

Living into the Questions: Love it or Leave It?
Acts 9:10- 16; Jer. 29:4-7
November 18, 2018
First Baptist Church, Pottstown
Rev. Marcia B Bailey, preaching

The title for today's sermon comes from a popular HGTV show by the same name, "Love It or List It". How many of you have watched that? I am not much of a tv watcher but I confess a little HGTV binge watching on occasion, and one of the shows I have watched is this one. For those of you who are unfamiliar, this show features two hosts, Hillary, a design consultant and David, a real estate agent. In each episode, a couple presents their unsatisfactory living situation to this Canadian team, who subsequently each endeavor to solve the couple's problem and fulfill their housing wishes by either updating their current home to meet their needs (Hillary's job) or by finding them an entirely new home to buy once they sell their rehabbed old house (David's task).

During the course of the hour-long show the designer who is trying to renovate always runs into predictable problems: unforeseen issues with wiring or plumbing, and not enough money to do everything the couple wants. The real estate agent's challenge is to find a house the couple can afford that meets their criteria, which often includes living close to the original home or relocating to a particular school district or neighborhood, which is usually outside their price range. The whole thing comes to a climax after the "reveal", when they see their own renovated property for the first time and are told its new market value, at which point they are asked: "Will you love it or list it?", meaning will you stay here in this old-new house or will you sell it and move someplace else. "Will you love it or list it"? becomes the defining question: are you able to embrace the present changes that were made to enhance your living, knowing you

didn't get everything you wanted or will you give up all that you loved and hated about this place to seek a new one, always at a greater cost but in hopes of something new.

"Love it or Leave it?" That's a question for us to consider as we seek to envision God's call and invitation to those of us who "live" in this "house"! First Baptist Church was founded more than 160 years ago and has remained on the corner of Charlotte and King all this time. The church has changed, the building has changed, the neighborhood, community and the world have changed, but here we remain, in this place, seeking to engage in relevant ministry to one another and to those around us. So, you might wonder, if we've been here all these years, why would we be thinking about leaving now? To that I say, *why not?*

We are living into the questions; that means that we are asking ourselves the penetrating questions of discernment as we endeavor to understand our direction for the days ahead. If we are going to take an honest look at ourselves, our location and purpose here has to be factored into the equation. You *have* asked this question before, most recently when the congregation experienced its last split, before Marvin came to be your pastor. You wondered *then* if this was still the place God wanted you to be, considering a move to the suburbs, out of the gritty reality of this urban community. The fact that you are still here indicates that you decided, at least at that time, that "loving it" was the way to go. Then again, when the tower started to fall, the question of staying or leaving, although not openly discussed, certainly ran through many minds. And so here we are at another turning point; it's time to ask the question again: do we love it or leave it?

Like any homeowner might attest, there are days when you'd be happy to plant the "for sale" sign on the lawn and other days when you think they will only move you out feet first. When

the snow needs to be shoveled and someone steals the pipes from the furnace, when the tower falls down on your head and there's water in the basement, you just wish someone would come along and write a check for the whole place; surely God has better use for our time and energy than this!

And that makes sense right up until some Sunday morning when the sun comes through these magnificent windows and the choir hits all the notes just right and the place is filled with the sounds of vacation bible school and you remember that you were born here, raised here, baptized here, married here, that you dedicated your children and maybe your grandchildren here and you feel like the building itself is a part of you, and despite its challenges, you know it and you love it; it's home.

So how do we decide? Is it all just an emotional response? How much does our financial reality play into answering this question? How much does our numerical reality play into answering this question? How much does our age and physical strength and available time and expendable energy factor into whether we "love it or leave it"? If someone offered us the "right price" tomorrow (whatever that is), would we take? Why or why not? Are any of these the appropriate questions to ask or reliable indicators of what we are seeking to know...about ourselves, about this place, about God?! I don't know for sure, but I think we haven't quite asked *all* the pertinent questions yet.... because we haven't asked *WHY* we are here. We haven't considered our sense of call or responsibility to this location, to this neighborhood. What does it *mean* to be here, or somewhere else? What does that mean for who we are, what we are called to, and who we are to serve?

