

EMPOWERED TO REMEMBER & MOVE FORWARD

Acts 4:23–35

108th Anniversary Sunday – St. John's United Church

INTRODUCTION

Today is a significant day in the life of St. John's. Today we celebrate 108 years of ministry in this community. One hundred and eight years ago today, Sunday, June 7, 1918, marked the first worship service of the Sankt Johannes Reformierte Evangelische Gemeinde, San Bruno.

- One hundred and eight years of worship.
- One hundred and eight years of prayer.
- One hundred and eight years of baptisms, confirmations, funerals, weddings, Communion tables, songs of praise, seasons of joy, seasons of hardship, and generations of people seeking to follow Jesus Christ here in San Bruno.

And interestingly enough, this week also marks one year since my installation as pastor of St. John's. I have reflected on that a great deal because there is a part of this story that still amazes me.

This church was founded by German immigrants. And 108 years later, God would send another German immigrant with the same Evangelical and Reformed roots to help lead this church into its next season.

My own family comes from Kaiserslautern, Germany, where generations of my family worshipped in the Stiftskirche. In 1818, that church became the birthplace of a remarkable movement when Lutheran and Reformed Christians chose communion over division and became known simply as Evangelische—a united church of Jesus Christ.

When I first learned St. John's original name—St. Johannes Reformierte Evangelische Gemeinde—it immediately caught my attention. These were the same theological roots that shaped my own family for generations.

History does not yet tell us exactly where all of St. John's founding families came from. But whether we ever discover a family connection is not really the point. The point is providence.

Because sometimes God is quietly weaving together stories across generations, across oceans, and across centuries in ways we cannot fully see until much later.

Long before any of us arrived here, God was already at work.

And that is really what Acts 4 is about.

The early Church is facing pressure.

The future feels uncertain.

The apostles have been threatened.

And when the believers gather together to pray, they do not ask God for comfort.

They ask for courage.

They pray:

“Lord... enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”

And I believe that prayer speaks powerfully to us today.

Because every generation of the Church eventually reaches moments where faith requires courage.

That was true for the believers in Acts. It was true for the German settlers who founded this church in 1918. And it is still true for us today.

MOVEMENT ONE -- THEY REMEMBERED WHO GOD HAD BEEN Acts 4:23–28

When the early Church gathered together under pressure, the first thing they did was remember the story of God.

Before strategy. Before solutions. Before plans. **They remembered.**

And anniversaries matter because they invite us to do the same thing.

Not to worship the past. Not to become trapped in nostalgia.

But to remember the faithfulness of God across generations.

And when we think about the founding of St. John’s, it is important that we remember what kind of faith this required.

San Bruno in 1918 looked nothing like it does today. No massive airport. No tech corridor. No sprawling suburbs. This was still a developing community.

The people who founded this church were immigrants living in a world that must have felt incredibly unfamiliar—more than 6,000 miles away from home, far from the language, customs, and communities they once knew.

This was not an era when someone could simply fly home if they became homesick. Travel took weeks. Communication could take months.

Many immigrants left knowing there was a good chance they would never again see the places they came from. And yet they came.

Not because life was easy.

Not because the future was guaranteed.

But because they believed God was still faithful in unfamiliar territory.

And when they arrived here, they planted a church. St. Johannes Reformierte Evangelische Gemeinde, San Bruno.

That name reflected deep roots.

Evangelical roots.

Reformed roots.

A people shaped by Scripture, worship, prayer, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The very name of the church suggests roots in the Evangelical and Reformed traditions that chose unity over division and believed Christ's mission mattered more than maintaining old walls of separation.

In many ways, this church was born from a spiritual tradition that believed Christ's mission mattered more than maintaining old walls of separation.

And honestly, that feels deeply connected to who St. John's is still called to be today.

This week I spent some time reading through our very first church ledger from 1915. Not the church council records. Not the records of a building project. The records of the Women's Guild that actually planted this church.

