

UCC Forum Sept. 8-9th2023
Being the Church, Now!
Remarks by Rev. Janna Meyers

Being Plumb:
Correctly Measuring the Church

It was around 10am on a Saturday morning and I was in church. More precisely, I was in a church basement. It was a very nice basement, as far as church basements go. There were no creepy spiders or, leaky pipes, no peeling paint, or flickering lights. In fact, it was a delightful basement with clean carpets and cream painted walls, sheer drapes defusing the morning sun streaming in from the ground level windows, and tables piled high with hot breakfast and coffee. But still it was 10am on a SATURDAY, not Sunday, SATURDAY. No matter how delightful it was, I was still annoyed that I had to be there.

Not only was this idyllic church breakfast spoiled by being held on a Saturday, but my car had failed to properly start, which resulted in my being about 30 minutes late to breakfast. Which would only been about 15 minutes late if I had not had to argue with the kids to get into their car seats. But they refused because "We *don't* go to church on *Saturday* mom, we go on *Sunday*. Mom only Sunday is church day!" To which my husband had to quietly add, "They have a point Janna, why are we going to this thing and on a Saturday?"

So there I sat, at 10am on a SATURDAY in a church basement with my whole family irritated we were even there. I had placated everyone with the promise that there would be no "big talking," my kids name for my sermons, only a meal. And then the pastor of the church got up and said the words that made my heart sink, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord. Amen" I do not know if this is true in Germany, but in America, if you hear that prayer, it only means one thing: someone is about to preach a long sermon. My husband stared at me as if to say, "you said it was just breakfast" I stared back, pleading "How could I know there would be a sermon?!" My son just put his head right down on the table. Now, my daughter took a different approach: she sat for a few minutes quietly coloring on her paper placemat and then she began to ask questions about what she heard.

"Mommy, why is he talking?"

"It's church now honey and he is giving the message."

"But why is he talking?"

"He is talking about Jesus and how important it is to love each other."

"Mommy, when is he going to say something interesting?"

"Honey shhhhhhhh."

"Mommy, what are we doing here?"

"We are having some church."

"But why?"

“Because that’s what we do.”

“But why do have to do it on a *Saturday*? Why do we have to have church *right now*?”

In her four-year-old way, she was able to articulate better than most the question facing our congregations today. When are we going to say something interesting? Why do we need to have church? And why now? These questions and their responses are the invitation and the imperative of the forum’s theme, *Be the Church, Now!* It invites us to be the church, just as that basement breakfast invited me, 30 minutes late and a bit more irritable than necessary. But “*Be the Church, Now!*” also convicts us with its urgency. Just as my daughter pulled at me, and whispered “why do we have to be here now!” I tug at you and wonder, why are you here? What invitation drew you in or what urgency convicted you to respond to God’s call to be the church now?

I wonder this because for me this is an essential and urgent challenge to tackle. I live in Indianapolis, Indiana. Currently there, and around the United States, folks are voluntarily sorting themselves into groups, giving themselves labels, and only associating with people of the same opinions. In so many ways we have become less tolerant of the stranger, less interested in knowing the neighbor, less curious about each other, and more consumed with discovering if they are “our kind of people.” In a world where like is only interested in finding like, what does it mean to be the church?

In order to *be* the church, we must know what church means. I wonder how you would define church? When was the last time you explained what the church is to someone else? Not just thought about it, or reflected upon it, or railed against it, but actually tried to articulate what you understand the church to be to another human being? And if you all say “confirmation class,” we are in deep trouble.

For me, the church is:

the Body of Christ

formed of

Jesus’ siblings,

the created, beloved, children of God,

living today,

and gathered together by the Holy Spirit.

We cannot talk about how to *be* the church, until we understand what it *is* we are supposed to be. The church is: the Body of Christ formed of Jesus’ siblings, the created, beloved, children of God, living today, and gathered together by the Holy Spirit. I phrase it this way, because all too often we think that the church is the building, so old we cannot remember life without it. Or we might think the church is the bank account balance after the Sunday collection, because without that nothing can be paid for. Or we might think the church is the number on the membership rolls, because we are told bigger is better. Or the church might even be all the empty seats in the pews from the people who have left or died, because sometimes church is our precious memories and our grief. Sometimes, if we are being truly honest with ourselves, we do not’ know what the church is anymore, except that church seems painfully hard and deathly tired. All too often it can feel like we are bearing the church instead of being it.

