

1Peter 5:2

“Eager to Serve God”

This morning’s message has come at the request of the Administrative Council and the folks who went on our “Choosing the Faithful Path” retreat back in February.

Our sermon Scripture from the first epistle of the Apostle Peter says, “Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly – not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God” (1Peter 5:2). The Apostle Peter sends this message to leaders in the churches. Those leaders are to take care of their congregations for no better reason than because God asked them to. They are not to serve because being a leader makes them look cool. They are not to serve as a leader of the church because they are on some kind of power trip. They are not to serve because they think it will make them more money. Leaders of the church are to serve for no better reason than, “because they are eager to serve God.”

Now, here’s the rub. That same charge falls to the congregations those leaders serve. The people of the church, the laity as well as the clergy are supposed to serve for no better reason than because they are eager to serve God and one another. The laity – not just the clergy have a responsibility to watch over one another and our community, willingly, because we are eager to serve God. This is not about filling pews, or putting more money in the collection plate. This morning’s message is all about answering the question, “How faithful are we being to Christ’s call and commission on our church? (pause) Let’s find out.

Would y’all please take a look up at the clock on the screen? This clock represents the life cycle of your average congregation. Churches start out around six o’clock. There is a lot of positive energy, and everybody works really hard until about 10 o’clock. That’s when people start to get comfortable in their positions in the church. Most people know their, “job,” and have a handle on what their, “place,” is in the life of the church. The congregation sets the cruise control on the work of the church. Largely, the congregation acts as if they are asleep at the wheel. Things keep clicking along, but slowly something begins to happen. One member of the church moves away for a new job. Another member of the church dies. Another member of the church gets burned out and quits serving. Many people in the congregation assume the same work is being done, but it’s not. Or the work is not being done as well by a less than enthusiastic successor. What has happened is the church has fallen into unrealized decline. (pause) Now at some point a few people begin to wake up. They look around and see what time it is, but too often it is too late. It’s not five o’clock somewhere. It is five o’clock in their church, and there is too much downward momentum to prevent the church from shutting its doors. (pause) Those who are left in the end wonder, “What happened?”

Brothers and sisters look at this clock. The same clock is printed in your bulletin. Please, take a moment and look at this clock. (pause) What time is it in the life of our church? (pause) What time is it in the life of our church? (pause) Please mark on your bulletin what time you think it is in the life of Central United Methodist Church. (pause) What time do you think it is in the life of the church? (pause for responses) I asked this same question at our “Choosing the Faithful Path,” retreat in February. This is where they believed we are. (pause to change the slide and let it sink in) Do you agree? By a show of hands how many agree with this assessment of what time it is in the life of our congregation?

Sisters and brothers, here is the inconvenient truth. **In the life cycle of our church** it is probably 2 or 2:30. (pause) It is probably 2-2:30 in the afternoon. (pause) Let me prove it to you. Would everyone please stand as you are able? Y’all take a moment to look around at who is standing. (pause) Would those of you who are 18 or under please sit down? (pause) If you are 30 or younger please sit down. (pause) If you are 40 or younger please sit down. (pause) There are a lot of folks still standing. If you are 50 or younger please sit down. (pause)

“Most of the decline in our congregations can be attributed to our inability to or our unwillingness to change. For any local church to stay viable and vital, we must be willing to make **significant changes** to respond **faithfully** to our changing communities.”

Crissman, Beth M., Rankin, Nancy B.,  
“Choosing the Faithful Path: A Bible Study for  
Discerning a Faithful Future,” (Graham:  
Plowpoint 2015) p11.

If you are 64 or younger please sit down. (pause) Now, take a good hard look around. How many of y'all still standing hold a leadership position on the Administrative Council? (pause) How many of y'all are one of those who shows up to help do everything? (pause) How many are in the choir? (longer pause) Would y'all please sit down? Think about this for a moment church. Where will these people, these elders and stalwart Christian soldiers be in 15 years? How many will still be here worshipping with us? How many will be out at Mt. Vista? How many will graduate to the Church Triumphant? (pause) The inconvenient reality is change is on the way. The authors of the book, “Choosing the Faithful Path” argue;

It is the opinion of those who attended the “Choosing the Faithful Path Retreat,” our Administrative Council, and myself that our church is at a cross roads. We can continue to serve the Lord in the way we always have and in 15-20 years we will close our doors. (pause) We can choose to do that. (pause) We can choose to close. (pause) Or, we

can choose to do something else. (pause) We can choose to do something different. (pause) We can choose to be faithful to God's call on our church. We can adapt to more faithfully obey God's command to, “**go therefore and make disciples**” (Matt 28:19). We can choose to honor the bi-laws of the United Methodist Church laid out in the Book of Discipline which state; —————>

