

What About the Church?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 29, 2023 – Annual Meeting Sunday

Text: Ephesians 4:11-16

Welcome to Annual Meeting Sunday here at our church, the United Congregational Church of Westerly, United Church of Christ. I admit it. I love Annual Meeting Sunday. Not too many people feel that way, I'm pretty sure. And even if they do, I don't think they would admit it. After all, on the surface, there is nothing especially exciting about Annual Meeting Sunday, per se. Following worship we will receive the Annual Reports of the church, including the financial reports and the People Plan. We will hear the presentation on the recommended budget for 2023. We will vote on all of the above. Nothing especially exciting here. And, truth be told, that's why I look forward to our Annual Meetings. People ask good questions. Conversation happens. Problems are raised and resolved, usually. Whatever happens, we face it together. We resolve it together. And in churches these days, that is a real rarity. We are indeed richly blessed with the strong sense of community, of family, that our church enjoys. It is indeed exceedingly rare these days.

This is not to say we don't have our occasional spats or dust-ups about things because we do. People are people after all. But in this church, you all learned way before I became your pastor that fighting with each other never solves anything. You learned that the words of the Behavioral Covenant you created decades ago under the leadership of Interim Pastor Ray Bradley. which we will read together as the Annual Meeting begins, really do matter. They form the framework within which we practice being church together. And it is practice because speaking the truth in love to each other as Paul advocates in our Scripture this morning is not a natural human thing

to do. It takes real work and effort. And that is a lesson you all have learned well and you have taught it to me over these past almost 11 years we have been together. Being church together is all about speaking the truth in love to each other, especially when we don't feel especially loving at times. Like when you've been working hours and hours on something, and folks just don't seem to realize all the effort you've put in. Like when it's the end of one of the big events we are so very good at and suddenly there just aren't as many people as we'd like to help clean up. We get tired, all of us. We look around and we think, geesh if only we had a few more people. It's a natural thing to think. It feels like basic math. More people = more people to work on stuff. But guess what? I've served on staff at big churches and I've been pastor here and at another small church and I can tell you with utmost confidence that the folks from the big churches were just as quick to say we needed more people as we are here in our decidedly much smaller church. Go figure...

In today's text from Ephesians, Paul is explaining to the folks at the church in Ephesus that it's not how many people you have in the church that matters. Instead, he wants them to see if the people they do have, that God has already blessed them with, are the people they need to be about God's work. He talks about these different kinds of leaders in the church as actual gifts from Jesus to the church. He writes, "the gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers." And he explained that that they all had the same goal: "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." Okay, but that list of jobs doesn't seem to line up with what appears in our People Plan at all, you may be thinking. Well, let's think about that.

Apostles – who might the apostles be in our church? Well, what's an apostle? According to Webster's dictionary an apostle is

someone sent on a mission OR someone who initiates or advocates for any important belief or system.¹ Well I know we've got those people here. How many people here have made a last minute run to the store on a *mission* to get something we needed here at church? Grape juice for communion, butter and eggs for baking, paper towels, candles ... well, you get the picture. How many of you have undertaken such a mission for our church? ... Did you happen to mention to anyone at the store it was for the church? ... Hello Apostles!!!

Now what about prophets? That may be a little trickier. What does our friend Webster's tell us about prophets? A prophet is someone who utters divinely inspired revelations OR one gifted with more than usual spiritual or moral insight OR one who is an effective leader or spokesperson. ² Hmmm. Who has led a prayer at the opening of a board or committee meeting? Who has moderated a board or committee meeting, or an Annual Meeting for that matter? Who has shared an insight at a board or committee meeting? Who has spoken up to share an opinion at any of our meetings here? Come on, now! Don't be shy! ... Hello prophets!

Next come the evangelists. Oh dear. Aren't they the people who button-hole people, who wear their faith on their sleeves making everyone else uncomfortable with their "Jesus is Lord" speeches? Well, not necessarily. Yes, Webster's tells us an evangelist is someone who preaches the Gospel and helps convert others to Christianity.³ But don't confuse what I do – preaching from the pulpit on Sunday morning (that's the pastor and teacher role Paul mentions next) – with preaching the Gospel by how you live your life each day outside

¹ Webster's Seventh Collegiate Dictionary, ©1971G&C Merriam Publishers, p. 42.

² Ibid., p. 683.

³ Ibid., p. 287.

the doors of this church. I think every time you go out of your way to be kind to someone, to call someone you think could be lonely, to check on someone you haven't seen in church for a while, to write a note or send a card to someone you know has been ill or going through a tough time – guess what. That's evangelism. Every time you talk about any of the things we are doing here at our church that you are excited about, that's evangelism. Anybody here done any of those things? Hello evangelists!!!!

