

INVEST IN THE GOOD NEWS: CELEBRATING OUR FUTURE

Luke 12:22-34

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What does it mean to be the church? Here are a few true stories from the past year in the life of this congregation. A person who has recently lost a beloved spouse finds himself lonely, at loose ends, plenty of time on his hands, and so he joins one of our groups, he begins volunteering, and you can see him - month by month - looking happier and more engaged, because now, he has a place where he is needed, a place to belong.

A young woman experienced a crisis of faith when she was in the eighth grade. She finished Confirmation class but she did not want to be confirmed. It felt dishonest for her to simply go through the motions. So, with our blessing, she took some time off, and in that time, she was open to God's Spirit, and something shifted within her heart and mind. She asked to be confirmed this past fall, and it was so evident that she was truly enthusiastic to be joining the church as an adult member.

A couple of people in the church have an idea. It goes like this. Our Thrift Shop is so successful as an outreach. So many congregations are struggling to connect to their neighborhoods and to stay afloat. What if we helped other, smaller congregations to start their own Thrift Shops? Sort of like a franchise. So two men in our church set out on a mission. They developed a well-written business plan, and they approached one church after another. What they found was that once churches were in survival mode, they were terrified of trying something new. They didn't have it in them to take

even the tiniest leap of faith. “We just can’t do it,” they heard over and over again. But...there is a church on the west side of Cleveland, a church that is literally falling apart. The bricks are falling onto the sidewalk, creating a safety hazard, and they have been cited by the city of Cleveland. Still, this church has a gutsy determination to serve its community. “We’ll do it,” they said. “Help us start a Thrift Shop.” Meanwhile, the Haven Center Homeless Shelter in Lorain is overwhelmed with donations - much more than they can even sort through and use. Bags of donations clog its hallways. So — how’s this for the Spirit at work — our two ALUCC guys drive to Lorain, pick up the bags of donations, and drive them to Denison Avenue where the items are sold. Win - Win.

The purpose of the church in our time and place? It is to be a sanctuary, a place of safety and refuge when all around us the world feels difficult and stressful. We come to this sanctuary to experience sabbath rest, to stop. Here we listen for God’s voice, here we recharge our batteries, and then we return to that world where there is work for us to do, but we re-enter the world as new and different people, transformed by the energy of the Spirit.

The purpose of the church in our time and place? It is to be a community, because life can be lonely, and it’s hard to find people who share our values and commitments. Here moms gather once a month and talk about the sacred work of parenting, sharing their struggles with people who empathize. Here men gather twice a month for prayer, talking about the challenges of their lives and encouraging one another. Here our youth come for a sense of belonging, for relationships with peers and also with adults, someone who cares. If you are in a caregiver role, caring for an elder-

ly parent, caring for a spouse, caring for grandchildren, there is a caregivers' support group for you. If someone in your family is living with mental illness, and you need to talk about what that is like for you, we have a mental health support group meeting once a month now. Stephen Ministers are on standby to walk with people through times of life crisis and change.

The purpose of the church in our time and place? It is to be an incubator of hope. The news can seem overwhelming, and overwhelmingly bad. But when we work together, we can make a difference for good. We are helping to feed the hungry and house the homeless. We are supporting those who are fighting to stay sober and in recovery.

I have been deeply inspired and moved by our Moments for Mission over the past month. First, from the Omslaer family - Jeff, Pam, Abby and Kayla - each talking about what this church means to them. Then from Ryan and Katie Virtue, sharing about WHY they are committed to this church. Then, last week, from Tom and Mary Noeller and Beth Gee - each describing what it is that motivates them to support the church.

This morning it is my turn, to tell you where I see us going as a church, and why I hope you continue to support all that we do, with your time, talent and treasure. If you don't know how much to give, or where you fit in, please know I would be more than delighted to talk with you about any of that.

It has been our practice to continually assess what we are doing as a congregation, and then to shore up our strengths and address our areas that are weaker. This

ongoing process of evaluation has helped us to move forward in our attempt to be a congregation that is at all times ready to serve and meet changing needs.

