

Bearing Fruit
Colossians 1:1–14
Sunday, January 26, 2025

Today is the day of our annual congregational meeting, where we reflect back on the life of our church in the past year, and we look ahead at what's to come. So every year on this Sunday, I like to focus the sermon on what it means to be the church. And since this usually coincides with the presidential State of the Union address, I like to think of it as the state of *our* union as Christ's church; our union with God and with each other. Where are we as a church and how are we doing with that union?

Well, the other week, I was having lunch with someone, and it turned into a conversation where we were talking about all the things that we are *excited* about in our church right now. And it got *me* really energized and excited about all of the good things going on here right now. We had a Session meeting right after that, so in our devotional time, I asked the Session, "What are *you* excited about in the life of our church right now?" And their answers got me even *more* excited! So I want to start this sermon by telling you some of the things that *I* am excited about, and some of the things that the *Session* is excited about, and then I'm going to ask you what *you* are excited about, so you can be thinking about that.

The first one, I think, is kind of obvious. I am excited about the Transformation Team's work, this proposal they put together, the vision that they have discerned for our church, and the steps that we are taking right now to help bring that vision to life. And I am excited about *your response* to their work. Because with some of the things they talked about, I thought, "That's going to be a tough sell. Some people might push back on that." But your response was overwhelmingly positive! You have expressed such gratitude for their work, and I have seen *you all* get excited about the vision that they have put forth.

I am excited about the staff that we have put together. Having to fill two staff positions last year – our Admin and our Music Director – that was a lot of work. And to fill those positions with two people as

gifted and capable and personable as Annie and Janet...I could not have *imagined* a better outcome. It gives me such hope and energy for what we are going to be able to do this year and in the years to come. I am *really* excited about that.

And not just with them. Nancy Arico as our Treasurer and Brian Bouvier as our Financial Secretary, two people who really *care* about the life of this church and are easy and fun to work with, and they want to use their gifts to help make great ministry possible here. They both have hearts and minds for helping others and for mission. And I think that especially in this week of the annual meeting and the annual report, we need to recognize all their hard work and what a fantastic job they are doing.

Betsy Miller is also a part of our staff, as the Bell Choir Director (and unofficially as the Kitchen Director). We all know about the *meals* that she can make, and I *am* excited for Supper at St. John's to start up again this week. But her work with the Bell Choir is more than just ringing in worship. With the adult ringers and with the kids, this is her *ministry*. And I never fully *got* that until *my* kids were in the bell choir. And one Sunday after worship, we were all down in the Fellowship Hall, and our daughter Emily (who had just started ringing) came in and saw Betsy, and she ran over to her and gave her a big hug. I had never seen her do that with anyone here before. Because in the short time that she had been ringing, Betsy had made her feel valued and gifted and *loved*, just like every other person who has ever rung for her. These kids (and adults) don't just do this because they like ringing bells. They *also* do it because they love Betsy, and they know that she loves them. She has been the *connection* for so many kids to the life of this church over the years.

Ridgley is also a part of our staff, even though she's not here right now. Over the past couple of years, she and I have really found a groove where we are working together *so well*; where our gifts compliment each other, and our strengths fill in the weaknesses of the other. I am really excited that you have gifted

her with this time of sabbatical (and that you have done the same for me), and I am so excited for what we are going to be able to do when she comes back rested and renewed, and we have a full staff that works so well together. (I'm also excited for when her dog Seamus, our official church dog, comes back, too.)

I am excited about the Elders, Deacons, and Trustees that we have leading this church. People who *love* this church and are deeply committed to it. They all work *so well* together. I talk to my friends and colleagues about the challenges that they sometimes face with their Elders and Deacons and Trustees, and I have never had to deal with *any* of that here. They love and care about *each other*, and so they listen to each other and respect each other and, even when they disagree, they still *listen* to each other and try to *understand* each other. In my 12 years here, I have never been in a meeting where there is *yelling* (and that is surprisingly rare in a lot of churches). They do not have *agendas*. They all genuinely want God's will to be done in and through the life of this church. *You* should be excited about the leadership that you have guiding this church and about the *new* Elders, Deacons, and Trustees that we're going to be electing a little later.

I am excited that our church gives 20% of the budget every year to mission and ministries *outside* the life of this church, and that you are constantly looking for ways to give *more*. When we received this estate trust – \$25,000 every year to be used for building and grounds – the Presbytery asked if we would consider giving some of it as a gift to a church that has some serious building needs and not enough money to cover them. I brought that to the Trustees, and their response was *immediately*, “Of course we should be doing this. This was a gift to us. We didn't do anything to earn it or deserve it.” And they voted to give 20% of it to La Iglesia Renacer, a Hispanic Presbyterian Church in Parkesburg. That is amazing.

I'm also excited about how eager our Trustees have been to open up the building to outside groups. We have had so many outside groups using our facilities over the past couple of months; people coming into our buildings who might never otherwise come here. Even if it does not result in more people *worshipping* with us or *joining* the church, it is a great service to the community.

I'm really excited about how much time you all spend greeting one another at the beginning of worship. I know that's not for everyone, and especially if you're new here, that can be uncomfortable. But it shows just how much you all actually *like* each other; you *want* to be here together and talk to each other and catch up with each other. So I just let it go on as long as you all want it to!

