

On Us: (Jan. 2019)

Introduction: New

People of God!

I don't like today's message...I love it! Kidding. It's okay; I'm fine with it, really.

Today we're talking about ourselves, a little. Let's pray it goes well.

Prayer:

Established By Another:

I've been thinking about what it means to be myself. Really, what it means for anyone of us to be ourselves, and more specifically, what it means to be known by others.

Because of course, when we're little, we don't even know ourselves. Most of us grow into an identity that's offered us, however shallow or deep. We're named, we're known, we're held, we're--if grace is sufficient--loved, and established by someone else.

Someone else establishes us in the world. Does that make sense?

Establishing Ourselves:

And then, you know, we grow up, and test who we've been known as, push against it, embrace it, do all the things that teenagers do. We establish ourselves, in concert or over against whoever first established us. Teenagers, am I right?

And adulthood is, in some measure, owning who we've established ourselves as. Getting comfortable in the skin we've claimed as our own. Because it's in our Middle Years, I think, that most of us realize we won't live forever. As we realize it, we either panic, and react in all the ways panic and anxiety bring, or we settle into the people we are in the places we are.

Settling Into Ourselves:

And a few people live long enough, monitor their own boundaries enough, come to see themselves as God sees them deeply enough, that they become what we call mature. These "saints and poets," as Thornton Wilder put it are comfortable enough with themselves, see themselves enough as they truly are--which is core of humility--that you kind of want to spend time with them even if you're nothing alike. They are utterly attractive, because they're the best of what people can be.

And I don't think that you can arrive in that mature, wise, humble place without Christ, because I think it's only by way of Jesus, seeing ourselves as God sees us in His love for us, that we can ever really appreciate

the ways we've been established by circumstance, appreciate the boundaries that have been set for us by life, and see the way God works in all situations around us.

Only in Christ can we ever chill out, you know, and just be ourselves, and have that be not only more than enough, but the very thing that is useful to the world we inhabit.

So someone establishes us, and we push against it or embrace it; we go on to establish ourselves, and if we're blessed and lucky and privileged, we're able to settle into that establishment, and become someone others seek help from even as they seek to establish themselves well.

True of People, True of Us:

This isn't just true of people, it's also true of organizations. It's also true of congregations. And I think it's true of us.

There was a point in our congregational life when we did not know ourselves. We had been established in the world, but hadn't established ourselves, yet. We were growing into ourselves. And then we got a building, and a place, and all the people that made up who we were.

We struggled to establish ourselves, embracing and pushing against who we'd been when we were first

brought into the world. We were trying to figure out what we wanted in the world as pastors came and went, and people came and went.

Over the past decade, we've used up enormous energy coming to terms with where we are in the world, the place around us; who we are in the world, as people in this place. We've decided to be ourselves, and we've established ourselves in the community, investing in relationships, leaning into the problems that rise up around us, instead of creating problems for ourselves as adolescents do.

Smoky Row: Practically Geniuses:

We've been given power. It's the power of knowing our place, and knowing its needs, and simply being who we are. It's the same power that's present--although just a seed of it--in the wisest people who settle into their place in the world firmly established in God's love. In our circle of friends, our circle of relationships with those around us, we aren't the wealthiest congregation or the poorest congregation, we aren't the largest congregation nor are we the smallest congregation. I don't think we're the wisest, although you never really know who the wisest is, because wisdom is seen in humility, and that makes seeing it tough. We're certainly not the most short-sighted.

We are, simply, ourselves. And we have the same things to prove that everyone who begins to really nurture their place in the world have to prove, which is

simply that God loves us, and God loves you, and God proved it in all Jesus said and did, and God is still proving it all around us.

We are gifted, of course.

More Specific:

And I could be more specific, but you've walked through all this together: the 200 kids here, the 200 kids there that get presents or school supplies. The thousands of dollars given out in benevolence, the hundreds of hours spent in service. Service to each other: ensuring that this building and all that goes on it doesn't fall apart, ensuring our kids are nurtured in their faith, ensuring when we gather for worship, we gather well, ensuring that what goes unseen is seen by someone, and attended to, fixed or saved or helped. And of course, service to others: from the pantry to the garden to the school to changing oil or stuffing bags full of food.

Our cash and our time and our talents are used, around here; and tossed out into Columbus, through the relationships we have with other Brethren congregations; and tossed out into Ohio, too, through all the many denominational things that Smoky Row shapes through your efforts. It's all a gift; it's all the return of blessing for the ways God has blessed us.

2019 will not decrease any of this activity, presence, work, or power. It certainly won't decrease the needs

that clamor for help or the blessings that meet those needs.