But I am willing to guess that we are all here because we have both encountered the church and participated in being the church. It is from those experiences that many of us formulate our working definitions of church. One of the congregations that has provided fertile ground for developing my definition church is the congregation that I currently serve in Indianapolis, Indiana -- St. John United Church of Christ. This is the fifth congregation with which I have served, and in so many ways, like all our congregations, it is simultaneously similar to all other churches and yet a wholly unique place.

St. John has had a bit of a bumpy road these past few decades. In the early 2000's we experienced the loss of about half of the membership over the issue of marriage equality, then in the later 2000's we painfully parted ways with multiple clergy. By the 2010's we faced declining membership coupled with rising maintenance costs, also known by the grim moniker of "the church death spiral." By all typical benchmarks we were failing at being church. It does not matter if you use the metric system or the imperial one, when you measured our church, it did not look like a thriving place of ministry. Not much money, hardly any people in the pews, and a building tumbling down. We might have been the definition of a failing church. But you know what?! It wasn't. We weren't. Not even close. What we were was a church living in our Good Friday days.

Remember a church is the Body of Christ formed of Jesus' siblings, the created, beloved, children of God living today, and gathered together by the Holy Spirit. And that body, that church, like Christ on Good Friday, was in fact dying, but dying to what it had been in order to become something new. We were dying to the pain of being an institution in order to prepare for the joy of being a church again. We gave up being the historic building that meant more to the memories of the past than the people of today. We put an end to the way we had always done things and prepared to let God resurrect new life of abundance. This happens when we stopping measuring church and instead work to be it.

In those Good Friday days it became clear to the congregation that we could stay in our historic building (over a hundred years old, which I know is like new construction to you all, but for us that is old) where our memories and ghosts were housed, or we could take all the money we had and we could move and try to sell the building. To stay in the building that we had known for so long was to choose the way of slow death. We would slowly spend what money we had left on an ever-growing list of building maintenance and repairs until the money and the members were both gone.

Or...

We could follow the still speaking voice of God away from our own comfort and into the unknown abundance of God. We could choose to trust that when God promised Isaiah saying "do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you"¹ that that promise was still true and we were included. We could choose to trust that the psalmist spoke from experience when they wrote, "The Lord lies me down in green pastures; leads me beside still waters; restores my soul. Leads me in right paths for God's name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me."² And that God still leads us to pastures of abundance that will restore our souls even in the very face of what looks like certain death.

¹ Isaiah 41:10 NRSVUE

² Psalm 23:1-4 NRSVUE

We could choose to trust that Paul was speaking truth when he said "I convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."³ And that even here, even now, God will not be separated from us. And we could choose to trust Jesus when he said "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."⁴ We could choose to trust the words that proclaim God's presence, support, and peace in a time that feels chaotic and overwhelming. What would the church look like if we trusted the promises of God more than our measures of success? What if we acted on all the things we proclaim from the pulpit? What if we believe the assurances we give to others? What if we still believed on Friday all the things we declared to be true the previous Sunday?

The congregation of St. John made the choice to cling to the only thing we had left, God's promise of resurrection. We moved out of the building, took what would fit in people's cars, homes and storage spaces and trusted that although this looked like the darkest of valleys, we would fear no evil. This was our Holy Saturday season. We found a pasture, built a barn, and worshipped God without fear. Because the worst we could have imagined, closing the church building, had happened, and yet we had not died. And much to our surprise, in the closing of the building we found ourselves becoming a church, a Body of Christ formed of Jesus' siblings, the created, beloved, children of God, living today, gathered together by the Holy Spirit. Without realizing it, we had forgotten to pack up and bring with us our measuring sticks for what was a good, thriving, or successful church. Big membership rolls, big bank balances, and a big building no longer mattered much. Much like a toddler who has just discovered how much bigger the world is when walking instead of crawling, we had to adjust to this new and expansive perspective of church. Other churches considered us a failure, we had closed our building after all and moved away from a hundred years' worth of memories, but other's assessment didn't matter any longer. You see we had died; our church building had closed and yet God was with us and God resurrected us.

And in so doing we became an Easter people; no longer afraid, we tried things we had never done before; some failed, some did not. We invited people to worship and meals we didn't normally talk to because we were no longer afraid they would say no, we just wanted them to feel loved. We found a confidence in being ourselves, just as we are. We trusted that we were being the Body of Christ by honestly being who God made us to be and loving everyone who crossed our threshold.

In February of 2020 we decided to build a new church building. If you want to prove to your neighbors you are as crazy as they fear you are, put up a church during a global pandemic when no one is allowed to be inside. It was a decision we made because we trusted that God was not done making us God's church. We learned that being a church without fear means trusting, whole heartedly that God is a resurrecting God not a just a reviving God. God does not just give us more energy to do the hard work before us, but in fact seeks to bring all of us into a new life so that we can see the problems around us as opportunities to rebuild our world more like the kingdom of God.