In that spirit, here are some current challenges I'm aware of. One is a personal, spiritual challenge and I preached about it this summer. Many people in our community are experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety. Just last week Nate had conversations with or about three young people whose anxiety levels were out of control. Perhaps the political climate has something to do with it, technology has something to do with it. Whatever the reasons, it's a fact. We are, generally speaking, more anxious, stressed and lonely. And that becomes a spiritual issue, because we can't live abundant lives if we are over-stressed; we can't experience the fullness of God's love if we're fearful. How can we help each other find our way to more balanced and centered lives? How can we help each other, and I mean people of all ages and stages, develop spiritual resilience? I would love us to focus on that question for the next year, and intentionally encourage a focus on spiritual practices that deepen a trusting relationship with God.

Mission has always been part of the DNA of this church, but for the past several years, we have increased our involvement with local agencies, offering hands-on volunteer opportunities, contributing generously financially, and expanding our reach to new agencies, like Genesis House and sober living facilities. But we are discovering that sometimes these agencies need more than our money and our time. Sometimes they could benefit from the leadership of members of our church who could help guide their staff and boards. Organizations that run on a shoestring don't always have the ability to manage their work in the best possible way. Perhaps there are members of

our church who have the skills and expertise to help these agencies. Taking a new look at our relationship with our mission partners is a second challenge.

We are proud of our building and grounds, and grateful to all of those volunteers who work so hard to maintain and beautify them. However, just like with our homes, it's important to intentionally plan for modernization and upkeep and make sure that the facility fits our mission and ministry. I would like us to spend the first half of 2019 prioritizing the needs of our physical plant in light of our ministry goals. Here are some of the ideas that are emerging. If you've ever used the restrooms near the chapel, you know how badly in need of renovation they are. We may be used to them, but what kind of impression do they make on first-time guests? Look at the lighting in this room - these bulbs are now all going out, for the first time in 13 years, but replacing them has led to significant conversation because lighting has completely changed in that time period. The safety team would like us to consider a sidewalk for those who park across the street, better outdoors lighting, and new doors for some of the rooms our children use. Speaking of children, we have 150 children who are between 4th and 7th grade, and we don't have a Sunday School classroom for that age at all. We have to use makeshift rooms every single Sunday. So that's a challenge, a good challenge but still a challenge!

Let me share with you two of my dreams. What it would look like if we decided together as a church family to pay down our mortgage, so that the money we now spend every month to pay that debt was used for ministry and mission? If we decided together that was a priority, and if we turned our creativity and resources towards that goal, I know we could accomplish it. What would it look like if we thought about an-

other community outreach project, like the Thrift Shop which has been so successful for 40 years? Is there another entrepreneurial idea that makes sense? My dream is a coffee shop, a place where community members and our own members would mingle together. I don't have a business plan (that's not my gift), but I can imagine our youth working there nights and weekends and other members during the day. I can imagine book clubs and Bible Study sessions there. But maybe you have another idea. Many people from OUTSIDE the church might be attracted to the good news through an outpost like that. Can we dream big together, imagining projects that would inspire and energize us, projects - most importantly - that are responsive to what we believe God is calling us to do and be?

In our passage for today, we are reminded that generosity is the key to a less-anxious life. Generosity is living with open hands. We receive God's blessings with one hand open, palm up, and we pass those blessings on with the other hand. There is no grasping, no clenched fists, no desperately trying to hold on to everything we can. Not in God's economy. Living with open hands means living with trust instead of fear, trust instead of anxiety. The more open our hands are, the more blessings we receive. The thing we most want to grasp and hang onto is the key to where our heart is, the key to what we really worship. If you find yourself grasping for security, notice that. If you think that just a little more money is the key to happiness, pay attention to that. And then notice how you feel when you give. And see which lifestyle seems more gracious, more grace-filled, which makes you feel closer to God. I'm not saying give everything away, or don't pay attention to your own financial well-being, of course not. I'm saying that most of us could be more generous, and that generosity not only helps

others but leads to all of us enjoying more balanced and grounded lives. Beau and I were talking about parenting the other day, and about all of the ways we invest in our children's future. We pay for dance classes, music lessons, personal training sessions, we invest in travel sports, all because we want our children to be well-rounded individuals. How are we investing in their spiritual development? I don't know many adults who have occasion to use the soccer foot skills they learned as a child, but every single one I know faces times when they need spiritual resiliency. Challenges at work, at home, health or relationship crises -

I encourage you to join me in investing in the good news. And thank you for all you do to support the ministry and mission of this congregation.