

**First United Methodist Church  
618 Eighth Street  
Columbus, IN 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles  
September 24, 2023**

**“An EPIC Church: Every Person Is Connected to God”  
Text: Isaiah 43:1-5**

I associate this joke with the late comedian, Flip Wilson. I don't know if he wrote it, but he told it enough that it is often associated with him.

It seems that a pastor was trying to bring a bit of enthusiasm into the church. Things had gotten a bit stale. So during the sermon he said, “If this church is going to get anywhere, we have to learn how to crawl.” The congregation responded with enthusiasm, “Let it crawl, pastor. Let it crawl!”

He continued saying, “And after we learn how to crawl, we are going to learn how to walk.” Again the congregation responded with great enthusiasm. “Let the church walk, pastor. Let it walk!” He followed that with his own measure of excitement saying, “And after the church learns to walk, we are going to run!” The people shouted back, “Let the church run, pastor. Let it run!”

And finally he added, “And if this church is going to run, it is going to take money!” There was a moment of silence as his words sunk in and finally someone from the back called out, “Let it crawl, pastor. Let it crawl.”

All of these sermons are leading up to our stewardship Sunday in a few weeks in which we will make our pledge for the coming year. And I hope that we will do so with a measure of excitement about where God is leading us and the possibilities before us. But I am not asking for your pledge this morning. What I am asking you, however, is to consider with me what it would look like for this church to be an EPIC Church.

My own initial response is that sounds like asking a lot. Maybe being epic is a little too much. That is a lot of pressure. It is asking a lot. You might rather make a pledge than commit to the work of being epic. But let me explain what I mean by this. When I envision this church as an EPIC Church, I am using that word epic as an acronym. It stands for “Every person is connected.” And I think that is both within our grasp and something that every church should strive for.

One of the things we have experienced following the pandemic is a loss of connection. We experienced several years in which meaningful interactions were stifled because of the spread of covid. And even today, the shadow of that virus lingers as covid continues to impact our daily lives. We remember what that meant. We weren't able to be with one another in the meaningful

ways we once knew. Large gatherings were cancelled. Concerts, football games, even church services, were conducted with no one in the pews or stands. We watched from our homes, but we missed the interaction of being together. If we didn't know it already, we discovered how much we need to be with one another. We need those connections, those physical interactions. Do you remember when we had to wave to each other rather than shaking hands during the passing of the peace? We did what we had to do to keep one another safe and it was important that we did so, but it was not easy.

And so the sermons for the coming weeks are going to explore what it would look like to be an EPIC Church, a place where we are all connected to one another in meaningful ways. But we begin first with the most important connection, the very purpose for our existence as a church. Our connection to God.

Someone left a clipping on my desk last week. One of the stories on the clipping was a story about a 5-year-old girl who was attending church for the very first time. Her family must have prepared her for what was to come because she sat in the pew expectantly. But a few minutes into the service, she tugged on the sleeve of the parent or grandparent who brought her and asked, "When does God come in?"

I have often thought of church as one hand reaching out to our neighbor and one hand reaching out to God. We come here with the expectation that we will experience the presence of the Divine within these walls. Maybe through the anthems or music, maybe through the prayers, maybe through that gift of passing the peace. But we come here with some expectations that in some way, we will encounter God within this place. Not that this is the only place where we will meet God, but it is an expectation we bring to church.

And this is important in our lives because there are things that we need in life that only God can fully provide. We need to experience unconditional love because sometimes we feel unworthy. We need to experience forgiveness because no matter how many times we have tried to let go of the remembrance of misdeeds, we long for a lasting forgiveness that heals us and restores us to wholeness. We come here to experience comfort because one cannot get through life without loss and heartbreak. When we need a safe place to bring our grief, God meets us here with the promise of wiping away the tears. We come to experience inspiration and direction in life. We are bombarded with all those things that promise more than they can offer and leave us feeling empty and lost. We come to experience the challenge that dares us to step out in faith and experience what Jesus called the abundant life. We come to this place to meet God and to bring all these questions, burdens, needs, desires because this is a trusted place where we can experience the love and forgiveness and peace and comfort that God offers.