We decided not to build a big monument of a church, instead we would take the lessons we learned from our time in the barn and build from there. We now have a church that welcomes all, just as they

³³ Romans 8:38-39 NRSVUE

⁴⁴ Matthew 11:28-30 NRSVUE

are. No steps or stairs to climb anywhere. No abundance of storage rooms filled with things we cannot bear to discard. No old heating or cooling that did not do much of either. No pews to confine us to our previous selves and our previous ways of worship. Instead, a building made to be used by the church. There are walkways to walk or roll on in, it has spaces that serve multiple functions so that very little sits idle, it has energy efficient systems throughout the building and it has chairs in the sanctuary to allow worship to be as varied and creative as the Holy Spirit who inspires it. We thought long and hard and built something within which the church, that wild and unpredictable Body of Christ, could live and serve. We found new life, without fear, again in this new place.

I tell you this story, not because the church I serve is some great success story or road map. I tell you this story because this congregation helped me define what a church actually is and taught me how to be that church without fear. I don't know why it took me so long to learn that measuring the church by anything other than the love and compassion it shows for God's people is idolatry. And that so often it is fear that holds our congregations back from doing the work that we already know God has called us to.

Every Christmas we repeat the angel's proclamation, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." But we seldom seem to heed the angelic command. Instead, with heads down we miss the joy and gladness that surrounds us. Our preoccupations transform into worries and we go about consumed by every headline and worried over every empty seat on Sunday. Our worry hardens into fear and in time and we forget to love. Without love of the neighbor and stranger we fail to serve one another. And without service to those around us we fail to follow Christ's most essential teaching. We fail to be the church.

This is why I tell you the story of St. John, because it is a story of hope and resurrection, it is a story of facing fear and death and choosing joy and life. It is a story of discovering what church is. This story is how I know the church is the Body of Christ formed of Jesus' siblings, the created, beloved, children of God, living today, gathered together by the Holy Spirit. Because the only way you can be all that, is by working together, to trust that God's promises of abundant new life remain true even now even here, even for you even when the road ahead is a fearful one.

And most of the roads around us right now seem not just scary, but panic inducing. How are we to be people of fearless hope with a climate crisis that rages out of control and global governments, mine especially, that seem defiantly determined to destroy the creation we are called to steward and not plunder? How are we to care and give shelter to the stranger in the style of the Good Samaritan during a migration crisis when global governments, mine especially, are closing doors on God's children simply because they were not born in the global north? How can we love our neighbors when we insist on seeing people of color and LGBTQ siblings as less than fully human? How do we be this beautiful body of Christ gathered together by the holy spirit when people are dying all around us and hate seems to trample love over and over again. How do we be the church now when the world needs it so desperately?

Now, as St. John did then, we need to choose to do likewise within our congregations, denominations and our own lives. We need to choose to trust that God is: unchanging goodness, righteous grace, loving presence, wholly and holy transcendent. That God is God. And that being the church is not being the institution, the building, the budget, the bank account or even the traditions, heritage, or memories. Being the church is not being afraid of coming together, whoever we are and just as we are, and following the Holy Spirit into the unknown in order care and love God's children all around us.

So, if the church is a gathered community of God's beloved children how do we do the work of being the Body of Christ today? I want to offer four crucial elements of what it means to be the church at this moment. We must be the church of the present, be the church for all, be the church of change, and be the church of connection. Let me say more about each one.

First, we must be the church of the Present: We begin by reminding ourselves of the time in which we are the church. We are the church now. We are not yesterday's church or last year's church or last century's church or millennia's church. The church existed then of course, but was comprised of a different set of God's people with different needs in different times and spaces. God is unchanging, but God's people and their needs are not. To do the *things* we have always done, the *way* we have always done, and *where* we have always done them, set's us up to compete with the past instead of serving in the present. We must take a hard look at ourselves, our communities and our institutions and ask if we are serving the church of yesterday or today?

It is import for me to clarify something here, often the church of today or yesterday conjures up ideas of the people who comprise the church. It seems especially common to see the older members of our churches as the past and the younger members as the future. I would warn you against this way of thinking. The church of today is all of the people that the Holy Spirit has gathered together, regardless of gender identification, race, social location, immigration status, and yes regardless of age. The people that God calls into your congregations today are the church of today, not of yesterday or tomorrow. We are the church now.

