

## **LET US SAY WHAT WE BELIEVE I Timothy 1:12-17**

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15 September 2019

At the 11 AM service today, we will hear a paragraph from each of our 20 9th grade confirmation students - a portion of their statements of faith. Writing a statement of faith has been a part of our Confirmation program for decades, and when we give the assignment, we always say to the students, "You don't have to have it all figured out; we just want you to articulate where you are right now on your faith journey." Neither do we expect them to compose these statements all on their own. Each student has an adult mentor, someone who works with the student to help them craft the statement. Still, it's a daunting task when you think about it. How many of us in this room today could sit down and write - "this is how I would describe God, this is why church is important in my life, this is what prayer means to me." Those are some of life's deepest concerns.

One of my deepest concerns is the fact that fewer and fewer people are finding church to be a place where they go to explore those important questions.

I have shared some of these statistics before; they bear our close attention. For several years now, highly-respected religion research institutes in America have shown us that there is one group that is growing faster than any other: they are called "nones". They are people who claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. In the 1990's, 10% of Americans identified as "nones." By 2017, it was 25%. This year, the Pew Research Center concluded there are as many "nones" as there are Catholics. The numbers grow every year, especially among younger Americans.

Before we get to the question of “why” this is happening, let’s stop and think about this question - does it really matter? In the grand scheme of the universe, does it matter that fewer people are going to church? Here are a few reasons why I believe it matters. First, let me say that I know there are good people who are not a part of any faith community, just like there are regular church attenders who are not living their faith in the world in productive ways. Regular church attendance doesn’t always lead to people who are kinder and more generous. Second, let me say that I don’t believe in the image of a God who keeps a giant scorecard of who’s going to heaven and who’s going to hell, so I don’t think the threat of hell is a good reason to go to church. But here’s what I do know.

Personally speaking, from my own life experiences and from countless of people with whom I’ve walked through life’s ups and downs, I know that having real community makes a difference - real community meaning people with whom you can be real, people to whom you can share what’s going on with you - the good, the bad, and the ugly. At its best, church is a place where we can be vulnerable and trust one another with our stories. There aren’t too many places in our world today where that can happen. And community isn’t a benefit just in a time of crisis, of course...community helps us ward off loneliness and feelings of isolation. Ideally, the church is a second family - it’s here you find others with whom you can talk about raising children, about creating healthy marriages, about juggling work and family, and caring for aging parents. We share one another’s joys and sorrows at every stage of life.

That’s why church matters. It matters because this is the community that keeps alive the story of Jesus and continually keeps the truth of Christ relevant for each gen-

eration. What does it mean that God chose to enter the world as a human being? What does that event say about how much God loves us? When I read, in the gospel of John, Jesus' words, "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly," those words change my life. They transform me every time I read them. They make me realize that God wants so much more for us than mere survival; God wants us to thrive.

Church matters because the world needs the church. The world needs people who take seriously God's call to care for widows and orphans and strangers. The world needs people who pattern their lives after Jesus, who paid attention to those everyone else ignored. The world needs people who care more about the poor than about buying more things we don't really need. The world needs people who care more about feeding the hungry than finding the next gourmet restaurant for ourselves. The world needs people who are trying their best to withstand the temptation of selfishness and self-centeredness. The world needs the unconditional love of God in real, tangible ways.

So why are people leaving in droves? It's hard to pinpoint the exact answers, and there are, of course, as many answers as there are people. But studies lead us to some general conclusions. Mostly people are leaving because they don't like the church's teachings. They think that churches are judgmental, that churches are hypocritical, that churches don't care about the issues they care about. They think that churches are teaching people to distrust science, to exclude LGBT folks. Young people are leaving the church because they are growing up in a multicultural world and they believe that churches are teaching that if you're not Christian, you're going to hell.

If you've been listening carefully to that list, you'll realize that our church doesn't teach ANY of those things. In fact, we teach the opposite. We try our best NOT to be

judgmental. We try very hard to put our faith into action. We believe that faith and science go hand in hand; they're just two different disciplines asking different questions. We intentionally include and welcome LGBT folks. We nurture relationships with people of other faith traditions because we know we all worship the same God and have much to learn from each other.

The logical conclusion is this...congregations in the United Church of Christ and many other mainline Protestant churches should be growing. One problem is that the message is not getting out well enough and not spreading rapidly enough. People see a little clip on TV of a church with a hateful message, and they think all churches are like that. Thankfully, Avon Lake UCC is growing, but - guess what? We have room for more! There are people who need to hear the good news that there are churches where the message is more about love and less about hate, more about welcome and less about exclusion, a church where there is room for doubt and questions, where we don't all have to think alike in order to grow together.

I would like to encourage you this morning to think about what it is you believe. Pretend you're one of our Confirmation students and you have to write a one-paragraph statement of faith. What is most important to YOU about living the Christian life? Could you put it in a one to two minute elevator speech?

Our passage this morning from I Timothy is an example of a personal statement of faith. The author of this letter claims that Jesus transformed his life - he uses the word "saved" - which is another word which has been misused and misunderstood...it is a concept that has led some people right out the back doors of the church never to return. The question, "Are you saved?" is sometimes asked by Christians who are very

well-meaning; they have been taught to worry about saving their souls - and others - from eternal damnation. But that question doesn't usually sound like a loving question to the recipient. It comes across as pushy, and it brings to mind a God of anger and judgment. It's not a question I ask - but as I said a minute ago, we don't all have to think alike in this church. What I think is that I AM in need of saving, and that God does save me, not just once and done, but over and over again. I need to be saved not so much from the snatches of hell as from myself, and my own selfish tendencies. I need to be saved from a life of complacency. I long to be saved from meaninglessness. When I am at my best, living the life for which God created me, I am using my gifts, I'm involved in caring for others, I'm finding joy, noticing beauty, expressing gratitude, speaking out for justice. It's a life that feels "saved" in every way.

As members of the Avon Lake United Church of Christ, let us say what we believe. Let us learn to articulate our faith and share it. Let's tell the world that we care about the crisis of the planet and the growing gap between the rich and the poor. We believe that God's heart grieves the vicious cycle of violence and therefore God calls us to work for peace. These issues can be overwhelming, but ignoring them isn't an option. Ignoring them is a way of turning our back on God, and ignoring them will dull our own spirits. Questions like these — worthwhile, significant, moral questions - will bring our minds and hearts to life.

I want to thank you for all you do to help our church spread this message. This congregation has vibrant faith formation programs for all ages because you have said it's important, and you have supported it with your financial gifts as well as your volunteer hours. The average number of Confirmations per year in the United Church of

Christ is six; today we are confirming 20. That wouldn't be possible if we didn't have adequate staff support, volunteers, our Buoy youth center, and parents who found it all worthwhile.

You not only say it's important but your actions confirm what it is you believe. That's what the life of faith is all about.

Let us pray.

Holy God, you are known to us in many ways and by many names. We know you as creator, and friend, and we know you as savior - the one who saves us from lives of loneliness and meaninglessness, the one who saves us from living in fear and despair. Help us to share the good news that you are a God of love. Amen.