

“Still a Bridge”
Matthew 18:15-20

Twelve years ago, our Session approved a new mission statement for DPC. The previous one from 1989 was still relevant, but with the completion of our renovation project and the start of a new century, it was felt we should take a fresh look at those words. Our officers created a task force and charged them with determining if the current statement still articulated well our calling or if it was time to draft a new one. In the months afterwards, the members of that group reflected on the distinction between mission and vision statements, explored how other churches spelled out their calling, and solicited congregational input. The result was a statement that has been our articulated mission ever since--to “Be a bridge for Christ and a beacon of His love.”

The words draw from the two most visible architectural features of our campus, the bridge over Mechanics Street connecting our buildings and a steeple pointing to the heavens as a kind of beacon to world. Certainly, our mission is more than just maintaining those two structures and instead their uniqueness serves as an ongoing reminder of our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. Starting today, I want to reflect with you on that mission statement in light of what has occurred here since its adoption. I’m not proposing a new task force for I feel the words still capture well the uniqueness of DPC and its part in the shared calling for all Christians. Still, for a mission statement to be more than a line on our stationery or on some external sign, we need to stop periodically and reflect on its message again. Next week, I will focus on what it means to be “a Beacon of His Love,” looking primarily at our mission and outreach efforts since 2011. Today, we look inwardly and ponder what it means still to “be a Bridge for Christ.”

We begin, as always, with Scripture, though if you were to seek a place in the Bible that talks of a literal bridge you would come up empty. There are a couple of notable times when the Israelites walked through what had just been a body of water and a bridge would have been helpful, but not nearly as dramatic for God’s purposes. The word “bridge” does not appear in today’s Scripture lesson either, but the function of such a structure does go hand-in-hand with Jesus message as he talks to his first disciples about life in any community of Christians.

“If another member of the church sins against you,” he says, “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” That moment is one of only two times in the gospels when Jesus explicitly makes mention of the church. The other one came when Peter correctly identified the nature of his teacher as the Christ and Jesus replied, “On this rock, I will build my church.”

In our text, Jesus is talking about the real world circumstance of occasions when there is trouble in a church as members are at odds with each other. In such times, he encourages the harmed one to go to her or his fellow member alone and seek peace. Such private conversation would avoid public embarrassment, but if it does not restore unity, Jesus then names the next steps: taking one or two other members to the one who has caused harm and if that doesn’t bring change to take the matter to the whole church. If all approaches fail to bring reconciliation then Jesus calls for excluding from the fellowship that one who refuses to repent. It’s tough love, adding that church decisions made like that will be confirmed in heaven. Jesus then concludes by declaring “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

In that moment, Jesus was talking about the personal connection he wants among his followers. He spoke directly about times when reconciliation is needed in the church, but that promise of his presence applies to other times as well: when we gather for worship and turn to God in prayer, when we share in fellowship or study or service. By lifting up occasions when

unity has been disrupted, Jesus names the call of every disciple to make and mend connections, saying that when we do such things “I am there among them.” A certain bridge over Mechanics Street in Doylestown Borough is part of that essential work, too.

Since its completion, there have been literal ways the structure has achieved that purpose. In the past twelve years, it has changed the way people enter and leave our sanctuary and become a natural place to chat while moving to and from the classrooms or nursery in Andrews Hall. The bridge has become a primary spot for persons to sign-up for events or for the Sunshine Singers to gather before blessing us through song in worship. It has been used for receptions and staff lunches and has become a favorite place for a bride or groom to watch their guests arrive before the ceremony. The bridge even served as the spot where I depicted the angel Gabriel during a drive-through nativity fourteen months ago. When the men start looking to fill that role later this year, I encourage you to volunteer quickly as it is the only spot in the production that has heat!

That’s part of what we are talking about when we speak of being “a Bridge for Christ,” yet every word in that phrase is significant. For we have agreed to “*be*” a bridge—a verb which calls for action and not just self-identification. We are to be “*a*” bridge—not the only one, maybe not even the primary one, but one that makes the connection God intends. Lastly, we are “a Bridge *for* Christ,” not claiming to be a bridge *to* Christ as that would imply a kind of arrogance that we do not claim and a reminder that we do such things not for ourselves, but for Jesus.