At St. John, we are a congregation of soon to be retired, recently retired, and well retired people, a church of three, but not six generations. And when I was told by another pastor that we were not a successful church because we have no children in the pews, I confidently replied that our church is filled with well over 80 silver haired children of God every Sunday. Because everyone who walks in our door is loved. Not because they represent some sort of benchmark we are trying to get back to or some type of status we hope they will help us achieve, but because they, whoever they are, just as they are, are a child of God, beloved by the creator of the universe and brought into our community by the Holy Spirit to love and serve as Jesus taught us.

There are many ways we are told that a good and successful church is measured, almost all of these, as we have mentioned, are wrong. The only true measurements of a good and thriving church is how it loves God and neighbors and its members. Anything else is a false measurement. And for those of us who are part of the institutional church, this is a hard reality. We can fail at being the church. And we do this when we fearfully conform to the exclusive practices of the worlds we are a part of instead of trusting God to lead us forward in the life giving and life sustaining work of building God's kingdom here and now.

Second, be the church of All: Being the church now must mean welcoming all people into the church, especially those who our church doctrines have excluded. Jesus invited all children to him, not just those that fit into societal expectations. When we exclude people, we are failing to be the church. When we come up with church rules that close the doors and turn people away, we are the ones who fail to participate in God's holy work, not God and not our neighbors. God is already with them, loving them and upholding them. We however are the ones failing to see Christ and the church before us, and failing to welcome God's desired reality into our buildings, committees, and lives.

The church of today must also teach and make clear that the people of the church are not God's only beloveds. We are told in Matthew⁵ that we should not worry, for as much as God cares for the birds of the air and the lily of the field, so God cares for us. Traditionally this is read as an imperative to not worry, but I challenge the church of today to read it also as reminder that God cares for humanity and the whole of creation, but that humanity does not sit atop God's created world, but has a place in and among it. Being the church now means expanding our understanding of God's creation beyond humanity. With a wider reading, today's church should compel its community to see that when we put humanity's conveniences over the health of all of God's creation, we fail at caring for the others in God's world. As our world groans under the weight that humanity places on it, being the church now means modeling our actions after Christ and seeking to make our burden on the earth light. We must seek to de-center ourselves and willingly inconvenience ourselves for the flourishing and abundance of all of God's creation.

Third, be the church of Change: Being the church now, means not letting fear of change, fear of the unknown, and fear of failure to cause our congregations to wither and die. Being the church now means walking together on a road of change that will upend our understanding and move us into a new way of being. Being the church now means we must be unafraid to look around and see the needs of our neighbors even if this is a hard and painful exercise. Because the longer we live as if life today is not valid or filled with God's presence or God's people, the closer we become to a death from which God will not choose to resurrect us.

We must release ourselves from measurements that used to matter. We must release our death grip on our buildings, our budgets and the number of bodies in the pews and instead cling to Christ with courage and openness to change. Because the hard truth for those of us who work for and in churches is that all of the church buildings could close today and we could all lose our jobs and the church, *God's church* that Body of Christ formed of Jesus' siblings, the created, beloved, children of God, living today, and gathered together by the Holy Spirit, that church would be fine. Because the church isn't our institutions, even when we find God within them, the church is so much more than what we can fit into our precious buildings. When we believe that the ineffable, the all powerful, the life giving God can fit neatly with our church walls we have failed at being the church.

But when we our livelihood comes for the church within the building, when our community comes from the church within the building, when our understanding of God comes from the church within the building what are do we do? We must stop, take a deep breath, and remind ourselves that the church within the building is still church, a blessed, beautiful and sacred part of church just not all the parts of church. Being the church now, must mean understanding that the church, exists within and without the walls of the sanctuary, on and beyond the budget sheets, setting in the pews and in waiting at the bus station. And that being the church means courageously carrying the promises of the sanctuary into the streets everyday

Fourth, be the church of Connection: We cannot be all things to all people and when we try we spread ourselves to thin. The burn out rate for clergy is astronomical. This is the reality here as you face a shortage of clergy to care and shepherd your churches. The old way of thinking would say we need our churches to do more so that we can attract more people. Instead, I believe the church of today will do

⁵ Matthew 6:25-34

less alone and more together. We must think smaller while connecting and trusting wider. Instead of making new programs we reach out into the communities where God has planted us and talk with other churches and organizations and groups to see how we can form partnerships to serve the people around us. We must talk to the churches and groups that we don't want to because they are not like us, because we must show that we believe that all people are children of God, worthy and loved, not just the ones who think and act like us.

