

What's In a Name: Farmville

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 and 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Farmville Baptist Church

June 26, 2022

I really like maps. Does anyone else here today like maps? I think one of the reasons I like maps is because they are interesting to look at, with their landmarks and colors and symbols. Old maps often had imaginative drawings on the margins, like dragons or pyramids or pictorial representations of towns or forests. Many children's books replicate this sort of cartography, and as a child I was a sucker for a book with a map in it. To be honest, I still am; whether it's a work of history or fantasy – the two types of books I most like to read for fun – I am extra excited when I crack the cover of the book and find a good map.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise you that one of the features of any Bible I like most is the collection of maps at the end. But it isn't just aesthetic enjoyment that makes me appreciate a biblical map. The map helps us gain an appreciation for the world in which the stories of the Bible took place. I think I learned that appreciation from my father, who's also a big map guy, but from early on understanding the physical context in which the stories of Israel's past or the early church helped me better understand those stories and find connections with my own life.

Maybe that's why I love the fact that, when this congregation chose its name, it chose to be known as Farmville Baptist Church. Now, I don't know all the reasons why that happened. Gene Watson told me the story of how, a long time ago, we were THE Baptist church in town, to the extent that we were listed in the phone book simply as

“Baptist Church,” and new neighbors moving to town who were Baptist were pointed in our direction because “That’s the Baptist Church.” Maybe that’s why we became known as Farmville Baptist Church, I don’t know for sure – but it’s part of our name, and I love it. I get a lot of joy when I introduce myself to people and say I’m the pastor of the *Farmville* Baptist Church.

But what does it mean that we are the Farmville Baptist Church? What’s important about the fact that we’ve chosen “Farmville” as an integral part of how we introduce ourselves to the world? What’s in a name when that name includes the word, “Farmville”?

For one thing, it puts us in good company. The first generation of churches – the ones we read about in the New Testament – were not churches with names like “Grace Baptist Church” or “Trinity Episcopal Church” or “Smith

Memorial Methodist Church.” There isn’t anything wrong with any of those names, mind you, but the earliest churches were identified in a very particular way. It’s a way exemplified in our passage this morning: “To the church of God in Corinth...” The first generation of churches, the ones planted by Peter and Paul and Apollos and Priscila and Aquila and the rest, they were all known as “the church in a particular place.” We can read the letters written to them – Corinth and Galatia and Thessalonica and many more. In Acts, we read of the church in Antioch and the believers in Ephesus. In Revelation, we read of the church in Smyrna and Sardis, Thyatira and Philadelphia. And in the stories of these churches that we find, and in the letters written to them by Paul and Peter and John, we discover some insight that might just be helpful as we consider together what it means to be the *Farmville* Baptist Church today.

It begins, simply enough, with an awareness of place. The Corinthian church was, very specifically, a church *in* Corinth. While this caused some problems – and Paul certainly addressed some of those problems – the church fundamentally was a church in that particular place. It wasn't a church that withdrew from its community, it wasn't a church that pretended like the community around it didn't exist or didn't matter. The people who made up the church were people who lived in and near Corinth, familiar with the customs and practices of the place, and with connections to various communities within the city. The same would prove true of the other churches we read about in the New Testament, and while sometimes that comfortable familiarity with the culture of the city could get the new Christians in trouble with the apostles, nowhere were they encouraged to disengage. Indeed, their very purpose, their very mission,

was to connect with their community and be, as Jesus put it, the ‘salt and light’ of the world.

This reflects the overall perspective of the redemption story of Scripture. The passage we read earlier from Jeremiah, written to exiles far from home, was a command to plant themselves deep in the place where they found themselves. “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.”¹ And Jeremiah goes further. He also tells them to seek the peace and prosperity of the place they are – both for the good of the city and for themselves. In this, Jeremiah continues a tradition that stretches back even farther, all the way back to Abraham, the father of many nations, including Israel. Abraham, known at the time as Abram, was a nomadic shepherding chieftain in modern-day Iraq when he heard a word from God to go to a new land.

¹ Jeremiah 29:5

And why was God calling him to do this? “I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”² God’s expectation of those he calls to be part of his family is always that they will be connected to the place they live and the people they are around as a voice of hope and a presence of blessing. They are to be **in** a place, and also **for** a place.

We see this in the life of the early church. In these cities of the Mediterranean world, we find the church being a community of people where the sick are cared for and healed, where widows neglected by everyone else can be fed, where children are valued, where the poor are provided for, and where the grieving find support. Whether we are talking about Tabitha’s ministry in Joppa for the widows and the poor, the church in Antioch providing for those caught in

² Genesis 12:2, 3

famine, or some of the churches of Revelation being known for their deeds of generosity, the church has continued this long history of God's people being present and aware of needs in their community and responding to those needs with generous and effective actions.