In advance of our trip to Ireland, one of the books I re-read was Brendan O'Carroll's novel "The Mammy." One of the stories in the book tells about two women who have been lifelong friends. The two walked their children together when they were young mothers. They attended concerts and social events together. They were wonderful friends. But one of them, Marion, dies of a heart attack, leaving the other, Agnes, alone and grieving.

At the funeral she tells a friend that when she and Marion were walking their children, Marion would always run up the steps to the church, pull open the large door and shout, "Hello God, it's me, Marion." The friend smiles and says that Marion did this with her as well. She must have done this every time she walked by the church.

As the funeral service began, Agnes is feeling sad about the unfairness of it all. She is questioning God, asking how God could do this to Marion. Then she thinks these words, "as we walked through the doors of the church and started down the aisle...I got me answer! The organ struck a very low tone and in the middle of the drone I heard, as clear as day, a warm strong voice say: 'Hello, Marion, it's me, God.' And I just *knew* she was going to be all right!"

Our first task as a church, is to create those connections to God. That is our reason for existence. From that connection flows the other ministries for which we are known. We serve Hot Meals because our love of God compels us to share that love with others. And sometimes love is shared through feeding one another. We will support a strong Preschool because God's love encourages us to welcome and love all the children around us. We will send notes and letters to one another because God's love calls us to share that love with others. And sometimes that love looks like a hand-written note just letting someone know that they are being remembered. We will be present at next week's Pride Festival, one of only a few churches represented, because we have experienced God's love and acceptance, and God has called us to share that love with others. All that we do as a church is based upon that experience of being loved and accepted. That is the foundation for all our ministries, for all that we do. We may not state that explicitly, but our connection to God is foundational for all that we do as a community of faith.

As the book of 1John puts it, "*Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves God is born of God and knows God. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*"

That love is our starting point. It is our anchor amid the storms of life. It is God's abiding promise that can never be taken away. You are loved. Nothing you say or do will ever take that away. God's love is not fickle like human love. It is steadfast. It is eternal. It is unchanging. You are loved.

On the first day of high school, I walked off the bus and into the main entrance of Mount Vernon High School. The entrance was located right beside the principal's office, and he was standing there in the doorway as we entered the school. I can still remember vividly that when I walked through the doors of the school he called out, "Good morning, Howard." I'm sure I must have stopped in my tracks. I can't believe I didn't drop my backpack. School hasn't even begun yet and the principal already knows my name. I was wondering what kind of reputation I was bringing from middle school that the teachers or administration had already warned him about me! I was flabbergasted.

But then I heard him welcoming other students and calling them by name. “Good morning, Mark. Good morning, Heidi. Good morning, Ray.” I don’t know this for sure, but I suspect that he had studied the 8<sup>th</sup> grade yearbook in advance so that he could welcome us to school. After the initial shock wore off, it was a very thoughtful gesture. Nervous as I was about the first day, here was someone who called me by name and welcomed me. I have never forgotten that kind gesture and what it meant to me.

That is the reason for selecting the reading from the prophet Isaiah. It begins with those gentle and reassuring words, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” In a section that is filled with stories of the unfaithfulness and disobedience of Israel, God takes this opportunity to speak lovingly to the people. It is not a message of judgement nor criticism. It is a word of love. I have called you by name. I know who you are and I love you.

And the kindness continues saying that when you pass through the waters, meaning whenever you face any crisis or struggle or difficulty in life, I will be with you. No matter what we face in life, God is there with us to see us through those difficult times. We are never alone.

The reading concludes with those beautiful words, “because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you....”

What makes us an EPIC Church is that connection we experience together to God. The love forms the foundation for all that we do. And experiencing that connection here together, opens our eyes to experience that love and acceptance and peace in the world around us. We might experience the love of God looking up at the night sky and the vastness of the universe. We might experience the presence of God in the kindness of a stranger. We might experience God’s presence in silence or in song. Our connection with God’s love in this place opens our hearts and eyes to experience the presence of God throughout the world. Let’s start there to be an EPIC Church, a place where every person is connected.