

Looking Back With Gratitude

Celebration Sunday

1 Thessalonians 5: 12-18

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Not too long ago, our Renewing the Faith Capital Campaign officially ended, and I wanted to take some time to celebrate this significant accomplishment, to remember all that we have done together, and to give thanks for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in the process. I want to talk about the Capital Campaign for a bit and then I'll talk some about the early church in Thessalonica and connections to our time.

Almost seven years ago now, I was starting interview conversations with First UCC. In those conversations, I was told the to-do list that the congregation had for its next Senior Minister. Besides doing the things pastors do, worship and pastoral care, this list included hiring an Associate Minister, instituting a new Governance Structure and completing a capital campaign.

"Sounds great!" I said. Bring it on. "Have you ever led a church through a capital campaign?" I was asked. "No." I said. "But I know that there are people who know how to do it and we should talk to them. It'll be fine." "Ok."

I was so excited to get started at First UCC and to tackle the tasks in front of us. I got started and then church time took over. I'm convinced that time in the church operates in a different dimension and at a slower speed. For good and sometimes not so good reasons, projects in churches take longer than you think they will.

The first year was focused on the search process that called Pastor Abby. The next year was focused on putting a new governance structure in place.

I was loving this, truly. But meanwhile, the bricks on the outside of the church were turning to dust and blowing away day by day. We were sweating through summer worship, and our boiler was giving us clear signals that it no longer wanted to work for us, but wanted to retire. Out of spite, it would consistently give us a little scare on Christmas Eve. Our windows needed refurbishing and replacing, and we needed a sound system upgrade and sound dampening in the Assembly Room. There were some foundational things we needed to sustain and improve our home for ministry.

As I started year three, the Council knew it was time to start the capital campaign work. We made the list of projects we needed take on and the list was long and the price tag was high. We had an initial goal of \$1,054,000 . We wanted to worship to be comfortable 12 months a year, with cooling in the summer and heat during the winter. We wanted to improve the integrity of the building envelope. We didn't want the bricks to fall off the church and felt led to improve energy efficiency and lower our carbon footprint. We hired a consultant and the consultant gave us a process to go through. A talented leadership team was put in place, and we were meeting, a lot.

Our consultant completed an initial feasibility study that told us we could raise about \$750,000, not the million that we felt we needed. Ok, so we took a breath. We adjusted our list and decided to go forward.

So many of you got involved in so many ways helping the campaign unfold with energy and excitement and fun.

We collected three year pledges from 144 households. We didn't just meet our \$750,000 goal, we went way past it, with pledges of \$892,000. Phil Kasten was able to arrange for Air Conditioning and Controls equipment, which we are valuing at about \$100,000. With some other funds that came in and that we were able to direct towards our projects, we were able to invest \$1,258,000 into our home for ministry. More than our original 1 million dollar goal. Your pledges have come in. Any normal campaign, in any normal church figures in 5-7% for uncollected pledges. We only had 2% in uncollected pledges.

We added three energy efficient boilers. They have names: Mishack, Shadrach, and Abednego. We added the most energy efficient Air Conditioning unit on the market, while subscribing to a community solar garden. All of our electrical needs are supplied by solar energy. We added AC without adding to our carbon footprint. We installed a more energy efficient and aesthetically pleasing cover on the windows, and we will be replacing windows in the Assembly Room soon. We restored all the masonry around the church, added a new sound system and sound panels in the Assembly Room.

All while increasing our operating budget to the point that we are ready to add staff capacity for ministry with youth. Regardless of what happens with the election, we will be adding staff either way in 2019. We have also maintained our place as the leader within the Minnesota Conference in giving to Our Church's Wider Mission or OCWM.

Only a vital and strong church could do what we have been able to do together over these last few years. Pastor Abby and I are grateful to be

serving with you. It's great fun. And, we want you to know how generous you are.

When clergy colleagues ask me to describe First UCC, I say, "they are a generous people."