Believe it or not there are base line standards for being a United Methodist church. Every United Methodist Church is “supposed” to do the following;

- Preach the word faithfully
- Celebrate the Sacraments regularly
- Actively lead people to accept and profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior
- Build up believers to become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ
- Minister to the needs of people in our community through our members
- Cooperate with other churches and organizations to meet the needs of our neighbors

Sisters and brothers how many of these are about putting more money in the Central's bank account? (pause) How many of these on this list are about filling up a membership roll, or putting more posteriors in these pews? (pause) How many? (pause) None. None of these is about money or attendance, or membership. Everyone of these is about Kingdom building. The Spirit is calling us to act. God is calling for us to be faithful. Jesus Christ died so we would have the freedom to do just that. How will we respond? (pause) How will we respond?

As you are thinking about what to do now let me lay this one on you. Dying churches are focused on what they want. (pause) Dying churches are more focused on what they want than what God wants. (pause) Vital,

“Every congregation is located in a community in some type of transition, [therefore] every local church is encouraged to study their **congregation's potential.**”

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House 2016)

living churches are focused on what God wants. So maybe today is the day to start asking which one are we? What does Peter tell the leaders of those churches he is writing to? "Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly – not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God" (1Peter 5:2). Being the hands and feet of Christ is not about doing what we want. Being the hands and feet of Christ is about doing what God has asked us to do out of gratitude for what Jesus Christ has already done for us on the cross. Serving others will make us feel good about ourselves and what we are doing. Caring for one another in our congregation will strengthen the bonds of love we feel for one another. However, the work of Jesus Christ in this place has to be about more than just what makes us feel good. The defining quality of our ministry is how well our work lasts into the future. I am not talking about how long our church lasts into the future. I am talking about how long our work lasts into the future.

A big change our church needs to make is how we care for one another and how we care for those in our community. For the last seven or eight years that work has taken through a committee of six called the "Church Vitality" committee. Brothers and sisters that committee is falling apart. They are down to four and half members now and their chair person has taken a position as the president of the UMW for the entire Uwharrie District – that's 153 churches. Plus when you think about it for 6 people to do the work of helping Central to be vital congregation when we average 87 in worship and have 317 on the role is a bit crazy. It is the living definition of the 80/20 rule. The 80/20 rule says 80 % of the work is done by 20% of the people. Brothers and sisters this just won't do. The Administrative council agrees as do the members of the Church Vitality Committee. So in keeping with the Book of Discipline the Church Vitality Committee is going away. In its place we will return to three old committees: Nurture; Outreach & Witness.

### **Nurture**

The nurturing ministries of the congregation shall give attention to but not be limited to education, worship, Christian formation, membership care, small groups, and stewardship. Attention must be given to the needs of individuals and families of all ages.

¶252.2 of the 2016 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church

### **Outreach**

The outreach ministries of the church shall give attention to Local and larger community ministries of compassion, justice and advocacy.

These ministries include church and society, global ministries, higher education and campus ministry, health and welfare, Christian unity and interreligious concerns, religion, and race, and the status and role of women.

¶252.2 of the 2016 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church

### **Witness**

The witness ministries of the church shall give attention to developing and strengthening evangelistic efforts of sharing of personal and congregational stories of Christian experience, faith and service; communications; Lay Servant Ministries; and other means that give expression of witness for Jesus Christ."

¶252.2 of the 2016 Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church

If Central UMC is going to grow into a more vital, vibrant and loving church with a legacy stretching out into the future we are going to have to get our hands dirty. Everyone is going to have to be willing to get their hands dirty. This 80/20 business is not going to work. Did you know there are smaller churches who are healthier than we are? They may not have our gorgeous building, and they may not have as many people as we do, but they are thriving because everyone in the congregation is involved in the life and ministry of their church. I have seen it at Cotton Grove. Cathy Ward tells me the same thing is true at Alleghany. Stop to think for a minute. Stop to dream. What would it be like for everyone here to be involved in fruitful life and ministry here at Central UMC. I recognize not everyone has the same gifts and abilities. I recognize not everyone has the same amount of time. However, that is the beauty of the church. We are not going to all be the same. However, we are challenged by God that everyone one of us should be fruitful for the building of God's kingdom. Please take some time this week to think about these three committees. Think about the gifts and abilities we have. How might we contribute to Kingdom work? How might we bear good fruit which feeds the next generation of servants in God's church? What should it look like for 100% of us to be the hands and feet of Christ in a way that has nothing to do with us and everything to do with bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God both today and tomorrow.

In the name of Jesus Christ,

Amen.