This seems easy, but it is deceptively challenging. I served a congregation in New York City and one winter some members of the church wanted to help the unsheltered community in our neighborhood by giving away sleeping bags. The streets of New York are certainly cleaner than have they have been, but they are still littered with pieces of trash mixed with the occasional bit of dog waste to make having a clean sleeping bag a good idea, especially during the fridged winter months. So the youth of the church were charged with collected money, holding fundraisers, and buying over a hundred sleeping bags.

After the collecting and shopping had been done, we all gathered at the church gates on a wintery Sunday afternoon to walk the streets and distribute the sleeping bags. We gave out some, but much to our surprise hardly anyone we met wanted one. We walked for a few hours before heading back to the church more than a little disappointed. But at least we had done some good for the people we met that afternoon, right?

A few weeks later as I walked to my office at the church I was shocked to see, scattered amongst the Starbucks cups and dog waste, one of the sleeping bags we had distributed. There it was, cast aside as a useless piece of trash discarded and forgotten. All I could think about was how much work we had done. Didn't they know we worked so hard to collect the money, buy the sleeping bags and then wrangle all the kids to bring it to them. Especially for them, whoever they were. I couldn't actually remember the names of the people we met I was so upset.

As I stamped all the way to the church that day, I felt indignation that our gift was just thrown away into the streets. But as I continued to pound the pavement, I thought more. I reflected on the fact that our church had never actually asked anyone if they wanted or needed sleeping bags. We had talked with no one who actually lived on the streets about what they needed. We have just thought about what we wanted to do, without any connection or relationship to anyone else. As if to highlight this point, I passed a homeless shelter as I walked. We had not called to ask how we might help them do the work they were already engaged in. Going further down the road, there was another church with a homeless ministry, which we did not reach out to because they are not part of our denomination. And then there were the people lived unsheltered on the streets every day and night, which we never spoken to because we saw them as so different. How could our efforts have been more useful, meaningful, and loving if we had connected with even one of these groups.

We assumed we had to do it all, alone, and we were painfully wrong. Our hardened habits and hubris had blinded us to the presence of partners in being the church all around us. Being the church, means doing better than this.

Churches doing the work of connection will form bonds and then relationships that will foster dialogue between each other to understand who is doing what and where. These relationships will lead to learning about, and appreciation for, the work and ministry of others. With that information churches being present to the needs of the community will be able to then see what they are uniquely able to

offer or where their gifts would be better shared in a partnership with another group. One group might have a building that can be used for activities beyond worship. Another might have a kindergarten program for local children that needs more space. Working together, these communities can use both of their resource to serve a wider group.

Many people are starved for connection. Can you work alongside another church to help offer support and connection to people within so many blocks of the church? What would you ask your neighbors if you were not afraid to knock on their door?

Do your neighbors need help getting heat pumps or language classes or food? How might you help them if you were not afraid of being inconvenienced yourself? What new group would you meet if you partnered with the people who are already engaged in this work?

This type of connecting work requires us to let go of our need for recognition. It requires that we not seek the acclaim or fame that comes with big flashy work. We must let go of the fear that no one will know that we were involved and instead trust that God will take our service and, like a mustard seed, make it grow until all the birds of the air may find rest amongst our branches.

If we seek to be a church that present, open to all, able to change, and ready for the building of connections, we will be opening our faith to being relevant, diverse, dynamic, and at the center of life for many.

When my four-year-old pulled on my sleeve in that church basement and wanted to know why we had to be there on a Saturday, she wanted to know why church needed to interrupt her play time. It is time that for all of us, being God's church, interrupts our playtime. The church today cannot let fear prevent us from letting go of the past, extending radical welcome, allowing our faith-filled convictions to lead us to advocate for change, and drawing relationships deep and wide. Jesus calls his followers to love their neighbors, to welcome the stranger, to feed the hungry, care for the poor, and visit the imprisoned. He does not call for the care of buildings over caring for people, or for filled pews over fulfilled hearts, or for healthy cashflows over health communities.

We must fearlessly trust God to be God, and live as if all we proclaim is true today just as we believe it was in the past for all people everywhere. And when we are so worried that the church will not survive, we need to remember that the church does not survive based on our actions. That is hubris. The church survives because God wills it to survive. God has willed that, God is willing that, and we trust that God continues to will that in the days ahead. Why did we need to be in a basement on a Saturday? Because God is willing, calling, curating a church that is present, opened up, able to change, and building connections and I am committed to being a follower and a church leader of that God. May you join me as we fear not and go be that welcoming, brave, and honest church that God is calling us to be now!