This 1.2 million dollar investment gives us a foundation on which our ministries can build going forward. For decades to come our ministries will benefit from the gifts of this campaign. Thank you for your love and care for this church. We give thanks to the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of our ministries too.

Now I want to transition to the Apostle Paul's words for today. Our passage from 1 Thessalonians is the closing of a letter from the Apostle Paul to this early church and as people. In this closing Paul says, "give thanks in all circumstances." Give thanks to God when things are going well. But Paul is also suggesting that we can and should give thanks to God when we are facing struggle and when our hearts are broken.

I like the other things Paul is saying here as well. He gives guidance on how to be together as a church. Respect those who work among you, he says. "Admonish the idlers." The word "idlers" as a translation is likely misleading. The Greek term usually suggests anti-social behavior. Admonish those whose behavior is tearing apart the community. Don't just let that go.

"Never return evil for evil," Paul says. Wow. It seems a sign of our time that this jumps off the page. We are to be a community that doesn't seek revenge or that tears others down, we are meet sin and evil with responses that are good.

Then Paul get to the heart of it: rejoice (celebrate) pray (stay centered in the Holy) and give thanks in **all** circumstances (when life is good and when life is heartbreaking).

Paul was writing to a church that was being persecuted, that was at odds with the culture around it.

The church in the first century Roman empire was a community that was offering an alternative to the imperial religion of the Pax Romana, or the Roman peace. The language the church used was a challenge to the powers of the day and no one would have missed that. Emperor Augustus was Lord, Savior, the Prince of Peace. The early church proclaimed that Jesus was Lord, Savior, Prince of Peace. Scholar Helmut Koester points out that Paul thought that the coming or return of Jesus would shatter the false peace and security of the Roman establishment. Augustus sought to construe his empire as one large Roman family, and Paul spoke of welcoming believers into God's family. The church community was an alternative way of life, and a challenge to way and values of Roman empire.

Most people in the cities where churches were started, didn't want to be noticed by Roman authorities. They wanted to go about their business. They didn't want Roman authorities to feel they needed to crack down on anything. So to have these small church communities stirring up the pot, using language that openly defies Roman power, made people in the Roman empire and in Thessalonica nervous. They lashed out and persecuted members of the church.

It was hard being a member of the church. Paul is trying to help the church sustain itself in difficult times. And he tells them to give thanks always.

Even in struggle, place your faith in a Love that is in the midst of the church, with us, and working for good, healing, restoring and giving life. That Spirit of Love in your midst will never be overcome by the life-denying powers of the world.

Hang in there, Paul is saying. There is powerful goodness in your midst that will never let you go.

I had lunch with a clergy friend of mine just after the Kavanaugh hearings. He said, "there's this heaviness around the church. Members of my church were crying after the hearings, so hurt by what was unfolding." Since we had lunch there was news on climate change, the immigrant caravan from Honduras, proposed anti-transgender legislation, pipe bombs, and now the shooting at Tree of Life synagogue. My friend said, "the church needs to be a container in the midst of all of this." In other words, the church needs to provide something to hold onto, or to remind us of what it is that holds onto us when human dignity is being denied and the values that lead to life and wholeness are being ignored.

Paul is giving a message to a hurting people saying, "there is a love in the midst of the church that affirms you. There's a love in the midst of the church that will sustain you, and give you power and send you into the world to act differently. Stay rooted in that Spirit. Give thanks for that Spirit, for that is good news.

Paul says, "We know that all creation has been groaning until now, waiting for the Children of God, who will trust this love, live out this love, and share this healing love with the world.

Let this Spirit hold you. Let this Spirit steady you. Let this Spirit send you, with more power than you expected. But give thanks always, for you are never on your own.

We give thanks for the presence of the Spirit: Empowering our ministries, nurturing our generosity, and holding us together as a people with a different vision, a healing vision, a peaceful vision of how our world can be. Amen.