From the time the bridge first opened in the fall of 2011, it has done those things, yet a pandemic interrupted that work and made clear our commitment to be a bridge would require new forms. And during that difficult season when buildings were closed and we were confined to our homes, this congregation and its staff embodied that calling beautifully.

During those long months, we pivoted to the Live Stream only for worship and launched an online devotional series called “Bridges and Beacons.” In that stretch of time, we moved quickly to virtual classes and meetings, too, including the training, approval, and ordination of new officers through a computer screen and a new members’ class that joined without ever setting foot in this sanctuary. Our music ministry moved to pre-recorded offerings only and creative activities emerged in our children and youth ministries as well —dropping off activity boxes and Bibles, online Zoom fellowship and the placement of signs in every child’s yard that had cartoon depictions of their leaders and read, “We can’t wait to be together soon!” Officers, staff, and members made phone calls to check in on congregants, we created a Covid-19 team to address challenges faced by members and you donated \$20,000 to help persons in need. Two groups formed online for Moms or Dad and we created a Facebook group called DPC Connects.

The people of our church felt those new ways of connection. After our online Easter service in 2020 that included a virtual choir, one of our members sent me an email that said in part “The opening hymn brought tears to my eyes as I saw and heard those familiar faces and voices of our church community.” Another wrote, “Holy Week [was] particularly difficult, but I was able to feel more connected with family that I was unable to see by watching the service, knowing that [they] were all watching at the same time.” Still another member wrote of her appreciation saying “DPC has done so much to keep my ‘new’ normal, normal. I’m amazed how quickly staff has explored and implemented new technology. Along with calls, emails, and online Sunday service I now have weekly devotions and Zoom to keep me connected.... Amazing!” Even in times of virtual-only gatherings, Jesus was there among us. All of those creative steps kept us connected even though we all knew it was an imperfect substitute.

That fact recalled for me the comment made by a woman named Maude Adams, who isn't a member of this church or even someone I have ever met, but only read about years before any of us had ever heard of Covid-19. Mrs. Adams appreciated her local post office because the employees there were so friendly and one day, just before Christmas, went to buy stamps. As you might guess, the lines were particularly long and someone standing next to her pointed out there was no need to wait since there was a stamp machine in the lobby. Maude replied, "I know, but the machine won't ask me about my arthritis." (Lenehan, Arthur, ed. *The Best of Bits & Pieces*, Fairfield, NJ: The Economics Press, 1994, p. 48)

The pandemic reminded us of the importance of that in-person touch, too. As individuals began to tentatively return to worship in this sanctuary starting in May of 2021, with everyone wearing masks, I would greet people at the door afterwards who had tears in their eyes as they spoke of how meaningful it had been to be back in the space. One member of our Re-opening Task Force described in an email aspects of gathering that he had forgotten until his first Sunday back—the rumble of the floor when the organ plays and the smell of someone's perfume, the laughter as friends greeted each other and the sounds of rustling bulletins or dropped hymnals.

In the months since, much of what was lost during the pandemic has come back in incremental fashion. We removed the requirement for social distancing in the pews and returned to in-person classes and meetings, too. The choirs can gather in chancel once again and the wearing of masks for them and everyone else is optional. The children's message is no longer pre-recorded, the nursery has reopened, and today marks the second consecutive year we have resumed the tradition of Scouts assisting in worship. We are well on our way toward putting the pandemic in the rear view mirror and the White House has set an official date in May for the end of that health emergency. All of us hope never again to experience anything like that, yet as we move further into the future, we remain committed to being a bridge for our Savior.

As we are a "Bridge for Christ" still when we gather for worship in this room or online, when we receive the bread of communion from a pastor or take it in our living room, yet together offer our praise. We are a "Bridge for Christ" still when we welcome the stranger and learn the name of child sitting next to us in the pew, and when we use the card for naming our concerns or use the QR code on the screen to do the same. We are a "Bridge for Christ" still when we invite a neighbor to join us for an event at DPC or when we strike up a conversation with someone of a different generation, when we offer a listening ear to one who is troubled by life's events or when, as Jesus taught long ago, we seek to be reconciled to a fellow member.

In other words, we are "a Bridge for Christ" still when we make every effort to connect ourselves and others to the power of God's redemptive love. For as we continue doing such things, we will experience time after time the truth of his words from long ago: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." An ongoing gift to which our most natural response is "Thanks be to God!"