

## “Year One”

### Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 8/12/18

This week marks my one year anniversary as pastor of this historic congregation. I do not take it lightly. This has been a learning year for me. I mentioned to Tony and Debbie Mecca last week that though it had only been a year since we first met them, for me, it had felt like a lifetime ago. Inside one year at Church of the Covenant, I have learn so much. This faith community takes time to understand but only a short time to love. This is the same church where Pastor Bev Cosby called its start “the great adventure,” referring to the uncharted waters that the handful of young people that chose to be a part of it would navigate. It was different than any other church of its day. It was in a sense, revolutionary, especially for its time. Bev saw a church that thrived in authentic community with one another and with God as more than just idealistic optimism; he saw it as a possibility. It would strip away the traditional buildings and sanctuaries, replacing them with a home-like, earthy, more rustic accommodation—known as the “church house”. Many to this day have visited this campus a hundred times over decades and still not realized there is a community of faith that meets here each Sunday. For in Bev’s mind, the building and the place do not make the “church”, but the “church” is the people, the *ecclesia* (the called out ones), in action—walking and suffering alongside those most marginalized by society, the ones Jesus calls “the least of these.” But these visitors know you in other ways. Maybe you greeted them as they dropped their kids off for camp, or served them a cup of coffee at the café, or showed them how to get to Long Lake for a moment of trail-walking and meditation—or maybe they know your face or perhaps even your voice when you speak up for the suffering immigrants in this country at a downtown meeting, or hear your voice singing in a multi-racial choir intent on bringing unity in the neighborhoods that surround us. And I know they have heard you when you cry out against the injustice that still plagues our communities, as they quote you in our local media outlets. But most importantly, I know most of your love goes unnoticed by the community at large as you still work daily to help alleviate the suffering of the most marginalized. You are often as invisible as they are. And that’s ok. It is a testament to who you are, who Bev was.

Bev set out with a monumental task from the start of this church in 1954. He greatly desired to see an inter-racial movement bent on seeing a unified Christian body. All his life, he had seen a divided religious order, divided on denominational and religious lines, divided on racial and cultural lines, and he desperately wanted to see a unified love for one another. No more divisions. No more silos. No more isolationism with the larger Christian community. He struggled to find any denomination that would support such a goal, save one. The United Church of Christ seemed to share the same goal, so they joined together in this endeavor to bring about an ecumenical unity like none they had ever experienced before. In 1956, Bev articulated this vision. He wrote, “It is the will of Christ that there be a world-wide unity in his Church... Within this movement the barriers of national, racial, social, economic, or educational discrimination have no place.” So, Bev set out to see these barriers removed in his lifetime—through this very church. In his time, this church would become a quiet stalwart for many ministries that embody the same goals, starting with the Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship and its focus on providing suitable housing for all, then Camp Kum Ba Yah and its goal of providing a place for ALL children to play and enjoy God’s creation, and then to this coffee house, the Lodge of the Fishermen, now called the Common Grounds Café, created for the sole purpose of providing a safe venue for life’s hardest and most controversial conversations—where people can learn to love each other through what Bev called “genuine communication.” Then from these roots spawned so many more formal ministries

set to remove these barriers of inequity, some of which are still active today—like Interfaith Outreach Association, Miriam’s House, Elizabeth’s Early Learning Center, and the Gateway for Men. So, in my first year, I have learned that though strides have been made—the barriers have yet to be fully removed. As you know, I began my tenure here—not in Lynchburg, but in Charlottesville on August 12, 2017. As I handed out hundreds of water bottles to pained people, and watching hateful words hurled at my fellow clergy who prayed in silence with interlocked arms, a local resident collapsed to the ground, grabbing at my clergy robe for support (hoping to break her fall), and all the while looking at me—sobbing, “Why, why our town, why, why?” I had no answers to give her. I still have no answers to give you as to the why. But I do have an answer to “What do we do now?” Bev preached it from this very pulpit in October of 1964. Just a year after Dr. King preached it in his Letters from a Birmingham Jail. Bev, echoing Dr. King, in response to Christian indifference—said, “[we are] standing on the line between the white community and the black community trying to mediate this awful crisis... participating in the pain and suffering of broken relationships. You say, ‘I didn’t know this is what Christianity was about. I thought it had to do with saving souls and helping people find new life.’ Well, it does. This is what you mean by ‘saving souls’: Closing the gap between persons and persons, and persons and God—until there is wholeness and unity in our relationships.” It has been more than fifty years, and this is still our mission. It is a mission of reconciliation, but more acutely—a mission of racial and social justice. Thank you Pastor Bev, for teaching us this fundamental truth.

When David Edwards became pastor in the early part of this century, Pastor David saw that if we were going to accomplish this mission, we needed to be equipped. Not unlike Bev, he taught you to take seriously the inward journey as a foundation from which to work the outward journey. However, David gave us additional helps to engage our inward path—he brought us the Lectionary and other mindful helps to encourage personal growth and development, so that our outward journeys would be even more impacting. He also extended our mantra of unity, much like Jesus’ prayer that “they may be one,” to be inclusive of other faiths as well. He saw, as Bev also grew to see, that unity of faith can include other faiths; there is additional strength in multiple branches of wisdom, fitted together, rather than a single branch only—for a single branch is much more likely to break than multiple branches weaved together. And most of all, David gave us a re-launch of our essence, as an authentic community that must learn to love one another. Nearly a decade ago, from this very pulpit, David preached, “When we choose to abide with others in love, then we begin to discover the blessing of true community” (2009). This is a great challenge for us to rise up to, to abide with others in love. I think in this past year, I have learned that at its core, our church strives to do nothing less than abide in love with one another. However, it isn’t easy, and requires diligent and consistent work. It requires discipline to listen and not speak. It requires patience to disagree and not passionately seek to change another’s mind. It requires love to say “I’m sorry” when we offend or overstep. Thank you Pastor David, for teaching us how to walk, both inward and outward.

