Closing Worship at The Gathering
"The Things They Carried"

Last week we shared Rev. Vince Amlin's keynote address to the Florida Conference's annual Gathering in mid-October. His message was titled "A Spirit of Play: What to Do When Your World is Uncreated." In introducing it to our readers, we commented on Rev. Vince's storytelling gift – and those stories he has to tell! -- and this talent is once again on display in his sermon for the closing worship, which we share today.

In case you need reminding, Rev. Vince – an Associate Pastor at the **United Church of Gainesville** until 2016 -- co-pastors Bethany UCC and Gilead Church (a congregation-in-formation) in Chicago. He is also a member of the national UCC's Stillspeaking Writer's Group.

We hope Rev. Vince's "being church" message stimulates your synapses for what it means to "put flesh on the bones of faith."

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Florida Conference UCC
2024 Annual Gathering
Flowing with the Spirit

Closing Worship
"The Things They Carried"
Rev. Vince Amlin
Co-Pastor
Bethany UCC & Gilead Church/Chicago

Hebrews 11



Fifteen years ago this month was my first PRIDE parade in Gainesville. I didn't go. Actually, I didn't even know it was happening until the day before when a church member e-mailed to say, "We should do something for PRIDE. It's tomorrow."

Now, I had come from Chicago. Where PRIDE meant literally one million people gathered for miles along the sidewalks and balconies and where my church had hired a truck and constructed a float. So I said, no, I didn't think we could do something for PRIDE… Tomorrow.

Instead, the next week, I announced that I was going to hold a meeting to plan for next year's parade, so that by the following October we would be ready. I expected a handful of people for one meeting, but when the time came, there wasn't enough space in the room I had reserved. There weren't enough chairs. People were sitting on the floor. It was one of those moments in ministry where, as a pastor, you just have to get out of the way. Because people had ideas. Energy. Not just for PRIDE, but to start support groups, and plan parties, create a standing committee and advocate in Tallahassee. But also for PRIDE.



A few months out from my second October in Gainesville, we finalized our plans. We made T-shirts and bought little rainbow flags for people to carry. But then one of our members thought those little flags weren't enough, so he offered to donate another flag for us to carry. What he didn't tell us was that the one he was getting was 26 feet long and would take six of us to hold it.

Another member informed us, after the fact, that she had invited her drum circle to march with us. And another said she was organizing the church band to play Lady Gaga‘s “Born this Way.” And someone had bought beads. And someone had printed cards with the church’s information.

And I’ve sometimes joked since then that our presence in the parade should have been called, “The Things They Carried,” because we had enough props that every person could have two hands full, and we’d still have to leave some in our cars.



Ninety people showed up from the church that morning. We were as long as the rest of the entire parade combined. At that time, the parade route was a total of five blocks I think. Maybe four. But we walked it. Carrying our drums, and trombones, and beads, and cards and 26-foot flag. And I realized that for our group, the more things we carried, the more real it felt. The community they had built. The love and acceptance they experienced. The God who welcomed us all. We needed to make it tangible. To have something solid. Not just an idea, but something you could hold onto.

Our scripture this morning might contain the only verse I prefer in the King James: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” The NRSV says “assurance” and “conviction,” but faith gives *substance* to our hopes. Makes them solid. Something we can carry. Something we can get our arms around.

I think it’s substance that the author of Hebrews has in mind. Because after this, he takes us through a whole history of faithful people who did something substantial with their hopes.

> Abel, bringing his offering to God.
> Noah, building his ark before a drop of rain had fallen.
> Abram, setting out from his homeland to the place that God would show him.
> Sarah, growing Isaac within her in her old age.
> Moses‘s parents weaving a basket
> Pharaoh‘s daughter, pulling it out; the Israelites, stepping across a dry seafloor.

And on and on. People whose actions made God‘s hopes real. People who put flesh on the bones of faith.

I think the author of Hebrews has substance in mind because he ends that list with Jesus. The Word become flesh. God‘s love for us incarnate. The one we can hold to. Cling to. The one we carry with us to our destination. The one who carries us.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. But after that, I like the NRSV: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” Everything you see started from something you can’t see. That 26-foot flag in Greg’s hands, it came from somewhere. In him. Somewhere you can’t see. That parade. It had a beginning. It has a history that is invisible. That church. It didn’t always exist. It came into being. It was made from things that are not visible.

And what you don’t see, Hebrews says, is the Word of God that prepared it. “The worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” Abel’s offering. Noah’s boat. Abram’s journey. Sarah‘s pregnancy. All of it started from a Word. In the beginning was a Word.