This one is going to sound weird at first, but hear me out. I am excited that our prayer list is so long. There are at least 20 people that we pray for by name every single Sunday. That list has gotten longer and longer over the years. And I'm not excited that we *have* to pray for them; that there are people who are struggling with cancer and other health problems, addiction, and mental illness. I wish we didn't *have* to pray for them. But what excites me about this, the fact that our prayer list is so long means that you truly believe in the power of prayer, and that you are bringing your joys and concerns here, before God, sharing them with your church family. *That* is what excites me about our prayer list, because it shows me something about *you* and where your faith is.

I want to share with you some of the things that our Elders are excited about. I'm just going to go down the list. Having Janet as our Music Director and Annie as our Admin (more props for them). The response to the birthday notices that are in the bulletin; how many people have signed up, and how you're really using this to connect with each other. The fact that people are spending more and more time in Fellowship Hall after worship. One person was just excited that *other* people are excited! Someone else said they are excited about the congregation's receptiveness to change and growth. One person was

excited to see faces that they did not know in worship; new people connecting with the life of our church. Another person said the landscaping in front of the church, and the fact that you can actually *see* the church building now, and that it looks open and welcoming and inviting.

Someone was excited about having more electrical outlets in Fellowship Hall, and if you have ever taken part in our pillowcase sewing events, you'll know *why* they are so excited about that. Someone was excited about Lunch & Learn, this new opportunity for learning and fellowship together. People were excited about the men's groups and the women's groups, seeing more and more people take part in those. People were excited about the fact that we are collaborating more with Covenant Presbyterian Church in Frazer. Our *youth* absolutely love doing things together, and we're working on ways for the adults to do more together, too (you'll be hearing more about that soon). One person was excited that the Nominating Committee is done with their work, and the great class of new Elders, Deacons, and Trustees that will be coming aboard.

So that brings me to *you*. What are some things that *you* are excited about in the life of our church right now? And it's okay if it's something that has already been mentioned. We can be excited about the same things! **(Listen)**

When Paul wrote letters to various churches, he almost always starts off by talking about what is going on in those churches. The good things and sometimes the bad things. With the Colossians, he starts off talking about the good things, the things that *he* is excited about. And what he says to them here is that all these things are evidence that the Word of God and the gospel (the good news of Jesus Christ) are growing in them and bearing fruit. And because of this, he says, he has not stopped praying for them, that they may be filled more and more with the knowledge of God's will, with spiritual wisdom and

understanding, so that they can lead lives that are pleasing to God and bear *even more* fruit as they continue to grow.

All of these things that *we* are excited about are evidence that the Word of God and the good news of Jesus Christ are growing in you, growing in this church, and bearing fruit. And Paul's prayer for the Colossians is also *my* prayer for *you*, for this *church*. That you would continue to grow in your knowledge and love of God. That *you* would be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power. That *you* would be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God. It is *God* who has made all of this possible. And it is God who will continue to do good things among us, both in our individual lives and in our life together as Christ's church.

To that end, I also asked our Elders, not just about what we are currently doing that excites them, but also about their hopes for the future. It was the beginning of the year, so I asked what our new year's resolutions are for the life of our church. Things that we would like to see *happen* in our church this year. So here are some. They want to see us actually *implement* the Transformation Team's vision. Someone said they want to see us find more ways to share in fellowship and get new people involved and connected. One person said, "If you see new people not talking to anyone during the greeting time or coffee hour, *go talk to them!*" Another person talked about finding more ways to share out interests and skills with each other. Like, "Oh, I didn't know that Bill has plumbing skills! I could actually use your help right now!" "I didn't know that Sally loves the theater! We should go together some time!"

One person said they would love to see more people start singing with the choir this year. Someone said more retreats; women's retreats, men's retreats, church-wide retreats. Someone else wants to add a service event. Like how we already have Rise Against Hunger and others, let's find a *new one* to add. They got off on a tangent for a while talking about having a monthly breakfast and even tying that meal in

with worship. Like, worshipping in the Fellowship Hall *while* we share a meal, which is actually how the early church celebrated communion. One person said they want to get the youth interested in service mission trips again. Another person wants to see us nurture “a culture of yes.” That if someone comes to us and says, “Hey, I have this idea for a new ministry or event,” as long as it fits within the mission of our church, we find ways to say, “Yes,” rather than saying, “Oh, I don’t know. The insurance or these other concerns....” Not that we don’t take those into account, but that our first instinct is to *find a way to make it work*.

Here’s mine; my resolution or hope or vision for our church this year. I want to see us baptize one adult. Someone new to the faith. Not just to get new members who are *already* Christians, but for us to fulfill Christ’s calling to *make* new Christians.

You might have your own hopes or resolutions for our church this year, or even for *your own* life; things that you are working toward or want to see happen. And whether you’re thinking about your own life or our life together, I want to end with these words from the book of Proverbs, chapter 16:

- ¹The plans of the mind belong to mortals,
but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.
²All one’s ways may be pure in one’s own eyes,
but the Lord weighs the spirit.
³Commit your work to the Lord,
and your plans will be established.
⁴The Lord has made everything for its purpose...
⁷When the ways of people please the Lord,
God causes even their enemies to be at peace with them.
⁹The human mind plans the way,
but the Lord directs the steps.
²⁰Those who are attentive to a matter will prosper,
and happy are those who trust in the Lord.

If we commit our work to the Lord – in our individual lives and our life together – and are attentive to these matters, intentional about taking steps to bring them about, trusting in God to direct our steps, then

even if these goals are not realized, we will have gone about them faithfully. And that is all God asks of us. Faithfulness. Trust. As Thomas Merton says, “the desire to please God pleases God.” So in all that we do this year, as individuals and as Christ’s church, let us simply seek to please God, and we will bear good fruit, in Christ. Amen.