

**IT IS GOOD: A YEAR OF LOVE**  
I Corinthians 13

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Imagine, through these few true stories, all of what you made possible in 2021, because of your support of the Avon Lake United Church of Christ.

We deliver meals to women, men and children who are homeless. With the homeless shelter closed due to COVID, they're living in hotel rooms.

We load the van with bags of food at the Haven Center, then arrive at the Motel 6. At the back of the van, Shanequa and Roberto look at their list and hand us bags of food. "Take this bag to room 139, these two bags to room 141." "Knock twice. If no one answers, leave the bags at the door."

I only knock once at room 139. The door opens, cigarette smoke billows out, an older woman gives me a large, toothless smile as I hand her her bag. Two styrofoam containers.

I deliver about 12 bags. Up and down the stairs, around the courtyard, back to the van. Load up again, get more room numbers. Keep moving so my feet don't freeze.

Most people answer the door. Pajamas, bare feet. One man opens his door widely. He's clean and well-dressed. "Do you have mail for me?" he asks. He's waiting for good news, waiting for a job offer.

We deliver larger bags of food to the other motel. A family of five lives in a motel room. They eat out of these bags for two days.

I think of the words of Jesus, “ I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.”

In one of the months when we had a bit of a respite from COVID, children gathered for five days to learn about what it means to put on the armor of God. That verse from Ephesians was the focus for last summer’s Vacation Bible School, inviting children to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s power. They learned about the Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Justice, the Shoes of Peace, the Shield of Faith, and the Helmet of Salvation. On the last day, they gathered on the back lawn to watch real live knights and horses do some jousting, an event that helped reinforce to them and their families that church is a place where they can have fun as well as learn. The kind of experience that helps to forge relationships and renewed commitment.

One of the moves we’ve all learned all too well over the past 23 months is the pivot. When it was clear that the usual Senior High and Junior High Mission Trips couldn’t go forward as planned last year, Nate Taylor, our Director of Youth Ministries, pivoted and created Serve Local events, opportunities for the youth to work together, and have some fun along the way, but in a safer environment.

When he reviewed with me how the Senior High week had gone, he said, “Kelly, you know this wasn’t my first choice, not at all. But it’s been extraordinary to see the ways that our youth have been able to connect with our very own church members. One woman, formerly a very active Sunday School teacher, watched from inside her

home with tears in her eyes as the youth and adult volunteers repaired and repainted her garage.

After a yard clean-up project, one of our older members called me to express her gratitude. "Seeing all of those kids in my yard, Kelly, well, it made me realize that they're family. This is what family does for each other."

The Tuesday after Labor Day, I was in a meeting in my office regarding a new lease for the Thrift Shop, when I first heard the news. "There's been a murder-suicide in Avon Lake." I hope to never have to be involved in anything like that again, but I'm grateful that our church was able to provide some solace, some comfort, some support and hopefully some meaning to our community at large. We were there the night of the neighborhood prayer vigil. Since then, Pastor Beau and I have have met with neighbors, with children who are grieving and have questions. I officiated at the graveside services for all four members of the Hull family. Love, in the toughest of all tough circumstances, offered in the name of Jesus, and made possible because you support this church and all of our ministry and mission.

If you're a senior, and you have an underlying health condition that requires you to be particularly vigilant against COVID, the investments this church has made in technology are a spiritual life-saver. We have a faithful online worshipping community that includes former members who live in California, a Texan who grew up in this church, and snowbirds in Florida. Every single Wednesday morning, a woman from Fremont participates in our Bible Study class.

The second Sunday in December, our choirs presented several arrangements of Christmas carols, interspersed with scripture readings. The next morning, I received an

email from one of our members who wrote this: “I just had to write to tell you how much I enjoyed Sunday’s service. From the first time I heard Scott play, I truly thought his talent to be extraordinary. He and the choirs presented such a moving musical interpretation of the story, woven beautifully into the scriptures.”

From time to time, this church has taken leaps of faith. We don’t do it impulsively, but only after prayerful discernment, hard study, research, conversation and consensus-building. Before my tenure here, this congregation decided to move from the little white frame structure on Lake Road to this property. Then to start a Thrift Shop. Then to broadcast their worship services on local cable, long before anyone else was thinking about that.

When we were over-full in our old sanctuary, we built this worship space. When we realized that developing a robust youth ministry program was going to require full-time effort, we found the best person we could who could devote himself to that work, and I hesitate to imagine where we would be without Nate. Last year about this time, a Worship Study Group began to meet and consider how we could deepen and enhance our worship experience for as many different people as possible. The answer that came to us from consultants, the answer that seemed to emerge naturally, I believe as a prompting of the Holy Spirit, was this: a full-time Director of Music Ministry will be able to devote the time and attention necessary for your worship to touch hearts and change lives.

Just as we have seen our children’s ministry grow under Beau’s leadership, and our technology and media ministry evolve under Tim’s leadership, our music ministry has the leader we need for this time in our congregation’s life. Let’s welcome Scott

again, to his first Annual Meeting Sunday. All of this, all of this, is thanks to your support of our ministry and mission.

This past Monday and Tuesday, I was helping to lead a clergy retreat for UCC ministers from all parts of eastern and northern Ohio. After I heard about how many ministers are leaving ministry altogether because of the stress of the pandemic, I decided to try to create an environment of support, and try to prevent any more clergy from leaving. I had the opportunity for the first time to meet Emily, the new pastor at our partner church, St. Paul's Community UCC in Ohio City. When the topic turned to how each church is faring in these challenging times, Emily said (completely unprompted by me): "Our church wouldn't be able to do anything if it weren't for Avon Lake and its support. Tim has helped us so much with our technology needs."

I do hope each of you will read the Annual Report. If you can't access a copy, let us know. You'll read about our amazing Good Neighbor Thrift Shop and the mission projects they supported this year - over \$137,000 worth. You'll read about our food drives, our Christmas mission tree coordinated by Parish Nurse Cheryl Updegraff, our Afghan resettlement project and our combined benevolent giving of over \$244,000.

We also cared for one another through Stephen Ministry relationships, Doorstep Dinners, our card ministry, our mental health support group and caregivers' support group and in countless other ways.

One church historian tells us that the early church grew because those outside the church saw what the church was doing - caring for each other and the neighbors around them. They said, "See how they love each other!" That kind of love draws

people in, it attracts. Here's best-selling author and researcher Brene Brown on what the love of Jesus means to her: <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/love-made-flesh>

“See how they love each other.” Before I close this sermon on this Annual Meeting Sunday, I need to share this hard truth: we are facing a deficit in our General Fund. After almost three years, the pandemic is now affecting our giving. I am confident that we will be able to increase giving, because I am confident that you, the members and friends of this church, see the impact of our ministry and mission and want us to continue to engage in all of the programs that you value. With all my heart, I believe that the church has never been needed more. THIS church has never been needed more. Our world needs an outpost of hope, a place where all people are welcome, a mission base camp, a place from which all of the good works can grow.