Eighteen women. Names like Minna Frömling, Louise Ficke, Elise Schiedeck, and Eugenie Wenzel. They met in a rented hall. They counted pennies. They funded a Saturday school. They packed relief boxes for victims of World War I. Long before there was a sanctuary, there were faithful people doing small things with extraordinary faithfulness.

And as I read those pages, I realized something: these women were not thinking about building a church that would still be here 108 years later. They were simply doing the next faithful thing.

Those early settlers were missionaries in their own way. They carried their faith into a new world.

Their mission field looked different than ours, but they were still missionaries—trying to remain faithful in a culture that felt unfamiliar. In many ways, we are still called to do the same thing today.

Because increasingly, churches like ours are rediscovering what the early Church already knew: We are missionaries in a changing world.

And that is not something to fear. It is simply the reality of mission. **The Church has always been built by people willing to trust God in unfamiliar territory.**

That missionary spirit has continued throughout this church's story.

This church helped birth the Filipino congregation just down the road. That was mission.

People stepped beyond themselves to create space for another community to worship and grow.

And now, decades later, there is once again growing relationship and connection between our congregations.

That matters. Because it reminds us that healthy churches do not simply preserve themselves. Healthy churches plant seeds beyond themselves.

And today, our mission field is not limited to this building.

Every week, through online ministry, sermons, livestreams, teaching resources, and prayer, people across the country—and even in other parts of the world—engage with the ministry of this church.

One hundred and eight years ago, German immigrants planted a church in a small Peninsula community. Today, through technology they could never have imagined, the witness of this church reaches far beyond San Bruno.

God has a way of doing bigger things than we can see in the moment. And that is why remembering matters. **Because remembering God's faithfulness gives us courage to trust Him again.**

We are not the first generation to wonder what the future will look like. **We are simply the latest generation being asked to trust God with it.**

MOVEMENT TWO -- THEY ASKED FOR COURAGE, NOT COMFORT Acts 4:29–31

The believers pray:

"Lord... enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

Notice what they did not pray. They did not pray: "Lord, remove all difficulty."

"Lord, make everything comfortable." "Lord, help us avoid risk." **They prayed for courage.**

And courage has always been necessary for the Church to move forward.

It took courage for the early believers in Acts to proclaim Christ in the face of uncertainty.

It took courage for immigrants to cross an ocean and build a church far from home.

And honestly, it takes courage for St. John's to step into this next season.

Because if we are honest, humanly speaking, the odds are stacked against churches like ours.

Limited resources. Small numbers. An aging congregation. A culture increasingly disconnected from faith. **And when you are down to eight active members, what is happening is not maintenance. It is relaunch. And relaunch requires courage. Especially when the future feels uncertain.**

But the Book of Acts was never the story of what human beings could accomplish through favorable circumstances.

The Book of Acts is the story of what God can do through ordinary people empowered by the Holy Spirit.

**The same Holy Spirit that empowered frightened believers in Jerusalem...
the same Spirit that sustained German immigrants planting a church in 1918...
is the same Holy Spirit still empowering the Church today.**

Because our confidence cannot be rooted in ourselves.

Not in numbers. Not in money. Not in influence. Not in nostalgia. Our confidence must be rooted in God.

The future of the Church has never depended on favorable odds. **It has always depended on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.**

Because the mission of the Church has never been possible through human strength alone.

And I believe one of the reasons God brought us into this season is to teach us dependence again.

Not dependence on systems. Not dependence on personality. Not dependence on tradition alone.

Dependence on God.

Because sometimes God allows us to reach the end of ourselves so that we rediscover where our true strength comes from.

The Church was never meant to operate merely as an institution.

The Church is meant to be a Spirit-filled people.

And that is especially important as we continue stepping into the kind of witness God is calling us toward.

A witness rooted in grace. A witness rooted in truth. A witness rooted in the love of Christ.

An Open and Affirming witness that proclaims clearly that every human being is made in the image of God and deeply loved by Him.

And I know that kind of ministry takes courage too.

Because boldness is not only about speaking loudly.

Sometimes boldness is the willingness to keep loving people well in a divided world.

