

A Celebration of Thanks
Jeremiah 29:4-14; Philippians 1:3-11
November 18, 2018
The 120th Anniversary of the St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

I arrived at St. Charles in 2013 just in time to celebrate our 115th anniversary. My daughter was 4 and my son was 7. My husband had just walked away from an earth-changing job successfully advocating for good environmental policies in Virginia's General Assembly and the nation's capital; choosing to essentially begin his career again so that we could make this bold move together. We came here because we believed God's call to this city and this place were undeniable.

We told the pastor search committee that accepting this call 1000 miles from Richmond felt like Indiana Jones walking across the invisible bridge. He knows he has to move forward to get to the grail; his journey demands he cross a path he cannot see. He stands at the edge of a deep chasm, puts his hand on his chest, takes a centering breath and places one foot out over the void, trusting a bridge will catch him. And with that one step, the path before him appears.

Five years later, our path is still appearing, our children are now 9 and 12, we've begun a new chapter of our family's life in a new home. And five years later, I look at you with gratitude for the ways you have given your hearts and time, your energy and your resources, your tears and your passion to the work we have done together for the past five years.

Paul writes to his friends, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now."

I thank God for the bravery you have shown in discovering new ways to be church together—growing in community, rooting yourselves to the love of Christ as you deepen your friendships with one another and push beyond the walls of 7100 St. Charles Avenue to love your neighbors. I thank God for the ways you have loved each other through and beyond old hurts into new possibilities. You keep showing up, open-hearted, ready to grow and discover. What an amazing gift to the world that posture is!

I know I have asked a lot of you in these five years, and I know some of it has been new enough and different enough to feel really uncomfortable. But you have shown up anyway, stretched your capacity to bear your soul anyway, taken seriously the commandment Jesus gave his disciples to be known as people who love in bold, distinct ways anyway. I thank God when I remember our first steps as a congregation across the bridge from the safe space of this gorgeous facility into the unknown avenues of relationship in this city.

Five years ago I preached from the text we read earlier today—Jeremiah 29. Not knowing any of you but knowing your story through beloved friends, I took the first step toward you and toward our shared future, saying:

Jeremiah's words compel us to act today. I believe that the call on the church of the 21st century is to shift our focus to the present; to the life and needs within and beyond our walls. As we move through the next decade, more and more of us will experience our salvation only in seeking the welfare of the cities and communities around us.

Christianity Today spent much of the past two years studying Christian communities around the United States who are committed to healing and vitality in their cities. They focused on people and churches who speak of seeking the welfare of the city as seeking God's shalom for all, and they defined shalom not simply as "peace" but more robustly as "comprehensive flourishing." They shared stories again and again of deep faith and of vibrant congregations whose primary focus was seeking the comprehensive flourishing of both stranger and friend until that shalom rippled through every part of the homes to which God called them.

The congregations who will thrive in the era to come will each tell a story as unique as the church's context. The residential, neighborhood church will find life differently than the one in an urban, industrial setting. The small church in a farming community will come alive in a way far different than the small church in the city. As I continue to remember you in prayer and imagine what your next story may be, I think about how well-positioned St. Charles Avenue Baptist is in the city of New Orleans. This city is known around the world for its joy and its celebration, its food and its music, its architecture and its people. People know that New Orleans is a place for everyone and anyone. More than Austin or Portland, this city is known for welcoming the peculiar and the eccentric as just another next-door-neighbor.

But there are complexities alongside the assets. New Orleans, much like Richmond, has its story in American history as a major player in the slave trade. That legacy weaves its way into modern day in subtle and powerful ways. This is a city still recovering from the destruction of Katrina. Like much of the South, there is a disparity here between rich and poor that lives its way out through schools and resources and public safety. So a faith community living into its present and future story here, in this place, must ask: What does seeking the welfare of the city look like for us? Where is God leading us next?

As we people of faith (the great big churches and the ones barely eking by) move into a new phase of being church, we do not do so by losing our identities, forgetting or grasping at our past, or taking on a new way of being that is foreign to us but worked somewhere else. We move into this new story by being most fully ourselves for the sake of the world. We pay attention to the goodness of God and the movement of God's spirit in daily life. We take on work and projects and causes and conversations at the intersection between our own gladness and the world's hunger. In that sweet spot, as individuals and as the body of Christ, we find our welfare, and we find our home.

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion. We have done good, hard work for these years together. Some folks might say they don't want to go to church to do hard work, and plenty have said they don't go to church to be challenged; they want to be comforted. I get it. Those expectations were certainly possible to meet throughout much of the past 50 years in this country. Particularly in white, Southern Baptist congregations, the church practically ran itself as it moved through the Annie Armstrong to VBS to Lottie Moon cycle each year. Pre-determined programs and campaigns ran the schedule, cultural momentum filled the pews, and congregations moved by inertia for a long time.

Being church now means working for it—showing up here when you could be at brunch, wrestling with scripture when you could be walking in the park, asking what our role as people of faith is in healing ourselves and healing the world when you could be planting flowers in the backyard. You are choosing this way and this place week after week. We are choosing to participate in a community rather than warm a pew, to discover together what it means to be on the Way of Christ rather than what it means to go to church, and we are releasing what has been to make abundant, gracious space for what will be. Together, we are living into our hope that The Spirit still hovers and blows like wind and moves around us and within us.

I thank God for grace you show me and for the affection you hold in your heart for me and for one another. I thank God for the holy welcome you show again and again to people who have not been welcomed in other churches—the ones who bravely take a first step across the bridge coming into this sacred space as they test the strength of the welcome we offer. What an act of bravery to have been scarred and wounded by other faith communities but try one more anyway! What an act of hope and faith to believe that what you know in your gut to be true about the love of God must really be lived out by some other folks somewhere in this world. I thank God for the ways you are seeking the welfare of this city by loving so well that God's healing flows through your very heart.

I thank God for the connections you make between the stories of Jesus encountering and engaging people who needed healing, affection, engagement and the ways you encounter and engage people from Honduras, at Angola, at LCIW, and neighbors from every part of this town. You are living this thing out and teaching me about how wide and high and deep the love of Christ is. This way is not easy, and our work here as a congregation is just beginning. We may not be for everyone here, but we are for a whole lotta folks who need to be loved back into life by a brave and kind people.

Just as Paul wrote, this is my prayer: that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.

When we sit and attempt to map out the next 3, 5, 10 years in the life of this congregation, we do not all have the same vision for what those years will look like. I'm being very delicate in those words. What I mean is: if you put 14 of us in a room and ask us to make a plan for the years ahead, you will have at least 17 different ideas of what the way forward looks like. We are smart, stubborn, ambitious, certain of our right-ness, and fiercely committed to the future of St. Charles. And so I will continue to pray for you, for me, for us:

May your love overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best. May the guiding questions for this community be rooted and anchored in the love of God, fully revealed in Jesus the Christ. May you commit yourselves anew today to Asking Questions that grow your faith, expand your mind, and deepen your concern for your neighbors. May you embrace the work of Seeking Justice both within this congregation and across our community—chasing after equity and working for the comprehensive flourishing of all things and all people. May you hear the steady call of Christ in your commitment to Loving Neighbors knowing there is

an added call in that work to love yourself. May you continue to open your heart as you join with the sisters and brothers of St. Charles in Welcoming All because there are folks who need a holy welcome in a desperate way, and maybe we right here are the last stop and last chance before someone stops believing that welcome is possible.

May the words of the prophet Jeremiah call us once again to seek the welfare of the city to which we have been called. I am confident, I am certain, I am convinced that in seeking its welfare we will find our own.

Amen.