Our new friend Niles Comer, the project director for the Haven—also once a member of our sister community, the Church of the Saviour in DC, for nearly a decade, gave me amazing advice. For, it seemed each time I mentioned to people I meet in Lynchburg that I’m the new pastor of Church of the Covenant, whether the person was more closely linked to Bev or David—it seemed to never fail that they would always say, “Wow, those are certainly ‘big’ shoes to fill”. It’s gotten to the point that I am really wondering if Bev and David literally had big feet. I typically always respond, that “I can never really fill their shoes.” But Niles, gave me a new way of articulating what I’m really trying to say. He said,

“Don’t wear their shoes. Just go barefoot!” Unfortunately, Niles isn’t here today but moving his things from Northern Virginia to his new apartment here in Lynchburg (I have a 3pm appointment to help him unload his furniture)—but his response gave me such a smile. He’s right. I knew I couldn’t possibly fill another’s shoes. But it’s like he knew my weakness. I hate going barefoot. My feet are sensitive, and I can’t bear the rocks and prick-lies that inevitably plague the tender soles of my feet. However, that is exactly what I’ve been doing this past year—going barefoot. Along the way, there have been moments of discomfort. There have been times of scratches and bruises. I have wandered off the soft sand of the worn path into some rocky patches. In the soothing sand, though, I have gotten to know most all of you. For many or most of you, we have shared a meal together—and talked about the ills of life, but also the hope that sustains us. We have journeyed together on silent retreats, even eating in silence together—just looking at each other (but really looking at each other, like into the depths behind the eyes, to our individual essence and stories). We have perhaps marched together, held posters of protest, or banners of love. We have been in the trenches together, but also in the warmth of our homes together. Maybe we helped someone in need together, on the street, giving rides or a little money (anything we had). Maybe we rallied around a message of hope together, as your new pastor spoke to the masses about what the Gospel message really is: To preach the good news to the poor, to bring freedom to the oppressed, and to set the captives free. Or maybe you were with me as we simply laid out under the sky and we talked about life, and we both want more of it—to know life in its abundance. Or maybe we shared a cup of coffee together across the patio terrace, and we talked about how unique this church community is. The point is, that within this past year, we are learning each other. Learning to trust each other. Learning to know what love looks like for one another. And if you have been so fortunate as to get to know my wife, Ruth, then you probably found yourself asking “How did this guy end up with such a wonderful wife like her?” Or if you met any of my kids, you may have thought, they look like their father but they have the heart of their mother. Regardless, though, we are getting to know one another, learning how to abide in love, and at the same time live-out justice.

Milestones for me this year, of course, starts with my getting to know each of you (and there are several of you I am excited to get to know more intimately as well—a perk of my vocation); other milestones include getting to know our history, visiting our sister church, Church of the Saviour (started by Bev’s brother Gordon in 1947) multiple times this past year, representing us at events while there and sending our love to a community that has evolved significantly over the past few decades; also getting to know the history of Lynchburg, spending time listening to stories of how this wider community came to be. Getting to know African American leaders and clergy, hearing their stories, and working towards a path of racial reconciliation wherever and whenever possible, including bringing white and black groups together to dialogue towards a greater understanding, repentance, and full reconciliation—this endeavor is only at its genesis (but the multi-racial Maundy Thursday service down Rivermont and our recent pulpit swap with Mt. Evergreen Baptist are steps towards it)—however, there is so much work still to do. Other milestones also include working with the Mayor’s office, meeting with her and sharing a vision and the empowerment that comes not only from ecumenism but interfaith projects—as there is more than just Christians in our city. Working with my dear friends Rabbi John and the World Community’s leader Shaykh Rashid have been held up as examples of how we as a city should work together. In this vein, our church held a joint Bible study with Agudath Sholom Synagogue this year. I also participated in an interfaith symposium with Shaykh Rashid’s Legacy International. Rabbi John and I (along with Ruth and Mumu) in order to encourage the youth who decided to march against hate, all the way from Charlottesville to DC, we marched with them some of the way, in the rain... in love. Other

milestones have also included working together toward further inward journey work with our weekly Bible study on Wednesday afternoons—as well working with Mike Buhler and others on the Inward Journey group every other Thursday. I have learned in all of this, that really, the work here, for me, is just beginning. There is much still to do. Bev was always good at articulating that the church is not here to serve the structure, or the institution, we are here to serve God by serving the people. If we lose our relevance, then it is only natural we fade away. BUT if we are able to work together for a greater good, both inward and outward, to make real change in this world, then let us continue together. This is what I have learned this year. We have much to still do. We have racial barriers to overcome; we have economic hurdles to destroy, and we have systems of bigotry to obliterate. Let us be the Christians we were called to be, and let's do it together! In unity, for unity. As Jesus prayed, "That they may be one."