And we know from our Genesis story that the word was: “Let there be… “ Light, and darkness, sun, and moon, water and dry land. Birds of the air. Fish of the sea. Cattle and creeping things. You and I. Everything that is. Everything you can see. Everything you can hold. That feels so solid and obvious now. It once wasn’t. It didn’t exist. And someone, by faith in the God who spoke to them, gave it substance. They got out of God‘s way and let it be.

The author of Hebrews puts it in the past tense. “The worlds *were* prepared by the word of God,” but we are members of the United Church of Christ. We know better. We know that *God is Still Speaking*. Still preparing the world. We know that God has never stopped, saying, “Let there be…“ We know that it’s still true today that we can look around, and every good thing we see was made from an invisible word of hope spoken to someone who got out of God’s way. The things that feel solid and have substance. That we can lean on. They were once nothing. Until faithful people let them be.



Each of us comes from a church that once didn’t exist. When the founders of your congregation came to your neighborhood, what they saw was formless and void. Maybe complete chaos. At least a blank page, an empty canvas. Maybe all they could see at that moment is what they had lost. What had come apart. What had been uncreated. Maybe what they saw in that place looked like a failure. An ending.

But it turned out to be only the beginning. Because God spoke a word to them. Saying: I am preparing to make visible the things you can only hope for. To give substance to your faith. So that you can hold it and know that it is real. Two handfuls of good things. More than you can carry. So much you have to leave some in the car and come back for it.

And all you have to do is let it be. Don’t stop it. Just get out of the way. Just listen to the word of hope I am speaking in you, and bring it forth. Put flesh on the bones. Take the first step. Hammer the first board. Weave the first papyrus. Make it through the first trimester. Hold the first meeting. Speak the first word. To the first person. Of the hope I have placed in you. And watch what will happen. Blessed are those who have not seen but are coming to believe.

I accidentally own three cars. Last Christmas, my in-laws gave us one of theirs after my mother-in-law stopped driving. And it would’ve made sense, at that point, to get rid of our oldest car. The one we bought 15 years ago when we moved to Florida. But we can’t. Because it’s currently filled with everything we need to do church at Gilead. My book about church planting could also be called, *The Things They Carried*.

The car makes one round-trip a week. Eight blocks to the bar and back. But it’s essential. We have a lot of stuff. So much, that it all has to go in, in just the right order. Two large speakers on the back left first. Then two smaller monitors in front of them. The keyboards slid along the right side, followed by the plastic A-frame sign we’ve set up outside dozens of locations. The keyboard stand and bench up against that.



Then a pile that starts with speaker stands, then mic stands, then music stands. But actually not until the blue bin full of sound equipment goes in on the front left. It weighs like 30 pounds. And the purple bin full of welcome table stuff on top of that. All the name tags with pronouns printed on them. Narcan to help prevent overdoses. A trans flag and a progress flag that get hung up everywhere we go. The basket where we collect prompts. Then the music stands. And finally, this one particular wooden stool that is just the right height to sit behind the keyboard and hold our music director’s laptop.



It’s a lot of stuff. 10 armloads-worth. To carry down the block and up the stairs. But seeing it there, reminds me: we started a church. Once, none of that stuff existed. Or at least it wasn’t packed together in the back of a 2009 Honda Fit. Once, there wasn’t a community of people who have come to see

those objects as sacred. To know that *that* basket holds our stories. That *that* keyboard plays our songs. That *that* sign points the way to our church, whatever crappy dive bar we set it outside.

Once we were not a church. And now we are. For however long we are -- but that's true for all of us. Today, we are. We exist. Because God spoke and said, "Let there be a queer storytelling bar church wandering the far north side of Chicago."



There's one more tub we carry to worship. It goes in the front seat. It contains our Communion stuff. A tablecloth we never put on the table, but it keeps things from breaking. Little jars we fill with juice and wine. And a beautiful handmade chalice and paten. They're green. And the chalice has golden leaves on it. Its stem is made of brown strands of clay braided together to look like the roots of a tree sinking into the earth. And on the paten, there are white stalks of wheat around the outside and several verses about Communion inscribed along the rim.

The handwriting is Allison's. She called me to her studio a couple weeks before I left Florida. I had told this congregation that I loved that I was leaving. That I felt called to Chicago to start something new. But at that point, neither of our denominations had said yes to us yet, let alone given any money. We had no location. No people. No church. But we were moving cross-country. Hoping. Fearing.

And at Alison's studio, she took out these incredible pieces and held them out to me. Two handfuls of a church that didn't exist. Until that moment. Holding them. Solid. A tangible sign of God's word of hope. Faithfully crafted. And I took them from her and felt their weight. And I said, "Wow. This makes it feel real."

