

RENEW YOUR COVENANT

Matthew 16:24-26

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26 January 2020

You may sometimes wonder, “What difference does it make?” Washington is a mess, climate change is frightening, there seems to be no end to threats of war and violence...does what we do in church really matter?

If we were a church with a more conservative philosophy – if we were a hellfire and brimstone church, if we preached fear, then we could say, “It matters because if you’re not a good Christian, you’ll go to hell.” Fear can be a powerful motivator. “Give ten percent of your income to the church or you’ll go to hell.” “Be in church three out of four Sundays or God will be mad at you.” You can see how that would work for some people.

But if you preach a God of love and grace, what is it that helps us believe that what we do matters?

Churches that preach the fear of hell imagine a God who is like the great assistant principal in the sky, keeping track of all of our mistakes, keeping a giant ledger of everything we’ve done wrong. But what if God is, instead, the most understanding teacher you’ve ever had, the one who noticed when you were having a bad day, the one who would bend over backwards to help you learn something? What if God isn’t your punisher but your cheerleader? What if God is the friend who knows all about you and loves you anyway?

My son hated school. He came out of the womb a rebel, and he never understood why school had so many rules. He was also born with a small motor disability in his fingers, which meant that writing, coloring and cutting were hard for him – all the skills that are emphasized in elementary school – so that didn't help. I seriously was not sure he would graduate from high school, even though he's very intelligent. But he had three teachers at Avon Lake High School who "got" him. They accepted him, they saw his gifts, they made him interested in their subject matter, they helped him find ways to become involved that fit his talents. I credit the three of them for encouraging Michael, bringing out the best in him, and getting him to the graduation finish line.

What if God is like one of those teachers, always looking for the lost sheep, searching out the person who doesn't quite fit in, helping each person's light to shine? I believe God IS like that. And God has called each of us to that very work ourselves. That's why church makes a difference.

A few years ago we designed an entire worship series around the parable of the starfish – here's how the story goes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-R5LqE3nzY>

I want to tell you that Avon Lake UCC has made a difference in the lives of people this past year.

I know that it takes a lot of work to keep the ministry and mission of this church going and growing. Countless hours on the part of hundreds of people. Just think of the scope of what we did this past year – volunteering and working at the Thrift Shop, renovating the new Thrift Shop, moving the Thrift Shop, taking extra Thrift Shop dona-

tions to other stores in two counties. Rehearsing for choir, bell choir and band, selecting music, planning music, scheduling musicians, teaching Stephen Ministry, Stephen Ministers meeting one-on-one with caregivers, facilitating support groups, visiting in hospitals, homes, and nursing homes, training and recruiting youth group volunteers, running major events like a cornhole tournament, a 5 K, chaperoning youth in Louisiana and in Cincinnati, driving youth to various events throughout the year, teaching Confirmation, repairing the church building, weeding and raking on the grounds, tearing down an old chimney, crunching numbers so that a budget is balanced, recruiting ushers, greeters, acolytes, coffee hour hosts, typing bulletins, teaching Sunday School, rocking babies in the nursery, purchasing food and delivering it to our mission partner agencies, serving breakfast to Bike and Build kids, picking up seniors who can no longer drive themselves and bringing them home after church...I could go on for ten minutes listing the activities our church was involved in over the past year. It would be fun to try to guess just how many volunteer hours were given, wouldn't it?

It all makes a difference. It makes a difference in the lives of children, whose faith is being formed as they spend time in Sunday School, in Vacation Bible School, as they make friends here and have fun here. Church is becoming a place they want to be, a place where people know their names, and that is one way we come to know God's accepting love...I doubt many of you who grew up in church remember one single lesson from a Sunday School class, but you probably remember a Sunday School teacher who cared about you, and through her or him you began to be attracted to the God about whom they were teaching.

What we do makes a difference to our youth as they navigate the always treacherous waters of adolescence. I am convinced that adolescence becomes more complicated every year, especially because of social media and technology. Many of our youth comment to Nate that they find the weeks they spend on the mission trip and at camp and on the senior excursion to be highlights of their year...for one thing, they tell him, because they're off their phones, interacting with one another. Imagine how formative it is for our students who are able to participate in two junior high mission trip experiences and then four senior high mission trips...the cumulative effect of all of those seeds that are planted - the relationships, the laughter, the joy of service, the immersion into different neighborhoods, learning about poverty and the inequities in our world...what happens is that some of these students are profoundly changed. They are no longer happy to just go to the beach every spring break - instead, when they're in college, they sign up for alternative spring break mission trips. While classmates are partying poolside, they're building houses for the homeless. Two of our youth group alumni have spent summers riding their bikes across the country with Bike and Build, raising awareness for America's housing crisis.