The text for this morning may seem a strange one in relationship to the questions we are asking but I think it points to something we might be up against. The passage we read from Acts is the part of the extended story of the call of Saul or Tarsus—Saul, the murderer of early Christians, the persecutor of the faithful; Saul, who with the support of the Roman government sought out believers in order to disrupt their worship and imprison them; it's the story of *that* Saul, later known as the Apostle Paul. It's part of the story of how he comes to understand his own purpose in life, and his encounter with Ananias, who reluctantly helps him. And it is the reluctant Ananias who is the focus of the portion we've read, not Saul.

I say "reluctant" because if you look at the passage again you will see how distasteful Ananias finds this injunction by God to go to Saul to help him in his weakness. Ananias reminds God that Saul is the enemy, that's *he's* the one opposed to God. Ananias recognizes the real and present danger here; Saul could turn on him and capture, or worse, kill him. Ananias realizes that carrying out God's direction could have significant implications for the wider community of believers'; there weren't that many of them. Did they dare stir the pot and get the things brewing again? Surely there was something else Ananias could do to be found faithful; certainly, there were other folks to "go to" whom God could use that wouldn't have to include Saul!

But not surprisingly, God isn't particularly interested in hearing about what Ananias thinks; God wants him to heal Saul so that God can use him. "Go," God says to the foot-dragging Ananias, "*for he is an instrument I have chosen* to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." Ah, so there's the wrinkle: God is saying to Ananias, "it's not YOU I

am after here; *you* are not the one I've chosen for this important work; I've chosen Saul. Do as I ask, Ananias; it's all part of a larger plan."

And so, to his credit, Ananias does the *one* thing that seems the most foreign to him; he takes a risk, he puts aside his very real fear and he responds to God's command. It doesn't seem like a good idea; he doesn't think this is the best use of his or God's resources, but Ananias is obedient. He hears God's call and he obeys. He decides that he will "love it", that is, he will love God's will and God's way. He will be faithful though the ways' uncertain. Ananias agrees to do the more challenging thing, the more frightening thing, and ultimately the most transformative thing, in order to be faithful to his call.

And that makes me wonder about what God's asking **us** to do, about God's desire for us in this place. What does it mean to be located at the corner of King and Charlotte? Are **we** called to do the risky thing, the "dangerous thing" of loving others **here**, in this neighborhood? In what ways might our values, assets and faithfulness combine to affect change in this location? How might we be Ananias to this community, to be the ones to open the eyes of those around us to God's healing power and grace? Might **we** be God's agents of transformation here, on this corner, learning to know and love our neighbors who are themselves "instruments whom [God] has chosen", to offer solidarity, not charity, to them? We need to decide: do we stay or do we go? Do we plant or do we uproot? Do we love it or "list it"?

Before we answer these questions, listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah; he is writing to the exiles, preparing them for a lengthy stay in captivity, in spite of the voices of false prophets, who speak for themselves and others, but not for God. Jeremiah writes on behalf of God: "...seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its

behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jer. 29: 7). “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you...” Build, plant, engage, God says, in the people, the place, the city to where I’ve made for you a home. Invest, relate, *live in* the community I have called you to. In *its* welfare you will find your own welfare. It’s *its* wellbeing you will find your own wellbeing. In *its’* future, you will find your own.

How does this text inform our discernment; can we hear God’s word for us, here in this place? What would it look like to “build, plant, engage” this neighborhood in new and exciting ways? What would it mean to once again commit to this community to which we have understood ourselves in the past to be called?

We are living into the questions, and this is a big one! I keep asking you where you see God showing up and I want you to know, God is making Godself known here. There *is* someone who is interested in purchasing at least half of the building; there are real options on the table that have never been there before. We have choices to make; we have a vision to discern, we have work to do. This building, that depending on the day we equally love and hate, is right now our biggest asset: what will we do with it? How will we use what God has given us? What invitation do we hear, what call are we receiving about life and ministry in this place?

See it as an act of commitment and responsibility to write your responses to these and the other questions we’ve been asking on the kiosks in Echo Hall. We need to do the work of discernment together and one way we are doing that is gathering your feedback, your heart’s understanding of what God is saying to you and to us, thru you. (Plus, next week, I will use those comments as part of the sermon as we celebrate the faithful lives of those who have come before us and look ourselves to the future we share.)

Are we going to love this place, this space, this neighborhood and see it as a blessing and opportunity for ministry? Or are we ready for something else? And what would that be? Will we love it or leave it? Either way, God is in our midst, the questions are ours, and the possibility of new life is real.