

In a Glass Dimly: A Vision for our Future

A sermon by Rev. Ron Dauphin
Olmsted Community Church
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The apostle Paul writes about the past and future in 1st Corinthians. He was writing to the people of Corinth about spiritual gifts. He knows there are people there who want to forecast the future; who are telling others all about the Kingdom of God and when that's going to come to fruition. And so he guides them by saying, "don't try to second-guess what God is going to do, but just be loving to one another". And then, as a way of recognizing our finite nature, he says, "for we see in a glass dimly now, but in the future, God's way will be clear." And I think that's a pretty good definition of faith. Anticipating that which we cannot fully see today, and living into that future--God's future. And Jesus, in the parable he offered about the guests to the bridal party, said we need to think ahead and live prepared for the Kingdom that's yet to come.

So in faith, we as a church must look back to benefit from the past, and then look forward to what God has in store for us. Last week we celebrated our history, and today we move the mirror and pray for God's guidance on our future. Both history and future are important, and we will continue to honor both. We use a mirror to remember the past, but pull the glass away, and we are clearly headed into a very bright future.

Today, I want to use this opportunity to share with you my vision for our church's future. My sense is that we're at a place where we feel we pretty comfortable with one another. We have a trusting relationship. We're more settled and secure as a congregation. We're over the difficulties of the past. We are family. Having served as your pastor for the past 18 months, I have a vision for this church and for us as a people of God.

I envision a church where we will develop a more hands-on approach to missions.

We're off to a good start with the Volunteer Opportunities Fair, but how many have actually volunteered for church or community service? We drop off groceries for the needy, but do we actively minister to those who receive them? We make flood kits to help in disasters, but our presence and our labor are needed too. We are going to work to offer several hands on mission opportunities over the next few years, because I've seen how that can change lives...of both the givers and the receivers.

I envision a church where we will become a place where money is not seen as a concern, but as a gift from God and tool of ministry. We're getting there. Financially, as a church, we are in very good shape even with the difficulties of the current economy. We will continue emphasis on stewardship year round. Our Board of Stewardship has done a wonderful job over the past year educating and informing us about opportunities for giving. The Board of Finance has provided regular reports of our financial status. You've responded to the good communication, and despite the salary cutbacks we had to institute early in the year, our ministry has increased, and many lives have been touched. I congratulate you. And I will share with you what the Apostle Paul shared with Christians so long ago: that a cheerful giver gives out of response to the grace that God has provided. God has given us everything

we have, and in return, we offer our time, our talents and our treasure for God's work. When that becomes our second nature, financial issues will be in our past. In two weeks, we are going to ask the church family to fill out a Discipleship Card, letting the church know, among other things, what you feel you'll be able to give monetarily next year. We need this to operate as a responsible organization. And believe me, we all have concerns. I got my retirement funds 3rd quarter statement this week, and apparently I'll be retiring at age 96. My savings account is asking for a larger allowance from my checking account. And it's true for you too. If you're on a fixed income, you're losing money because milk is approaching \$4.00 a gallon and bread, when it's on sale, is \$2 bucks a loaf. The church is not insensitive to this reality. The Board of Finance is putting together a lean and achievable budget that enables our ministry to grow. The Board of Stewardship has a plan in place where--yes, we'll ask for your discipleship commitment on November 23, but we will also re-visit that commitment several times during the next year. Because stewardship is not a once-a-year obligation, but an opportunity to give back to God in proportion to the blessings we've received. You'll be able to adjust your estimate of giving up or down during the year as circumstances change. More and more, I see us becoming people who give in response to God's grace.

I envision a church where we are seen not so much as a beautiful building, but an energetic community gathered for worship. You all amaze me...I know sometimes I ask you do step outside your comfort zone and try some new things in worship. And you do it with grace...like learning a new song to use for the Doxology. Our worship is a way of saying "thanks God, for getting me through the past week...but don't forget Lord, there's a rough week coming up ahead and I need to know that you're close by." Our worship is a gathering of extended family on Sunday mornings and Saturday evenings where we gather not out of obligation, but out of thankful response to God's presence in our lives throughout the week. That's hard to measure, but one goal is to see our average weekly attendance cross the barrier of 200 people. That will mean, for some, coming to church when you otherwise might not. It might mean packing more activities into Saturdays and being here on Sundays. It might mean being in church when it's a perfectly beautiful day outside and there are other things you could do. It might mean sloshing through some frozen precipitation when parking is tight...but it will all be worth it for that expression of faith and the warm connection with fellow Christians here.

I envision a church where we will be intentionally inviting to young adults and comfortable for older adults, where those under 40 feel as at home as those over 60. We've made great strides in offering a welcome to newcomers, and you've made it clear with your friendliness to guests that they are welcomed. But our witness as a church depends on personal invitations to experience God. That means you and you and you and you inviting someone to come to church with you, or to attend some special event, or even just to say "our church is praying for you this week, and here's a teddy bear to give you a little comfort."

I envision a church where we will grow the leadership of the congregation to include others not currently in leadership. We have a problem, as do most all churches. When a church is of a particular size, like this one, we need to have structure in place for leadership and decision-making. But we don't know each other well enough to know who has gifts and abilities to help make our vision become reality. Next week, we'll be talking about an

inventory of your gifts and abilities, and ask you to make a discipleship commitment of time and talents to grow this church and grow the Kingdom of God. We can't rest on the past. We want new faces and new ideas working beside our seasoned leaders to make ministry happen that is relevant to our world today.

I envision a church where we will more actively share the good news. It's who we are; it's why we exist as a church--to share the good news of God's love that we have learned about through the sacrificial love of Jesus; a love which forgives us and accepts us and encourages us forward in faith. We are people who meet together here not only to be blessed by God, but to learn how to be a blessing to others. We can all be evangelists...people who share good news.

If someone asked you, "what denomination is your church?" what would you say? I'll bet if we had a multiple choice question, we'd get multiple choice answers from among us here. **I envision a church where we will become more closely identified with vital ministries of The United Church of Christ.** For decades, the UCC has been this congregation's sole partner in mission and ministry. There are resources in the denomination that we have not tapped; and we have resources that we can offer to the UCC in broader ministry to the world. Many times, newcomers to our area bypass us because they are unsure of our denominational affiliation. They look for a brand identity, and I believe to strengthen our ties, to be more participatory with the UCC will be a blessing to us in the future.

I envision a church where we will actively care for staff members and their families. Caring for the people that you employ sends a message that you value them, and their families, and their work. These are the people who work hard to provide ways for you to be involved in God's work in our community and world. You have a dedicated staff; a hard-working staff who does much more than they are paid to do. I know you're appreciative of our important human resources. We as a church can do better in supporting them.

I hope I've shared some things we can continue to talk about and pray about. I hope you have a vision for your church, too. Together, we need to seek God's will about our future.

You know, Jesus had a vision for not only the church, but also the Kingdom of God. He talked about it mostly in parables—little faith stories—about what the realm of heaven will be like. We heard it in Matthew's gospel today. He gave us many word pictures, but in the end, he gave us this vision to give us hope and encouragement; to remind us to stay faithful, to stay on our toes, to anticipate great things. That's our future as Olmsted Community Church. That's our future as children of God. Amen.