

June 25, 2017
Acts 15:8-12
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“Practice Possibility”

Good morning! I’m glad that you are here to experience the possibilities of this worship service and the discussion at the Table Talk which will happen during the Sunday School hour in the Gathering Area. We have been speaking possibility for the past month as we consider the Holy Spirit’s work to empower the first apostles and the early church. I hope we can consider what God’s mission meant to the church 2000 years ago, and what it means to us today.

[Slide of Speak Possibility logo] Over the past few weeks I have been encouraging us to speak possibility: to consider the positive things which God has planned which haven’t happened yet. We believe in a God who holds the future and wants the best for each one of us and for this congregation and for the Church of the Brethren and for believers all over the world. It doesn’t mean that everything always goes the way we want it to -- I think we all know that’s not the way things work -- but we listen and pray and work and worship with the conviction that we walk by faith and not by sight, and that if it isn’t fantastic, that’s because God isn’t finished.

I’m sure you’ve heard the story about the tourist who is lost in New York City and is wandering around trying to find his destination, and finally stops in front of a street musician and says, “Excuse me, but how do I get to Carnegie Hall?” And the musician says, “Practice, practice, practice.” Speaking possibility is important, because what we speak about determines what we focus on; what we focus on determines what we imagine; what we imagine determines what we do; and what we do determines our future. Angi Harney shared a great children’s story last week encouraging the kids to imagine what they could be when they grew up. Do you remember? Some said

they wanted to be a basketball player, a firefighter, a ballerina or the president of the United States. That chain begins with speaking possibility and ends with what our future looks like. But in between there's a lot to do. Anyone who is going to be a ballerina or a professional athlete is going to have to put in a lot of practice time at the barre bar, on the court, or on the field. Practice means doing stuff: over and over and over. It doesn't have to be a chore: The things we probably spend the most time practicing, like cooking or playing music or swimming are likely to be things we enjoy. They may also be things we have some natural talent for -- that doesn't mean that we don't have to practice, it just means that everybody starts where they are and brings different skills to what they do.

What you're going to have the opportunity to practice today is listening: listening, speaking, and imagining possibility. I hope that thoughtful listening and speaking and imagining will help prepare us to go forward into the future which God has already imagined for us. Church Board and Worship Team and Outreach/Followers of Faith will be sharing during a Table Talk today, and you will have the opportunity to share around your own tables and with the entire group your answers to the following questions: When has this team exceeded your expectations? What possibilities would you like this team to consider for the future? These are great questions -- because they are questions which open up possibilities rather than being critical and putting others on the defensive and perpetuating downward spirals of thinking and responding.

I shared some earlier in this series about the organizational evaluation style of Appreciative Inquiry. As many of the words grouped around Possibility would suggest, Appreciation is rooted in the conviction that in every organization there are things which work, and we need to acknowledge those things, encourage those things, and figure out how to keep doing them. It is a significant shift in mind set to focus on what's *right* instead of what's *wrong*. That's part of what I hope we can practice today.

The other part of Appreciative Inquiry I want us to consider is the Inquiry part. As I said earlier, I think the questions we ask one another are important, and they are rarely neutral. Questions are usually loaded, and we need to be sure they're loaded with possibility

and not negativity. If you don't believe that questions often carry value judgments, I invite you to try this little exercise the next time you're leaving the house -- preferably to go to church or out to dinner, or some special event. Turn to the person you're with, a spouse, a parent, an adult child, whomever, and say, "You're wearing that?" You can protest all you like that you didn't mean anything negative, you just wanted to be sure they were comfortable; whoever was on the receiving end of that question is likely to be unhappy with you. (And you probably deserve it.)

