

GOD IS DOING A NEW THING IN OUR CHURCH
Revelation 22:1-6

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This passage from the book of Revelation describes the church as the ideal human community. The writer imagines a new Jerusalem – which for the early Christians was a metaphor for the church. This text offers a rare glimpse of how an early Christian hoped for the future. As I thought about this Sunday in the life of our church – this Annual Meeting Sunday, a time to look back in gratitude at the year just past, a time to look forward to all that God is and will be doing in our midst – I was drawn to this passage. I don't preach often from the book of Revelation, for all kinds of reasons, and we don't have time today to talk about all of the complexities of this book of the Bible, but let us be drawn in this morning to the vivid imagination of its author. Consider with me the ways that this passage connects with our congregation, our shared life.

The central image is the river of the water of life. We feature water imagery in our church. Because of the importance of water in the Bible, because of our proximity to our great lake, our chancel furniture has a water theme. There are waves at the front of our communion table, and the tile is fish. Our youth center is named the Buoy. Right now our chancel is adorned with a beautiful fabric waterfall. We know the necessity of water in our lives.

Next to the river is the tree of life with twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month...here's how one commentator describes this image: "The tree offers fruit for every month. It is ever flourishing, ever bearing. There is no barren period when it will not produce, nor weeks of the year when its branches are void of fruit." Think about the activity level in our church, twelve months of the year, seven days a week. There are

some times that are busier than others, but there really is no time when this building is not used, when we are not engaged in one program or another, and planning for the next. My office is right next to the office of Nate Taylor, our Director of Youth Ministries. I frequently pop my head in, “How’s it going?” “Busy, just a busy time.” All the time. I love this anecdote I heard from Linda Yonkers. She was trying to describe our church to someone she’d recently met. She described where the church was, and then she saw the lightbulb go off in this woman’s head. “Oh, you go to the busy church!”

And listen to the final description from Revelation. “The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations...” “The garden that was the beginning home of humanity is again a shared dwelling place where God and God’s people are gathered in mutual relationship. There is diversity and abundance without division and limitation. Even the leaves of the tree of life are meant for healing, serving as reminders of the shade and solace available from God.” And isn’t that the purpose of the church? We are not busy for the sake of being busy or feeling good about ourselves. We are here to serve as a conduit for God’s healing power, to help bring about healing and wholeness, wherever it is needed.

So let me share with you this morning a few of my observations about where we are as a church at this moment in time. Talking about our church is one of my favorite topics. I can’t hit on everything this morning, so please understand that. I hope that you will read my Annual Report, and feel free to schedule a time to meet to talk about any of this in person.

One way to think about the church is this: the church involves a journey inward and a journey outward. Our focus intentionally and consistently shifts from our internal life as a congregation to our outreach to others. We journey inward to make sure that we are

as healthy as we can be as this body of Christ, and then we journey outward to make sure that we are not self-centered, that we are sharing our good news, inviting people in, and making the world a better place through our involvement in it.

The journey inward involves everything we do to strengthen this congregation's ministry with all ages. We provide programming for children, youth and adults designed to help us grow spiritually. I want to thank each of you for making the decision to call a full-time Associate Minister for Children and Families. This past week, Beau began a fellowship group for 2nd and 3rd graders, an example of new programming. Having a full-time person dedicated to our children and families, assisted by Kim Banks and the Faith Formation Team, is already resulting in more participation in Sunday School. Our journey inward includes opportunities to strengthen relationships between us, so that we truly get to know one another and can support one another. Participating in a small group, whether it is choir, worship band, Stephen Ministries, serving on a team, playing euchre together, going out to dinner, book groups, men's prayer group – to name just a few – deepens the bonds between us. The journey inward involves attention to those who need it: our Membership Team reaches out to those who we haven't seen in a while. Our Parish Nurse, along with Beau and me and our Stephen Ministers and others try our best to maintain contact with our members who are homebound and in residential care facilities. Doorstep Dinners are delivered to those who need a meal from time to time. Heavenly Helpers arrange transportation.