When we identify ourselves as *Farmville* Baptist Church, we are asserting our understanding that God has called us to be a community of his faithful people **in** and **for** this neighborhood, town, and community. We are not to show up in this sanctuary, behind thick walls and tall columns, and shut our doors to the community around us. We are to be out there, each of us, connecting with people in the community, learning and knowing more about the reality of our town and region, forming relationships with people and, vitally, being a glimpse of the kingdom of God to them. That's why we're inviting folks to join us for ice cream and

watch the fireworks on our front steps next Saturday. But it's also why we're out there in the community garden, sweating as we move dirt from here to there and hauling water to keep the plants alive. It's also why we are partners with other churches and community organizations to support FACES, so hungry people can eat, and why we are partnering with CLASP, to help college students who may need some help to handle the college load make it. And it's why our church's expectation of each of us, as individuals, is to live out our faith in our daily lives, in the relationships we have, in the jobs we work, in the classes we attend, in this place we are. Farmville Baptist Church is a group of people called by God to be here, in this place, serving this community. When we put Farmville in our name, we accepted that calling to be **in** and **for** this place.

But there's a second piece to the idea of being a church for and in a community that we find, especially in Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. And that is how the church is called to bear witness to the Gospel *in a particular place* – and that often means speaking a word and living a witness that challenges the sins and problems wrapped up in a particular community or town.

Every place has a history, of course. The city of Corinth certainly did. An ancient Greek city long before the time of the New Testament, it had a history of licentiousness and opulence. Closer to the time of Paul's writing, Rome brutally conquered Corinth (along with most of the Mediterranean world) and things changed a lot. While many trappings of Greek Corinth remained, Roman culture and power were now at the center of the city. It became a hub of Roman emperor worship. It also became a core transit point in the

Roman system of trade, where cultures mixed and money flowed. It was a place with a lot going on – but also a lot of problematic perspectives on life that would cause problems for the young church, not in the community, but within the congregation.

We don't have to read very far into 1 Corinthians to realize that this is a letter to correct some misunderstandings and poor congregational dynamics. In a city of the haves and the have-nots, the church reflected those divisions and indeed tried to baptize them. In a city with a fairly laid-back approach to issues of morality, including marital fidelity, the congregation apparently failed to commit to a more faithful way of marital life. And Paul saw all of it. He saw how the church in Corinth was rife with economic and social division, how the values of covenant relationships, both in marriage and among brothers and sisters in Christ, were being flouted,

and how those with power and influence in the city who happened to be connected to the church were accorded more power and influence within the congregation, too, simply because of their community status. The Corinthian Christians were suing each other, they were cheating on their spouses, and they were making the poor members of the church feel like second-class citizens in the kingdom of God – all things that were acceptable in the city of Corinth.

All of that, to Paul, was wrong. It was verging on blasphemy. And he was having none of it. Yes, the church of Corinth was supposed to be in the community and work for the welfare of the city where God had called them...but this was something else. The sins of Corinth, the patterns of life that were not consistent with the kingdom of God – that's what the church was to reject. And Paul looked at the behavior of the church, he heard the testimony of its leaders,

he considered the fruit of its service, and he saw the rot at the core of the church...because the church **in** Corinth and **for** Corinth was becoming the church **of** Corinth, and that was a problem.

Instead, Paul said, they were called to be “the church **of** God **in** Corinth.” And in the rest of the letter, and for a good chunk of 2nd Corinthians, we find Paul laying out some guidance on what that would look like. It would include a lot of correction – correction of the people in the church. They couldn’t live like the people of Corinth who were not guided by the way of Christ. They couldn’t accept uncritically the values of their community. And they couldn’t ignore the things God called them to do that might just get them looked at as weird or even get them in trouble. In a community where economic divisions were virtually carved in stone, the church was to be a place where money didn’t matter at the

table of the Lord. In a community where social status was paramount, the church was to be a place where none of that mattered. In a community where power was literally worshipped, in the person of Caesar, the church was to be a place where the slave who possessed the gifts of the Spirit or the woman who was entrusted with Christian leadership could make more of a difference than and be considered equal to the rich patron or businessman who carried influence in the wider community. And, where the church was guilty of perpetuating those societal sins of the past, Paul called on the congregation to repent, to make things right within the congregation, and to bear witness to this right way of living, from God's perspective, in the wider community. The Corinthian church, just like the other churches of the New Testament, was called to be the church **in** a particular

place, not to be the church **of** a particular place, and where it had failed to do so, to turn around and go in a new direction.

As many of you know, I am a student of history, particularly the history of the Second World War. One reason I am drawn to that period of history is because it is distant enough to seem different and interesting, but near enough to comprehend. Another reason is that, during that period of conflict and evil, there are stories of heroism and goodness that shine all the brighter. One of those stories took place on the plateau of south-central France.

Before the war, France was like many European countries: there was a good deal of dislike of and even hatred towards Jews. Antisemitism was not solely a failing of Nazi Germany, after all. But when the Nazis consolidated power in Germany and began the first steps of what would become their horrific Final Solution, Jews from Germany fled to

wherever they could find refuge, including France. That was a safe place for them – until the Germans invaded France. It didn't take them long to bring their policies of Jewish extermination to France, and the Vichy government, a collaborating partner with Nazi control, went along. Many French towns and regions saw the Jews in their neighborhoods rounded up and sent to concentration camps, never to be seen alive again. And few raised any cry of concern. In fact, far too many French citizens, including French Christians, silently cheered this development.