Cary Kelsey shared excerpts with me from a book called *Power Questions* by Andrew Sobel and Jerold Panas. This book had hundreds of sample questions which can be used to develop different things: These aren't factual questions, such as What were our sales figures for the third quarter? They're questions we can use to build relationships, to start a meeting, to clarify goals, to understand a proposal. I didn't find the questions themselves to be earth-shattering, but the posture of being curious enough to ask and open enough to listen to the answers seemed like a huge leap in the direction of possibility. You're allowed to use any of these questions in the Table Talk today, or in friendly conversation, or in meetings. Here are just a few: Can you tell me more? What is your dream? What brings you the most fulfillment? What makes this important to you? And finally, the question which every preacher should ask him or herself before writing a sermon: What's the most important thing we should be discussing today?

I'm going to answer that question, but I want to preface my answer by going back to the Book of Acts. We began this sermon series at the beginning of Acts, with Jesus' promise to his disciples to send the Holy Spirit to them. Next we celebrated the Holy Spirit's presence on Pentecost, and how the apostles shared the prophetic vision of the church in languages that everyone gathered could understand. We talked about Peter's vision from God, and his conversion experience when he realized that the Roman centurion Cornelius and his non-Jewish household had received the same gift of the Holy Spirit as the apostles did. By Acts 15, some time has passed since Peter had that vision -- a new convert to the faith, a former Pharisee named Paul has been traveling with Barnabas, Peter is continuing to preach to the non-Jews, and many people are coming to believe in Jesus Christ.

And there is a show-down brewing between those who think that new believers can only be saved if they conform to Jewish law, and Peter and Co. who think that the Holy Spirit came for both Jews and Gentiles. This show-down happens at a church conference in Jerusalem and is recorded in Acts chapter 15. Like many church conferences since, passions are running high. What Chris read today is Peter's speech to that council, and here's why I think it's what we need to be discussing today:

Peter is preaching the mission of the church. He has literally had a vision from God which changed his mind and changed his way of seeing the world. He is preaching a possibility that some people in the church had not even imagined, and don't like at all. Peter's message has enormous implications for what the church will do, and what its future will be. Peter is not only speaking possibility, he is putting it into practice. Peter's mission is built on the conviction that his allegiance belongs to God. Let me quote from a speech of Peter's in Acts 5 to a group of priests and Pharisees who have imprisoned him and want him to keep quiet. Peter says,

We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." 5:29-32

And a wise Pharisee named Gamaliel, hears this speech and gives this counsel to his fellow Jews about Peter's mission:

Let them alone: because if this plan or undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them -- in that case you might even be found fighting against God!

I believe the most important thing we should be discussing today is what is God's mission for us which cannot be overthrown? How have our ministry teams been energized and successful in their work and vision? What questions should we be asking to see where the Holy Spirit is leading? What do we need to hear from others? How might

our minds need to be changed so that we can see things with a new perspective?

I hope this makes you hopeful. If you are feeling a bit anxious, let me reassure you that we already have lots of practice at being the church. I doubt if God's mission will steer us in a totally opposite direction: I know for certain that if it moves us away from proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of all, and the Holy Spirit as the power of possibility in our lives, then that mission is not from God. Jesus Christ is the foundation of our faith, and as long as I have a role in leadership, this will always be a church that is built on that foundation. That is the best of the past which we will never leave behind. But like Peter, we are being challenged to expand our idea of who is in or out of the church -- or if those categories are even meaningful ones any more. We may be challenged to practice church in different ways. We know there are plenty of people who aren't here -- and I don't mean members who are on vacation, I mean entire demographics which are barely represented. If we are not asking questions about why they aren't here, we should be. And I don't mean blaming questions like "How come you never come to church?" I mean power questions like "What are you looking for in a community of faith? What would make Creekside a more welcoming place? What's important to you? What's the most important thing we should be discussing today?"

Thank you for speaking possibility with me and to me. I shared with Worship Team this week that it has been a great experience for me to study the book of Acts; I hope it has been for you, too. There's still so much for us to learn together. Remember, if it isn't fantastic, that's because God isn't finished. God bless you. Amen.