So, I guess we've got Paul's list of roles in the church pretty well covered. And that's no surprise, really, is it? This congregation is blessed with excellent leadership in every way. Our Music program, our Deacons assisting with worship, our Trustees overseeing the property and financial matters of the church, our Missions folks reminding of us of all the ways we can make a difference in our community and in the world, and our Congregational Life folks charged with helping us to remember to celebrate the life and ministry of our church and each other – this church is blessed with the right people willing do the best they can for our church, given all the other stuff they have going on in our lives. How blessed are we!

But Paul doesn't stop with his list of roles. He goes on to describe how we are to be the church together. In verse 14 he reminds us that we are not to allow ourselves to get bogged down on matters of doctrine or allow ourselves to get distracted by people or situations that aren't important to the overall welfare of the church. No, we have one thing we are to focus on as the church and Paul is very clear as to what that is: “we are to grow in every way into Christ ... [by] building ourselves up in love.” To my way of thinking, dear ones, that is exactly what we are celebrating on these Annual Meeting Sundays. We are reminding ourselves of all we have accomplished in the past year even as we dream and plan for the year to come. All the ways in which we

do that together are how we are building ourselves up in love. You don't think you do that? Of course you do. How else do you think we could have pulled off the Sicilian Art Show or the Estate Sale or not one, not two but three separate mini-Bazaars within the span of three months? Our love for each other and this church is what propels us forward to accomplish things churches twice our size can't do. We – YOU – are excellent at building each other up in love, into the body of Christ in this place.

Yes, that's true, you're thinking. But, Pastor Ruth, look around! We're getting older! We're getting tired! We're getting cranky! Where are all the young people? Where do we go from here? Dear ones, these are all excellent questions. And, they are questions I can't answer – at least not with the kind of answers you all want. I can tell you what I decided about these very questions when I started here as your pastor in 2012. I realized very early on what an extraordinary church this is, what amazing people you are. You already have learned, in some cases the hard way, what it means to be church together – to fight and struggle together because church matters. Because *this* church matters. Whether or not it's here matters to each of you and to this community. This I learned within my first six months of being your pastor. And then I prayed on that, a lot. Gradually God helped me understand one very important, very basic reality – we are all of us, you and me, called to be the church we already are right here and right now, in this place and time. We are called to be who we are as a church right now and trust our future to God. The past is behind us, and we have moved on carrying the best of it with us into the future and leaving the rest behind. The future is ahead of us calling us forward to only God knows what. That, dear ones, is totally in God's hands and it always has been and always will be. God will reveal the future to us in God's time. Our time is now,

right here and right now. Tired and cranky as we are. Wishing for younger bodies as we do. All that is okay because we are still the church, just as we are, doing all we can to build up this community in love to be what it is God needs us to be. That, dear ones, is more than enough for any of us to deal with. Today is God's gift to us, just as this, our beloved church is to us. That's enough. That is more than enough. We'll figure it all out together.

As we think about this topic of the church today, I invite you to consider and reflect along with me on a piece of art work my husband bought for me from the Silent Auction, and I think it might have been in the Estate Sale before that. It's this lovely rendering of Taliesen in Arizona, the home and "laboratory" of the world famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright.⁴ I absolutely love Taliesen and actually visited it when I was in Scottsdale for a ministry conference many years ago. It is a truly magical place, one of the best representatives of Wright's architectural style known as "organic architecture." Wright believed that any building should be reflective of the land and the landscape within which it would be situated. He said it should look like it belongs where it is built, like it grew there instead of being constructed. Our church, I believe, was designed with echoes of this organic architecture in mind. Yes, I know it looks very alien to some in our area, coastal New England dominated by clapboard homes and stone mills. And yet, if you walk around our property, this concrete and glass building does seem to come right up out of the Stonington stone outcroppings it nestles around. It is a church of stone, built from stone and glass, the glass allowing us to see the world outside our walls to which God is calling us. The stone anchors us to the ground, secure against storms and so much more. Sure the roof leaks and the building has its own issues as it ages but dear ones, this

⁴ <https://franklloydwright.org/taliesin-west/>

church – our church – is organic. It looks like it grew right up out the rock ledges on which it was built. It is our church, a building designed for the future possible instead of the past long gone. The building committee back in the 1960's chose this design specifically because they wanted to build for the future and not the past. What awaits us in the future as God's people here in this place? I don't know. But I am so excited to find out. With God all things are possible! And in our unique building, we know that better than anyone! What do you think might be possible for us here? Let's find out... Amen.