

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, May 2, 2010 based on Acts 11:1-18.

## God is Still Speaking

Play the song – “If I Had a Hammer” –

I have a hammer today, and I have a song to sing! So stay with me as I sing my song.

My hammer symbolizes many things today, but at the moment it represents the wonderful things you have done to hammer out a sacred space for God here at FCC. You have built something beautiful and special to glorify God, to inspire beauty, to provide a nicer place for the homeless, to provide a better space for education in Promised Land, and to provide a really meaningful place for spirituality in the spirituality center, courtyard, and chapel. You should be pleased with what you have done with your hammers!

The Stewardship Committee asked me to say a few words today about being stewards of the bricks and mortar. So of course, the first thing it made me think of was “If I Had a Hammer” song”!

As you know, we are in the middle of our discernment time when various people from the Stewardship Committee are speaking on various topics to help us prepare for Consecration Sunday on May 23. We are all being invited to pick up the spiritual discipline of being percentage givers by sharing a meaningful percentage of what we have as a thanksgiving to God and as a meaningful way to follow Jesus’ call to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the hurting, and spread the good news of God to the world.

A church can only do as much ministry as the members allow through their stewardship of time, talent, and treasure. As a reminder, members of Flossmoor Community Church are invited to pick a percentage of meaningful giving, say 3 or 5%, and then move up 1% per year on the way to tithing, the biblical call to give 10% of what we earn as a faithful way to live our faith and seek God's blessing of sharing. This year, because of the harder times we are facing, the Stewardship Committee is asking that if you can not move up 1% in your stewardship that you consider giving 10% more than you are currently giving as a way to stay on the path of percentage giving and meeting your spiritual goals.

You have built a wonderful church here at Flossmoor Community Church. I was at Foundation Board this past week, and their good news is that because of their due diligence and an improved market they will be able to make a contribution for 2010-2011. This will mean more resources for outreach and building improvement. They have hammers that they would like to support.

Building projects are exciting! It is rewarding to build something new or renovate something so it is more attractive and serviceable. I had the opportunity to build a million dollar building in one of my ministries, and it is very fulfilling and rewarding.

But I also discovered that after a building is built or remodeled, the congregation has to do that boring stuff of paying off the debt, finding the money to pay for the extra utility costs, budgeting for the day maintenance will be needed, and providing the resources so ministry can happen in that place.

There is a school district near where I live that some years ago received the OK from the electorate to build a new elementary school to meet the growing needs of the community, but they also had to pass a separate bond issue to buy the books and desks and furniture to supply the school. That bond issue failed – twice. So the new building sat empty for a year until a new bond issue passed to staff and supply the building.

Buildings are nice, but buildings are built to do something. In your case, you built for dynamic worship, meaningful educational experiences, space for youth ministry and adult education, spirituality, PADS, and fellowship. It costs big bucks to provide space for all these interests and then it costs significant bucks to staff and resource these things. But dynamic giving is making it all possible to be a dynamic presence for Christ in this place! We've a story to tell to the nations, and your stewardship is allowing us to tell it and live it!

Our scripture from Acts 11 has a story to tell today. Actually in chapter 11, we have a critical moment in the life of the church. You heard what happened. Peter had a vision about being commanded to eat animals that were forbidden by Jewish dietary rules. For hundreds and hundreds of years, faithful followers of Yahweh practiced customs of what to eat and how to eat it. Peter's vision changed those practices. Peter heard a voice that told him that "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Then Peter was summoned to bring the good news about Jesus to non-Jews in Caesarea. Something that was new. While he was speaking,

the same Holy Spirit that had touched Peter the disciples on Pentecost came up the people of Caesarea. So he baptized them.

But this caused a problem. Up until that point, all the converts to the good news about Jesus were with people who were Jews first. But now Gentiles were receiving the same gifts that the Jewish believers. What to do?

There were many who felt that converts to Christ who were not Jewish first needed to convert to Judaism and then follow Jesus. This would have made Christianity a sect of Judaism and who knows if it would have become the world wide religion it is today of people of all races.

But as you heard today, the followers of Jesus decided that God was still speaking and that they were being called to expand their understanding about what it meant to follow Jesus. They changed because they believed that God was still speaking. We are still being asked to expand our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus because God is still speaking.

One of the difficulties of having a book of authorized teachings like the Bible is that it is tempting to assume that because of this book, God has spoken and not still speaking. But 2000 years after Jesus, we have a choice – we can say it has all been said and it has all been written or that what has been written is valuable and important but God is still speaking.

Unfortunately, many times we don't receive the visions that Act 11 speak about to give us clear messages, so we have to discern what God is speaking about. But like the first followers, we pray and discern and try to decide who is part of God's grace and what we are to do. Jesus and the

experiences of Peter seem to say that God is always expanding our understanding of who is part of his grace and care. The fact that God is still speaking is still a powerful presence for us today.

By the way, the phrase "God is still speaking" is a powerful phrase in my denomination – the United Church of Christ. To us it means that "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." For us, that means we keep working at who is included in our fellowship whether gay, straight, white, black, brown, yellow, or red. Whoever is willing to follow the ways of Christ are invite to journey with us. This is the song we sing because we believe that God is still speaking.

In a little bit, we are going to sing the hymn – When Peace Like a River. Do you know the story behind this song?

It was written by a man from Chicago about 137 years ago. Horatio Spafford was a prominent attorney and businessman in Chicago in the 1860s. He also was a major supporter and friend of D.L. Moody, the famous preacher of Chicago. In 1870, however, things started to go wrong. In 1871, almost all of Horatio's real estates holdings on the shores of Lake Michigan were wiped out in the great Chicago fire.

In 1873, Mr. Spafford decided to take his wife and 4 daughters on holiday to England and join the work of Moody who was now in Great Britain preaching. The family traveled to New York in October to take a ship to England, but at the last minute, Horatio stayed behind to go back to Chicago to take care of some business and then he was going to make the trip. 9 days later, Spafford received a telegram from his wife in Wales. It read, "Saved alone."

On November 2, 1873, the ship of the Spafford family was struck at sea by another ship. The first ship sank in 12 minutes. 226 people died including the 4 remaining children of the Spafford's. Mrs. Spafford was pulled out of the water unconscious floating on a piece of wood. Both Horatio and his wife were devastated. Horatio took the next ship to Great Britain to join his wife. On the journey, Spafford was called to the bridge by the captain and was told that they were approaching the spot where the ship was lost. He went out onto the deck. Hour after hour, he remained on deck of the ship watching the rolling waves and grieving the loss of his four precious daughters. However, when the ship passed the area very likely where the drowning occurred, some poetic thoughts began to shape themselves in his mind. He had an overwhelming sense of God's presence about him and felt his spirit strangely comforted as he meditated on the redemptive work of Christ and the promise of his return. That night, Spafford, penned the words, "When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul."

How can someone write that after losing 4 children and much of his fortune?.. He could do it because he had built a foundation of faith to stand on so that when the waves came and the heartaches rolled he had something to stand on and rebuild on. God was still speaking to Horatio and he and his wife went on to have 3 more children and a full life.

You see I brought my hammer today to remind us that things need to be built and maintained so that the work of Christ can happen, but we also need to build a foundation of faith to stand on so that God's grace and

hope can help us. God is still speaking! We are invited to build on it for Christ! Amen.