But not in a town called Le Chambon.

In that town, on the highlands of southern France, a French Huguenot community lived. If you don't know who French Huguenots are, they were dissident Protestant Christians who were persecuted for hundreds of years, both by the state and by other churches. By the mid-twentieth

century, they were a minority religion themselves, and one enclave of this small Christian group was in the town of Le Chambon, where Pastor Andre Trocme and his congregation had studied the Scriptures and tried to live like Jesus.

When Jews began showing up seeking refuge, the patriotic thing, the culturally-acceptable thing, even the legal thing for the people of Le Chambon to do would have been to turn those Jews into the authorities. But Pastor Trocme and his flock understood something: though they were people in France, and a church in France, they were not a church of France. They were a church, a community, of God's people, following God's commands. They had embraced what we discussed last week: they were a colony of heaven here on earth. And as a colony of heaven, they knew they couldn't blindly embrace the way of their culture or their country. They had to welcome the stranger, protect the refugee, and

shelter the Jew on the run from the Gestapo. The attendance at their church school in this small mountain town was 18 in 1939; by 1944 it was 350. As Malcolm Gladwell says in his chapter on this phenomenal Christian community, “It didn’t take any great powers of deduction to figure out who those extra 332 children were.”³

And the people of Le Chambon didn’t exactly hide what they were doing, though they hid the Jewish refugees well. Indeed, in the summer of 1942, a senior official in the Vichy French government, tasked to set up camps modelled after the Hitler Youth in towns like Le Chambon, arrived in town for an official visit. In the course of that visit, a group of students walked up to him and presented him with a letter. The letter pointed to events in Paris earlier that summer, when Vichy police rounded up twelve thousand Jews at the

³ Gladwell, David and Goliath, 267

request of the Nazis, Jews who ended up in Auschwitz. As Malcolm Gladwell records, “Le Chambon, the children made clear, wanted no part in any of this.”⁴ The letter read,

“Mr. Minister, we have learned of the frightening scenes which took place three weeks ago in Paris, where the French police, on orders of the occupying power, arrested in their homes all the Jewish families in Paris to hold them in the Vel d’Hiv. The fathers were torn from their families and sent to Germany. The children torn from their mothers, who underwent the same fate as their husbands....We are afraid that the measures of deportation of the Jews will soon be applied in the southern zone.

“We feel obliged to tell you that there are among us a certain number of Jews. But, we make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to the Gospel teaching.

“If our comrades, whose only fault is to be born in another religion, received the order to let themselves be deported, or

⁴ Gladwell, 266

even examined, they would disobey the order received, and we would try to hide them as best we could.

“We have Jews. You’re not getting them.”⁵

Such open defiance of Vichy French and Nazi German expectations and even commands carried consequences. Some residents of Le Chambon were arrested and interrogated during the war, and a few, including Pastor Trocme’s cousin, were deported to concentration camps where they were murdered. But the church community in Le Chambon stayed true to the command to be in France and not of France. They did not turn any Jews in, and it is estimated that the people of Le Chambon, who could be counted traitors to their culture and their country but not to their God, saved the lives of between 3,000 and 5,000 Jews.⁶

⁵ Gladwell, 266-267

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Chambon-sur-Lignon

Let's pause here for a moment. Not all of us are as heroic as Andre Trocme. But most of the people of Le Chambon were simple folk, common people of faith just like you and me...and they, together, were able to be a church in Le Chambon, France, without being the church of Le Chambon, France. Could the same be said of us? The church in Corinth struggled with this, as have so many churches through the centuries – and, to be honest, as we have here at Farmville Baptist. There are places in our history when we went along with the way of our culture, of our town, when it was not at all the path God wanted us to take. That is a part of our past. But it doesn't have to be a part of our future. We can be the church God wants us to be, in Farmville and for Farmville, without necessarily being a church of Farmville, of the culture around us. There may come times – no, there will come times – when our

faithfulness to God's call to be the church he wants us to be will mean that we cannot be a church of our town or our culture. When that time comes, will we stay true to the way of Jesus? Will we be a church of God in Farmville and for Farmville, even when we cannot in good conscience be a church of Farmville?

For us, the clarion call is always to be this: how is Jesus calling us to be a church in Farmville of God? How are we seeking to be God's people in this place, with our allegiance to our Lord and our heart set to bless our community, our town, and our region? How are we walking the narrow path of Jesus' loving, neighborly way, and how do we see where the path might just lead in a different way from all of those around us? I hope we never face the test of Le Chambon, but I know we will face the smaller, everyday sorts of tests that all churches face. Will we be a church that blesses our

community and invests in our community while bearing true and faithful witness to the holy path of Jesus Christ? My prayer as your pastor is that, every day, that we will live up to our name – that we are found faithful in our call to be a church of God in Farmville, Virginia.