Many of our youth have gone on to make mission and service a part of their adult lives. The University of Findlay has a partnership with an orphanage in the Dominican Republic, one of the poorest nations in our hemisphere. Student groups who visit spend time with the children and help with maintenance and repair. Stephanie Carr from our church participated right away in her freshman year, and in her sophomore year went back as a leader of the group. This is what she wrote about her experience: "My trip to the Dominican Republic was one of the most unanticipated and rewarding weeks of my

life! I was introduced to new people, a new culture, and an entirely new perspective. I loved spending time with the boys at the orphanage and serving such a welcoming and appreciative community of people! My trip showed me that even the smallest gestures can make a big difference.” (Like the starfish being gently tossed back into the ocean, a small gesture can make a big difference...). Stephanie’s mom Christine told Nate and me that she credits our youth program for planting the mission seed in her daughter.

What we do makes a difference, and the ripple effects literally spread around the world. I tell you this because I want to thank you for your support of our staff and all of our ministry and mission programs.

Sometimes the difference we make is more personal. I want to share some words with you, words that are difficult to say and more difficult to experience. Cancer. Bankruptcy. Suicide. Divorce. Dementia. Mental illness. Addiction. Grief. Chronic Pain. There are dozens of people in our congregation dealing with each of these issues in one form or another. We have support groups, Stephen Ministers, a parish nurse, two full-time ordained ministers...all of it works together to let people know that they are not alone when life’s most daunting challenges threaten to overwhelm.

Our church makes a difference by serving as a place of hope in a world besieged by bad news. We highlight the things we have in common as we live in a time of division and polarization.

When you read the gospels carefully, you notice that there is a sense of urgency to Jesus’ ministry. At the time the events in the New Testament took place, everyone believed that something dramatic was about to happen. Call it the reign of God, the kingdom of God, the end of the world as they knew it...God was about to intervene and

things would not be normal again. So Jesus' message was, "Repent, because the Reign of God is at hand." "We need to start living and behaving differently, soon. Now." Well, that was 2,000 years ago, and in the mean time, Christians have lost our sense of urgency. We have become complacent. The world will always be here. The church will always be here.

News about climate change is infusing a sense of urgency into many of us. I believe we need to live with a sense of urgency about the church as well. Here are a few statistics.

Here's a snapshot from the United Church of Christ 2019 Yearbook:

QUICK SUMMARY OF UCC STATISTICS

MEMBERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

CONGREGATIONS: 4,882

MEMBERS: 824,866

AVERAGE MEMBERSHIP: 171

AVERAGE WORSHIP ATTENDANCE: 67

AVERAGE CONFIRMATIONS: 6

AVERAGE NEW MEMBERS IN: 16

AVERAGE CHILD BAPTISMS: 4

AVERAGE ADULT BAPTISMS: 2

Looking at the last several numbers, we'll compare to Avon Lake UCC:

AVERAGE MEMBERSHIP: 171

ALUCC -

AVERAGE WORSHIP ATTENDANCE: 67

ALUCC - 357

AVERAGE CONFIRMATIONS: 6

ALUCC - 20

AVERAGE NEW MEMBERS IN: 16

ALUCC - 56 adults and 32 children

AVERAGE CHILD BAPTISMS: 4

ALUCC - 12

AVERAGE ADULT BAPTISMS: 2

ALUCC - 6

Now let's look at the UCC national trends: (on screen - the bar graph showing a steady decline in number of members and churches over the last 60 years.)

Just one more piece of data, this from the Pew Research Center: “The religious landscape of the United States continues to change at a rapid clip. In Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular,” now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009.”

If we think that churches like ours have a positive role to play in people’s lives and in the world around us, then we will adopt a sense of urgency about making sure that churches like ours continue to thrive. Our word for 2020 is discipleship - our passage for today reminds us that we are each called to pick up a cross, risk, give, participate, commit...we will be talking a lot more about what that word means. For now, a reminder that the benefits of a life of discipleship are rewarding beyond description. Thank you for the difference you are making; thank you for all that we are able to do in the name of the one who calls us.