And then, we journey outward...several years ago, at our last Long Range Planning Session, one of our members had a dream of his own. If memory serves, it was actually my husband who came up with the term, so I'll give him a shout-out here. What if our church became known as Mission Central? One of the central places in the

community and the county where people can come if they want to become involved in helping others? What if we were to serve as a clearinghouse for people who want to make donations of time or goods? Mission has always been part of the DNA of this church, but it has become even more so over the past year. When you look at the report of the Nominating Committee, you will see that 27 people from this church asked to serve on the Mission Team. There was a time when the Nominating Team would be tasked with making calls, asking people, trying to get 12 people to serve on each team...these 27 ASKED to serve on the Mission Team, some as adjunct members. There is a palpable excitement for missions. We are one of the leadership churches in the county – if not the leadership church - for most of the agencies with whom we work. We are constantly offering opportunities to give money, donate goods, visit these agencies, offer hands-on support. We anticipate playing a leadership role again this year in building another house for Lorain County Habitat for Humanity. Our church had a million-dollar budget for 2017. We gave away over \$200,000 in goods and services, plus thousands more in volunteer hours. It's what being a church is all about, isn't it? Being the hands and feet of Jesus...making God's love real in the world.

I am keenly aware of the challenges faced by the individuals and families in our congregation in more personal ways. It has always been my hope that the church can help people connect their faith with their daily life. So I'm thrilled that we are able to offer programming like understanding mental illness, moms group, parenting classes, sessions to learn more about Alzheimer's and dementia, Financial Peace University where people gain financial well-being, and the Daniel Plan where we strive for greater physical well-being.

Some of you remember last February when my friend Allen Hilton preached here about his new organization called House United, a faith-based effort to address the political polarization in our country. Several members of our church are hoping we can make progress in that arena this coming year. I came across this quote recently which has been inspiring me, and I hold it up as a goal for us: “Local congregations should serve as schools of public virtue – communities that seek to form the kind of character necessary for public life.”

Finally, I share some statistics with you. Because it is important that we see the big picture, not just how we are doing as a church, but how we compare with the church as a whole. We are living in a time of great decline in all of the mainline Protestant churches. If we believe that a congregation like ours has an important purpose in our community, if we believe that our community needs a church with an open, inclusive welcome and message, with a heart for mission, with serious intention to both the inward and the outward journey, we must not ever grow complacent. As I said in my annual report, I know that it is hard work sometimes to be the church. There are cold Wednesday nights you'd rather stay home than trudge to choir practice, rainy Thursday nights you just don't feel like going to band practice...we are all busy, and church sometimes asks you to give of your time, one of your most precious possessions. Yet here you are, raking leaves in the sleet, weeding the Memorial Garden in the hot sun. Here you are, week after week, teaching Sunday School, painting the back hallway, preparing meals for Haven Center and Family Promise, hammering nails for Habitat. Here you are, giving up a week of your vacation time to chaperone the Mission Trip. And on and on. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. It is making a difference. And we have to keep going. Because our church is making a difference. I see it every day.

So here are those statistics. I share them not in any way to brag, but just so you see the trends, and in the hope that you are encouraged to continue giving, of time, talent and treasure, so that we may continue to be the church God is calling us to be, a church that produces fruit 365 days a year for the healing of the nations.

In 2016, the last year for which we have data, the average membership of a UCC congregation was 177. Our number was 896.

Average worship attendance was 71. Our number was 361.

And finally, this sobering figure. In 1956, the UCC had 2,173,441 members. In 2016: 880,383, a loss of almost 2/3.

If the church is a tree, as in our image from Revelation, it takes all of us to keep the tree healthy, pruned and watered. You help when you give sacrificially of your financial resources – I remind you that a growing church requires more giving than a dying church. You help when you invite people to worship with you or to accompany you to one of our events. You help when you reach out to those you haven't seen in a while. You help when you say "yes" when asked to serve, and when you come up with new ideas.

As you leave today, I encourage you to walk towards the tree that is in the entryway. Write on a leaf what it is that you think God is calling us to do as a church in 2018, or what new seed God is planting in you in this new year.

Let us be grateful for this life together that we share, that we enjoy, that we give away for the sake of the world. I can't imagine a better way to live.