

Benzonia Congregational UCC
November 21, 2010
Reign of Christ (C)
1 Timothy 6: 11 - 19
"The Good Fight"
Dan Furman

Loving God,

On this day we gather to give you thanks for all the blessings that you shower upon us. In good times and in hard times, you are the well that we continue to turn to for replenishment and renewal. Guide our time together this day that we might continue to find you when we most need you. We pray that the words that are spoken and the communion of our gathered thoughts, bring peace and glory to you, O God, for we believe that you are steadfast and transforming. Amen.

Though the big day is still half a week away, the final preparations have already started. If you are planning to travel, you either have your tickets, or you have checked out the map or the GPS device to find your fastest route to get to your destination. Maybe you are doing the cooking this year and you are making sure you have everything for the traditional meal. Maybe you are the one in charge of getting the den prepared for the annual Detroit Lions football game on Thanksgiving. Whatever your plans are this week, travel or host, the time for preparation is here.

The theme of preparation applies in several ways. As I said, most of us are looking forward to turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and all our favorite foods, along with visiting with family and friends. We also are preparing for a change in the season. The sweaters are coming out. Soon the hats and gloves will be dusted off, and we might even locate the shovels in our garages to prepare for the snow that we know is coming.

We are also preparing for a new season in the church. Today is the last day of what the church calls "Ordinary time." For many long months now, the color in the Sanctuary has been green, or the color of ordinary time, after the red of Pentecost and before the blue of Advent. Preparations have already begun behind the scenes to transform our sacred space to help us move toward a time of examination on our Journey toward Jerusalem, under a blazing star, searching for the Christ child.

And lastly, we also prepare this day for the next budget year as we celebrate what we as a church family have to offer for the ongoing ministry inside these walls as well as the missions outside both locally and globally.

To help us focus our attention on the theme of preparation, we turn to the first letter to Timothy. Though we tend to focus on the Gospels most often, when we do turn to Paul, normally we look to his advice to the churches in Galatia, or Corinth, or Rome. This morning, we catch a correspondence between two leaders of the early church. The two letters to Timothy helped give structure to the early church, so much so that it continues to shape much of the church today with its suggestion for deacons and bishops, leaders with specific purposes. Among other letters, these helped maintain order and boundaries; they created structure that helped provide a lasting foundation while other less organized groups disintegrated.

In our reading for this morning, Paul has just concluded a section of the letter telling his close friend Timothy to encourage others, not to listen to false teachers, and not to lose focus on greed, but rather to fight the good fight of faith and to keep their attention on righteous living. We don't often hear much about false teaching anymore. From time to time there seems to be interest in the universal church of seeking out and accusing some of being "a" or "the" anti-Christ. I give thanks that this seems to have lost momentum as of late. But what seems to me

to fall into the category of false teachings are the plethora of distractions that lead us away from leading active lives as disciples. "I could go to church, or I could sleep in... or work around the house... or go shopping." "I could talk to my friend who seems to be so lost in pain and grief and invite them to my church, but that's so awkward." These and so many other distractions lead us away from faithful living, joy in fellowship, church growth, and spiritual renewal.

So Paul writes this letter, knowing that the church folk are not growing in faith, but rather they are growing weary. He knows that they need a shot in the arm. He tells them to shun the distractions, and instead pursue endurance, gentleness, joy, faith, love, and righteousness. This is a letter of preparation. He knows that it is not easy being a disciple, nor has he ever said that it was. He also knows that his words will not provide a quick fix, but rather that they will need to sink in for days, weeks, years before the Christian community begins to recognize the need to fight the good fight of faith.

Several weeks ago we had a Congregational Gathering where a subcommittee of the Board of Trustees that handles finances presented a snapshot of our financial situation. On the one hand, the fact that we are operating with a significant deficit is troubling. Undoubtedly, sacrifices will probably be made in next year's budget that will better reflect the status of the secular world, that even though signs seem to be pointing toward slow growth, we all are still feeling the effects of the recession in our local economy.

Later, as part of our worship, we will stand and come forward, bringing our offerings as well as our estimate of giving cards, dedicating to our God the thanks we offer now as well as what we hope to give in 2011. It is from these estimate of giving cards as well as some other smaller sources of income that we will base our budget next year. This is a time for us to prepare either to make reductions as necessary or should we realize an increase from last year, we will

prayerfully continue and enhance our mission and ministry; fighting the good fight of our faith here in Benzie County.

So how do we fight the good fight of our faith? We are about to conclude our year of celebration; 150 years of local and global ministry. Much of this year we have looked back to our roots, giving thanks for our founders and their vision of a community with a strong church, college, and a town. We have given thanks for our former pastors who have led us through building changes, denominational transformations, the closing of the school, the venturing forward into new horizons. We have given thanks for our members and friends of our past who have left us with the legacy of one of the oldest, most prominent churches in northern Michigan.

As this year closes out, we begin to take the first steps into a new year. We can build upon the foundations set before us of discovering new ways to address education in our area or we can listen for God's guidance and move in a new direction. Maybe we need to take a closer look at the needs of our area, our county, our township, and discern how we might fight the good fight and address the needs around us. We know there are people who are hungry. The numbers of people looking for food is growing. How do we know if our food pantry is making a difference? Could we improve the way we feed the hungry?

In addition to hunger, what other needs are there in our area? Here's something I've noticed in the two years I've been a resident. It's not a dominant expression. And feel free to tell me later if you don't see this, but many times throughout the county, I have witnessed what I feel is a sense of apathy; almost a mild depression that seems to permeate like a mist or fog. Have any of you seen this? Again, it's not everywhere, but it seems to pop up with relative

frequency. Is this something we could address; might we provide a spark of God's enduring love, faith, and hope into the mixture?

This is a time of preparation. It will take time for us to discern God's direction for us as a Christ-led community. Our financial growth will take time to regenerate. We will need to work toward building our trust that God will continue to provide, not only for another 150 years, but even in our time. This will not be an easy task; ministry rarely is. Yet we are encouraged this day, to not give up, rather to give thanks, and to keep moving forward toward the life, as Paul writes, that really is life.

So as we prepare for the big day, as we prepare for winter, as we prepare for Advent, as we prepare for a new year, let us be mindful of what we can give both financially and of our time to God's glory, enriching our lives as disciples of Jesus the Christ, and moving us forward into a new understanding as the body of Christ.

Happy Thanksgiving! Amen.