

Today is July 1st—I have officially been your pastor for one year. And oh what a year it has been! While this year has held some challenges for me personally, this year has also been one of tremendous joy and that is largely because of all of you. This year has been so very rich and joy-filled learning your stories—and I'm certainly still learning.

It has been a privilege to walk with many of you through sacred moments in life—the joys of baptisms, the grief of loss, and so many sacred moments in between. I give thanks for the ways you have been church for me and my girls who love this church as much as I do—although admittedly for different reasons—pretty sure snack time after worship and craft packs rank higher on their list than mine, but that's OK!

When I first arrived, I was so excited to be in a community of faith that values the same things I do. God's all-inclusive love. Christ's open invitation to the table. The Spirit's calling to advocate on behalf of all those who are oppressed, discriminated against or marginalized. Our commitment as a church to reach out in love and service to and with our neighbors. All our neighbors. No exceptions.

Jacey, our seminary intern at the time, gave me a hard time about how much fun I was having preaching about these very issues that matter to me, that matter to you as a church, and that matter to God but that, quite frankly, are not welcome in many pulpits across our connection. And I was guilty as charged—I was having fun!

But along the year as I've gotten to know our community and both our individual and collective stories, I have also realized just how unique of a place this truly is. And as I realized this, I realized more and more how much I was preaching to the choir so to speak.

While preaching about social justice matters as issues of faith or asking the church to look outside its own walls would be a growing edge, a challenging message, a prophetic stance in many places, it's not necessarily that here. And that's OK.

It is good, especially on weeks like this one, to remember that we're not alone. That together we stand committed to God's love and justice as a community. I will continue to preach these truths of God's all-inclusive, radical love.

But I also began to ask the question—so, what *are* our growing edges at SSUMC? Where is it that the Spirit is nudging *us* to grow as a congregation?

So I kept listening.

And amid the genuine passion for our food ministry, I also heard of volunteers being spread too thin.

Amid the faithful commitment to our mission, I also heard genuine concern that we don't know one another as a congregation as well as we maybe should.

Amid the strength of our lay leadership, I heard important questions about our financial sustainability.

Amid the dedication of our gifted staff, I heard a desire for more time to deepen our faith, grow our congregation, and extend our impact in our community.

So what are our growing edges? Where is the Spirit nudging us as a church?

After listening to you all, after praying, after discerning, I hear the Spirit calling us into a time to focus on building up our community.

That is the name of this sermon series I'm starting today—Building Up Our Community—but this theme goes beyond this month of July's sermon series. As supported by the Council on Ministries, this will be our theme for our next year of ministry and life together—Building Up Our Community.

Now, I want to be clear, this does not mean we stop serving our community. It does not mean we stop advocating for justice. It does not mean we stop being who God has called us to be.

But it does mean there's a bit of a shift in focus. Because balance is needed.

Yes, we need to serve others, but in order to do that well, we also need to care for ourselves—not just as individuals but as a community.

Isn't that what we tell those who are caring long term for a loved one who is ill? Take care of yourself! You can't help your loved one if you are run down. You matter too.

Well, SSUMC, you matter too.

Reaching out is important but if we keep reaching out, reaching out, reaching out we start to stretch out...and stretch ourselves thin. In order to continue to be the vibrant community who reaches out and serves our community, we must also balance that reaching out with our reaching up to God and our reaching down to root ourselves, to ground ourselves, in this community we hold dear.

I saw a tweet by a Rabbi this week that caught my attention. She was referring to the anxiety expressed by many at our national news cycle this week, but her point applies to us as a church too.

She tweeted: Remember how the airline safety videos tell you to put on your own oxygen mask first and then assist others? If you're too busy having a panic attack to plan your next move for justice, get yourself calm and cared for. And then, when you've had a moment, schedule for the fight.

So often in Christian churches we teach that we should put others first and there IS SO much value in that statement.

And yet, like most lessons, taken to the extreme deforms its original purpose. God doesn't ask us to stretch 'til we break. God definitely asks us to stretch—in our serving, in our giving, in stepping out of our comfort zone—but not to the point of depletion.

So in this year we will seek that balance. Seek to care for ourselves—feed our own bodies, minds and spirits—even as we continue to serve our neighbors through the ministries of this church we love.

Throughout the year there will be a number of opportunities for you to join a small group—small groups have always been important in our Methodist tradition as a place:

where we can be in more intimate community,
where we can hold one another accountable and build one another up,
where we can dig in deep to our call to discipleship,
where we can share what God is doing in our lives,
where we can discern together the nudging of the Spirit.

These will be opportunities in which we are invited to grow deeper roots, to ground ourselves in the sure foundation of our faith and in the mutual support of our faith family.

There will be times of intentional fellowship where you are invited to get to know some of your siblings in Christ in this church who you don't yet know well.

Like good Methodists, there will be times to eat together, times to pray together, times to sing together, and all the time to love together.

This is a time to grow deeper and grow stronger for the work that lies ahead.

As we feel the gusts of the storms raging in our national and denominational life, this self-care is more important, and perhaps even more radical, than ever.

And as we begin this time of intentional focus on building up our community, the author of 1 Peter reminds us where to start.

You've had a taste of God, the author reminds us. Today we get that taste once more as we come to the table to be fed.

Now, like infants at the breast, drink deep of God's pure kindness. Then you'll grow up mature and whole in God.

What a beautiful and vivid depiction of our life in the Spirit! I don't know about you, but I want to drink deep of God's pure kindness. I want to continue growing, continue maturing, continue becoming whole in God.

Welcome to the living Stone, the source of life. The letter goes on to describe Christ as our cornerstone, a fulfillment of the prophet's promise.

Christ is our living stone, our cornerstone.

Now I don't know much about building and I admit that I too easily assume that cornerstone and foundation are the same thing. Christ may be described as both but they are not actually the same thing. Foundation is easier for us to grasp—we know we need something strong and steady, level and supportive underneath our feet. But what is a cornerstone?

A cornerstone is the first stone laid in a building. But it's not just important for its sentimental value. It's important because all other stones are set in reference to it. The cornerstone determines not just the strength but the position, the very shape of the whole building.

So if Christ is our cornerstone, we align our stones—our lives, our resources, our schedules, our churches—with the shape of his life. And that's exactly what 1 Peter asks us to do:

Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life.

What life-giving work we are invited into! We are called to build one another up, to build this community up, to build Christ's church and God's Kin-dom up! And we are not called to do this work in isolation but together—recognizing that each of our stones has a place, has irreplaceable value and also has its limits.

We don't have to be the whole structure! We can't be the whole structure. But let's also never neglect to offer what we have for the building up of our community.

This building up of our community may use this image of a stone building, but we know that the church is more than that. Even as we have important conversations about our physical buildings that are in need of some building up themselves, we know that our calling to build up our church is first and foremost a building up of the Body of Christ—the people.

How can we build one another up to be the very PEOPLE God calls us to be. Not just people—as in a collection of individuals who happen to occupy the same space—but we are called to be God's people, a family, a holy people, chosen by God, chosen for a high calling, 1 Peter tells us.

A people called to tell our story—**to tell of the night and day difference** Christ has made in our own lives—and so to invite others into this joy-filled life together.

Once we were no people, but now we are God's people.
This is our joy. This is our calling.
May we build up our community together.

Amen.