Back to the Metaphor:

But let me suggest something. I want to suggest that this idea that we're moving through life as a congregation, in a way that is similar to how a person moves through life.

Because there's something about our stage of life, that near-middle-age, when a person realizes, "This is my life!" And they either embrace it, and allow God to establish them in the land, or they reject it if they can, seek to establish themselves.

And Smoky Row is coming up on 40, you know? We're right on the cusp of 40.

And there is something to our, oh, let's call it Middle Life, that is catching up to us. We're having to deal, as a congregation, with the stuff that often those in their middle years have to deal with.

Middle-Life's Stuff: Obligations

Stuff like, say, schedules that people simply aren't entirely in control of. And they aren't in control of their schedules because they're obligated to the people they love. Children, parents, neighbors, churches and clubs and family and all sorts of obligations. But nearly every obligation that people in their middle years have comes with a face and a name that's not their own,

but someone they are responsible to and for.

The middle years of life are the years that people spend building things: building careers, building a family, building portfolios, building Ikea furniture, or whatever it is we're putting up in the places that we hope will be both mission and sanctuary for us. The middle years are, for many, the ones of greatest obligation to others and greatest responsibility to, particularly, care for the very young, but occasionally the very old, and even the four-legged and very hairy.

The early middle years of life often can be the ones that come with the most demands upon us. They are often the busiest years, and not because we want them to be, but because we love and care for people who need our time and attention.

Middle-Life's Stuff: Diminished Resources

And the corollary to all these demands on people in their middle years is that they are at, oh, peak capacity. They have no more to give. Their resources are called on so constantly, because they are so obligated so deeply, that they don't have the freedoms that are often present before or after these years. Their time, attention, money, patience, and energy...there's just not enough to do much more than they already do.

There is a narrowing, in these middle years, of what a person can do and still survive their life. If people are

healthy, they recognize that they can't say yes to everything. Not all people are healthy, and try to say yes to everything, or say yes to things that aren't good. Our time, attention, money, patience, and energy begin to be claimed continually, constantly, and it's only outliers who have big reserves in these areas.

Middle Life's Stuff: Diminished Resource: On Being Regular

And the Middle Years bring with them a new awareness of what it means to inhabit our bodies. People discover tiredness that they didn't have; they learn to fall asleep sitting up. Energy tanks, waistlines expand, backs ache. Things start to matter that didn't matter with youth, like how much you're pooping, you know?

Young people don't care about these things, about watching their cholesterol or making sure they're eating enough fiber, or having regular bowel movements. Childhood is characterized as that time when you don't have to care about this stuff. Young adulthood is when you have to begin to engage in the maintenance of yourself in small ways. The Middle Years are the ones where monitoring these things is part and parcel with life. Just one more task that takes energy, time, other resources, or causes us guilt as we eyes-wide-open ignore our health.

Our Middle Years are the years where we discover that

we have limits, and we have only so much we can give away.

And yet, people in their middle years generally survive, right? They come through these years.

Middle-Life's Stuff: Friends

But as they pass through these years, they'll often discover that they have fewer friends than they did when they entered them.

The simple truth is that people in their middle years just don't make friends like they did in their 20s, and those in their 20s don't often make friends like they did in their teens. If they have children, they'll get to know other parents, maybe. If they move, they'll get to know their new neighbors, maybe. Work may bring some friendships; church often brings new friendships. Some new hobby might.

But typically, after a certain stage of life, our relationships tend not to expand, but rather deepen. It's in the broad margins that come of the early years of life that most of us make most of our friends. And as we enter into our middle years, we discover that many of the friends we had were friends of the road--friends for a time--rather than friends for life, and those friendship that we keep we come to value enormously...but it becomes an increasingly small number.

True For Us, Too:

And all this, if it's true for people as they enter and live into their middle years, is true for Smoky Row as we near 40 years on the planet. This same stuff is stuff that we're facing as a congregation.

As a congregation, we're obligated to care for our children. As a congregation, we're obligated to care for those among us who are sick, who have needs that need attention. And externally, we're obligated to support our partners in ministry, we've obligated ourselves such that others depend on us for things, depend on us to give our resources and use up our capacity in all sorts of ministry things.

We're very much in a time of establishing ourselves as the people and the place who will help you if you need help, or help you find the help you need, who love Jesus, whatever that might mean, and want people to know it. We're building things, and building on what we've built, just like people do in their middle years. The Smoky Row Food Pantry is not that old; the Free Clinic is just now moving to a second time; the Spanish Prayer Group is brand new. Our role as a landlord is a relatively new thing, younger than my daughter.