To keep welcoming people in the name of Jesus.

To keep holding grace and truth together.

To keep proclaiming the Gospel with compassion and conviction.

Because the Church was never called merely to survive.

The Church was called to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

So the question before us is not whether the road ahead feels easy. It is whether we will ask God for the same thing the early Church asked for: not comfort, but courage.

MOVEMENT THREE - THEY MOVED FORWARD TOGETHER Acts 4:32–35

Acts 4 ends with a picture of transformed community.

“All the believers were one in heart and mind.”

One in heart. One in mind. Not identical people. Not people who agreed on everything. **But people united around a shared dependence on God and a shared commitment to the mission of Christ.**

And honestly, when I think about the deeper spiritual heritage behind this church, I think that matters profoundly.

Because the Evangelical and Reformed tradition that shaped this congregation was itself born from Christians choosing unity over division. Believers who looked at centuries of separation and decided that Christ had called them to something greater than rivalry.

Shared worship. Shared Communion. Shared mission. And perhaps that heritage still has something to teach us today. Because our vision moving forward cannot simply be about rebuilding what once was.

It cannot simply be about attendance numbers.
It cannot simply be about recreating another era.
And it cannot be driven by nostalgia.

Nostalgia is not strong enough to sustain the Church. Only the Spirit of God can do that.

Our vision is not about becoming impressive.

It is about becoming faithful.

Faithful in prayer. Faithful in worship. Faithful in witness. Faithful in community. Faithful in dependence upon God. The goal is not simply that St. John's survives another year.

The goal is that people who do not yet know the love of Christ encounter Him through the witness of this church. That is the mission.

And throughout Acts we see the same pattern again and again:

The believers pray. The Spirit moves. The people witness. And God adds to the Church.

Notice who does the adding. **God does.**

That matters. Because our responsibility is not to manufacture results.

Our responsibility is to remain faithful. Prayerful. Available. Courageous. Dependent upon God.

This week I noticed something remarkable in that old 1916 ledger. At the very bottom of one page, after all the accounting had been reviewed, an independent auditor wrote two simple words:

Alles Richtig. Everything is correct. Everything is in order.

What struck me was not the bookkeeping. It was the faith behind it. Those women were living through a world war. They faced uncertainty, scarcity, and hostility. Yet they kept praying, serving, giving, worshipping, and trusting God.

They simply kept doing the next faithful thing. That is how a witness endures.

Moving forward together may begin very simply: praying with fresh expectancy, worshipping with renewed gratitude, and making room for the next person God sends through these doors.

After all, the founders of this church did not cross an ocean so that one day we could simply preserve a building. They planted a witness. And now, 108 years later, it is our turn to carry that witness forward.

Not in our own strength. Not pretending the challenges are small. Not because the future looks easy.

But because Jesus Christ is still Lord of the Church.

The same God who sustained believers in Acts...
the same God who sustained immigrant settlers in 1918...
is still faithful today.

And perhaps that is one of the great lessons of history.

Long before we understand what God is doing, He is already at work.

Across generations. Across oceans. Across families. Across churches. Quietly weaving together stories according to His care and His purpose.

And so we remember. Not so we can live in the past. But so we can move forward with courage.

Because remembering God's faithfulness gives us courage to trust Him again.

The Church has never been called to survive by clinging to the past.

The Church has always been called to bear witness to Jesus Christ in every generation. **And now it is our turn.**

Minna Frömling never saw what St. John's would become. Louise Ficke never saw livestreams reaching people around the country. Elise Schiedeck never saw the generations that would follow.

They simply did the next faithful thing. They prayed. They served. They gave. They trusted God. And because they did, we are here.

May those who come behind us one day say the same of us. May they find that we remained faithful. May they find that we trusted God.

May they find that when our season of uncertainty arrived, we chose courage over comfort and the next faithful thing over fear.

And perhaps, by the grace of God, they too will be able to say: **Alles Richtig.** The foundation held. The witness endured. God was faithful.

May we be a people empowered to remember. And empowered to move forward. Amen.