

## With glad and humble hearts

Acts 2:40-47, 4:32-35

January 22, 2006

In less than an hour, many of us will gather downstairs in the church dining room to enjoy a potluck meal and to conduct the annual business of the church. Our business will include approving minutes, discussing and approving a budget for the new year, electing a slate of unopposed officers and committee members, and listening to updates on improvement projects and advertising campaigns. Won't it be exciting? Actually, if truth be told, an unexciting and rather predictable annual meeting is a pastor's wish come true!

What is exciting is doing it together: eating together, celebrating another year in the life of the church together, doing the business of the church together, because the church -- its people and its business and its reason for being and its future -- are that important to us. We come to annual meetings, we volunteer to serve on committees, we pledge our financial support because we believe in this church and because we believe in God. It is a joy, it is exciting, to be a part of something that matters.

So we will eat together, conduct the business of the church together, and think together about the state of our church at the beginning of a new year. According to the printed meeting agenda, after we vote to accept the minutes of our 2005 annual meeting, I will talk about *The State of the Church 2006*. But, in fact, that is not true, because instead I am going to talk about the state of the church right now!

What is the state of the church? What is the state of First Congregational United Church of Christ in January, 2006? But first, in order to answer that question, we have to address another question. We can't talk about the state of the church unless we know what the church is. What is the church?

The church is not its pastor. That should be obvious, but sometimes we confuse things by speaking of Rick Warren's church or Robert Schuller's church or Homer Larsen's church or Charles Jacob's church. A pastor sets the tone and points a direction and provides encouragement and motivation, like a coach. Even though we might speak of Bill Belichick's team or Tony Dungy's team or Bill Cowher's team, the team is not the coach and the coach is not the team. The coach doesn't play the games. The team's fortunes may rise or fall during a particular coach's tenure, but the team will be there long after any particular coach has come and gone. The team itself must take responsibility for its successes and failures. So when we talk about the state of the church, we are not talking about the stature or reputation or accomplishments of its pastor.

The church is not its building. We identify with our church building, we grow attached to our church building, we are proud of our church building, but the building is no more the church than a house is the family. A house reflects the personality and tastes of the family occupying it, but family is still family with or without the house. So when we talk about the state of the church, we are not talking about the condition of our facilities.

The church is not its denominational affiliation. Our denominational identity is important, so much more important than many of us suppose. When we remember that we are part of the United Church of Christ, when we claim that identity and act

out that identity, we are saved from a much too narrow sense of what the church is and what it is for. As Christians, we are members of a worldwide movement and we must pay attention to issues and concerns far beyond the walls of this particular church or the limits of this particular city. As we listen and respond to voices from other corners of the United Church of Christ, we are held accountable to each other and we are reminded of our primary mission, not to build a church, but to build the church, to realize God's kingdom here and now by doing God's will on earth.

And yet, though the church is a part of the United Church of Christ, the church is not defined as the United Church of Christ. The church is not its denominational affiliation. If the United Church of Christ were to merge with another denomination or change its identity or even go defunct, the church would still be what it is. So when we talk about the state of the church, we are not talking about the fortunes of the United Church of Christ.

And the church is not its history. As proud as we may be of our history -- of accomplished pastors and talented musicians, of strong and helpful leadership in the community, of acting on principle and living out our faith -- we cannot live in or live on the past. The church may have thrived in this city for one hundred and fifty years, but the church is not its history. At any given moment, the church is what it is at that moment. So when we talk about the state of the church, we are not talking about our legacy.

What the church is, at any given moment, is a network of relationships. The church is a network of relationships among a diverse group of people, defined and directed and held together by a mutual relationship with Jesus Christ. Without each other, there is no church. Without Jesus Christ, there is no church, just a congenial group of folks with some common interests.

The church is community -- living, functioning, growing community. So the question about the state of the church is a question about the state of our life as community. The church is a community of Christ, a community united in Christ, a community united in obedience to Christ, a community embodying the living presence Christ.

The church is a healing community, a place where people come to be healed, to be forgiven, to be reconciled -- to God or to a neighbor or to both, because where Christ is, there is healing and there is reconciliation.