And at the same time, our energy is diminished. We are a congregation whose energy, and resources, and capacity is taken up by obligations, some of which are related to our own self-care, our internal programming and ministry, but many of which are related to the

jobs, the work, our own families that we're caring for, children and parents and spouses. Because to be a body of many parts is to have the many parts have be already obligated.

As a congregation, we're making new friends, slowly, and learning how to be friends with new organizations and partners and institutions around us, but much of our energy is spent deepening the relationships that we already have with those we've been working alongside for a few years, now. And those friends have their own needs, that we're helping with; their own concerns that distract them and take their resources.

We are in walking deeper into our middle years as a congregation. What's true of a person's middle years is, in all sorts of ways, true of us as a body, as a congregation.

What do they do?

What do people who have fewer friends than they used to, who are more obligated than they used to be, who are busier because of it, and have less energy than they once had *do*? What do they do?

I think they do a handful of things. And we know what they are because many of us are doing them.

What do they do? They persist.

They get stuff done. They persist through the season

of life they are in. You know these people; you are these people. Life doesn't stop. The people that they are obligated to don't all of a sudden no longer have needs. They just muscle through, you know, waiting for a day when resources might expand and their capacities might increase. This is, fundamentally, good and human. People keep going instead of giving up. In a world as difficult as ours can be, in a time of life as difficult as one's Middle Years can be, persisting is a virtue.

But persisting breaks.

But it's a virtue that has to give sometime. Persisting always gives. Occasionally, something might give, might break, and that will allow a reprieve, whether we want it or not, from our ongoing exhaustion.

Sometimes we break; it's not the situation we face that gives, it's us. We collapse, burn out, and leave others to pick up the obligations that we've dropped. We feel so overwhelmed that we become overwhelmed; our emotional life takes over our physical life, and we end up unable to persist at all, much less thrive. It can be so destructive, not just to those around us, but to our own sense of agency and purpose in the world.

Maybe we don't break completely; maybe we just give up in bits, eroding away through exhaustion, illness, addiction, sin and dysfunction, bit by bit by bit. On some level, we recognize this is better than

abandoning our responsibilities, but it's not by much, because it's never strategic, and always a mess.

In the best case, we ask for help.

In the best case we do this: We ask for help. And in those best cases, there are those who we can ask who love us: Family, that shrinking group of dependable friends, others with whom we have a reciprocal relationship, giving and taking. And those we ask, they help in the ways they can, loving us, fulfilling what Paul calls "the law of Christ," and helping carry our burdens. They are the ones who lift us up and help keep us from falling, because we're not alone.

In Order To Ask:

In order to ask for help we have to acknowledge just how stretched thin we are. We have to recognize that our Middle Years and their demands are exhausting us, and our capacities are not endless.

Let me remind us, again:

Smoky Row:

We, as a congregation are in our middle years. And we are stretched thin. Our congregational resources are the lowest that they've been in awhile.

What's true of the Middle Years is true for many of us, too. We're caring for our children, caring for others who we're as obligated to as if they are our children, even if we're actually theirs. We're meeting our

obligations, but we do with people who have less energy and less capacity than ever. This is true of many of us as individuals, and the result is that it lines up perfectly with our congregation's reality as one entering its Middle Years.

We have to acknowledge just how stretched thin we are as a congregation. We have to recognize that our Middle Years and their demands are exhausting us, and our capacities are not endless. As a congregation, we're doing more with less, we're obligated to more when we have fewer resources, and our options are the same for any person in our situation.

What do we do?

First of all, we persist. We keep on keeping on, just as a person stretched to their limits does. And I think we could, for actually a few years, do just as we've done without too much breaking, too much "giving," and too many balls dropping. We're a savvy group, after all, and God has given us many gifts in the talents and skills and resources of each other. But you can't persist forever; things will break.

And we can, like a person does, either acknowledge our situation or ignore it and hope we muddle through our Middle Years without destroying ourselves or others too much.

Smoky Row in our Middle Years:

Part of our situation, which we have to acknowledge, is

this: We're shrinking. Our congregational size is shrinking. And again, this isn't unusual in a person's Middle Years; it's not crazy that it's happening for us, even as our relationships among each other deepen.

But when we gather together we're a smaller group now than a few months ago; and smaller than a few months before that. And this matters because gathering together matters: it has implications that reverberate through our programming, our budgeting, our energy level. To gather together for worship with fewer and fewer people over time can, if we see things only from a human perspective, invite anxiety even as it decreases optimism about the future.

Us: Shrinking

Our congregational capacity is taking a double-hit, though. We need to see this. We're growing smaller as a community, even as many of us are right in the middle of our own Middle Years.

We each have less to give than we ever have, right at the moment when our church has its own great need of us. We have to acknowledge and name this.

Our congregational Middle Years are lining up with our own Middle Years, right in the time when we ourselves have no more energy to give, no more resources to offer, as many obligations as we can each handle well.

No More To Ask:

And I can't ask any more of us, can I? I mean, I can, and we'd want to give more--more time, more energy, more financial help. I mean, we realize that the poor, the hungry, the sick, the addicted, they're coming through our doors in droves, and heading out a beat closer to biblical peace, to shalom, than when they head in. Jesus touches people through us. Our touches are changing lives, and that isn't even to mention our own care for each other, which, when we have had the personal capacity to give and receive it, has been the thing that has kept us together this long. The Holy Spirit is active among us, and through us, and it's not just rhetoric: We're important for people, and I pray, important to each other.

No More To Give:

So I could ask us to give more, do more, all that, but I'm just not going to. For most of us, I don't think we should do any more than we do. I don't think we personally have the capacity for it; the stuff of our Middle Years has taken it all up, and the fact that we gather with other Smoky Row folks with any regularity is itself a miracle. Of course, what "regular" looks like in Middle Age is different than what it looks like when we're young. Now: If God is asking you to do more, give more, expend more to help establish Smoky Row in the world, deepen our roots, then great. Do what God says. But I won't ask it, because pastorally I can't ask it. Some of us are at our limits, even as Smoky Row, our congregation, is very nearly at its limits.

The Best Thing:

What I'd rather do is the best thing, which is ask for help. And I do think asking for help looks different for a congregation than it does for an individual or family.

So to ask for help as a congregation doesn't mean, I think, that I as our pastor ask more of us...except for this one thing: That we seriously consider who in our lives can join us in our congregational life. What it means for a congregation to ask for help--or rather, what it means for us to ask for help is, I think, to invite others to be a part of what God is doing through and among us.

We ourselves don't have much more to give. I know that. But I also know that there are people who need what Smoky Row has to offer. That there are people who fit with us well, who want to work with God, know more about Jesus, bear witness to a way of life that is salt and light to the world.

Confession:

I can't fix the struggle we face in our Middle Years. I can't. Nor can I magically, somehow, attract people to us. You see that, right? We each really are at our capacity, and honestly, some of us are probably exceeding our own personal capacity, burning ourselves out, in an attempt to make up for what we all, as a congregation, can't muster anymore. Some of us are doing too much for Smoky Row as it is.

As we enter and live into our Middle Years as a congregation, we need more people to join with us if we're going to continue to keep up with all our congregational obligations. We need their help, because each of us? In some cases, we don't have anything else to offer.

Who?

Are there people in our lives who can use what Smoky Row has to offer? Are there people in our lives that can help us to do what God has called us to do, even as they are helped by us? Encouraged in some discovery that God loves them, is for them, and will use them for their good, God's glory, the world's blessing?

We'll persist.

We'll persist, you know? This is what the Middle Years demand of people, and of us, too. We'll persist in faithfully discharging what God has asked of us. We'll do as Paul calls us to do, when he says "Let's not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we don't give up." We'll keep on keeping on through these Middle Years, and I don't think that we'll break or be broken. I don't think that something will give. I think God will continue to provide for us all we need to do what is asked of us.

But we have to own the double-difficulty of our situation, which is that there are fewer of us with less to give than there used to be. And yet even as our energy and resources decrease, our obligations

haven't gone away. Our children still need cared for, our partners still need supported, our own programming needs still need met, and our community still needs us actively engaged in it with God's love and the Spirit's power.

And yet: when people need help they ask for it. We're called to ask for the help we need: Help from God, which we must pray for, and help from others around us, who can discover God among us, even as they help us reveal God's loving care. Who can you ask to join us in what we're doing?

Conclusion:

Smoky Row has established itself in our community, for people all around us and for ourselves, too. We're blessed and privileged in this, even already a church others seek help from. But our Middle Years are not over, and our legacy in the world is not yet finalized. We have time. I hope we do; I'm the exact same age as Smoky Row, and I don't think my life is over. But in all the challenges that come of our Middle Years as a congregation, the biggest challenge might be whether we're humble and faithful enough to ask God and others for help to get done all we're obligated to do.

Evaluate your life. Evaluate what you give and what you can and can't give. Evaluate your exhaustion, and your capacity, and your energy. Consider our congregation as you do, and this double-difficulty we face. We will persist through it; persist through your

own situation, too, but don't go until something gives. We have to each of us go until, rather, God gives to us the help we need that we've asked for. It's the same for our church. But we have to ask for that help.