The church is shalom-making community, making peace, promoting justice, and proclaiming the message of grace and salvation, because where Christ is, there is peace and righteousness and mercy.

The church is like the community of believers described in Acts. They ate together, praised God together, prayed together, took care of each other. They weren't just friendly to each other, they weren't just nice to each other, they took care of each other, sharing anything and everything they had to make sure that none among them was in need. They embodied the presence of Christ. In their life together they provided a living portrait of the kingdom of God, of what life looks like when it is lived in dependence upon God and in communion with God. And they eagerly invited people to share that life with them.

Do not dismiss this description of the church in Acts as an idealized portrait! This is not the picture of an ideal church, but of a real church, of a real church of real people that experienced in their life together the real power of the living Christ to transform them utterly. And this real church provides a model against which we may gauge the state of our church.

So, what is the state of the church? You tell me! Are people experiencing healing, forgiveness, reconciliation in our midst? Are we making peace, promoting justice, proclaiming the gospel? Is the Spirit of God palpably present among us? Is the Spirit of God palpably present in our worship? In our work? In our conversations? In our relationships? I will leave the answers to those questions to you! I will just make two observations ...

I firmly believe that the Spirit of God is shown among you in the way you take care of each other. You aren't just friendly, you aren't just nice, you do take care of each other. When people are hurting, when people are grieving, when people are ill, when people just need somebody, you are there. I have seen time and time again the ways you are sensitive and creative and persistent and bold in showing love in practical ways -- making the phone call, making the visit, taking a meal, taking a gift, taking someone out to lunch, taking someone out to shop or see the sights or just hang out, listening, touching, helping, praying.

You're human. Sometimes you hurt each other's feelings. Sometimes you hurt my feelings as I probably do yours, but, as I wrote in my annual report, when the crunch time comes, you are there for each other in ways that make a real difference. You do embody the love of Jesus in your life as a church family.

The church in Acts embodied the love of Jesus in the ways they cared for each other, and the church in Acts embodied the love of Jesus in the ways they boldly proclaimed the gospel. We could do with some boldness! Boldly owning our identity as Christians. Boldly telling our story, not to promote ourselves, but to provide a signpost to the wonderful grace and love of God, the same wonderful grace and love of God that we have experienced for ourselves.

Wherever I go, I take my family with me. Wherever I go, people ask, *How are the children? How is your Mom? How is Lynne enjoying her teaching?*, and I am glad to tell them. Wherever we go, we take our family with us, our church family. May we be proud of our identity as members of a community of followers of Jesus. May we represent this family well wherever we go. May we be eager and glad to tell the good news of what God is doing among us!

When Peter finished his Pentecost sermon, the account in Acts says that three thousand people -- three thousand people! -- joined the church that day. Was it something he said? Was it the way he said it? Do we just need to find the right preacher, someone who can "wow" them like Peter did that day?

Or was it the believers themselves, the face they showed to the gathered crowd, the integrity of their life together that compelled others to want to share it?

Or was it this, that the Spirit of God was there? The Spirit of God was there, and it is the Spirit of God that convicts and convinces and persuades and welcomes and forgives and heals. Our job as a church is not to create the light, but to let it shine! Our job is to be transparent, to let the presence of God that we have gladly received be seen in our lives and in our life together. Don't conceal the light; let it shine! Don't keep quiet; boldly tell of God's goodness!

*With glad and humble hearts ...* They met together and ate together and praised God together *with glad and humble hearts*. That's my favorite phrase in this whole text!

They were *glad*. They enjoyed a sense of blessing, of well-being, of hopefulness, of fulfillment, of gratitude, all because they had experienced something real, the real presence of the Spirit of God, and that was enough, that was more than enough to make them glad for a lifetime!

And they were *humble*. They knew they needed God. They knew they needed each other. They knew they couldn't be anything that matters or do anything that matters alone. They knew it was about us. They knew it was about God in us.

*With glad and humble hearts ...* That's my measuring stick. When we go about the business of the church with glad and humble hearts, the state of the church is just fine!