

“The State of the Church”  
Matthew 5:13-16

Pastor Liz Miller  
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I've watched a lot of State of the Union speeches this week in anticipation of our Annual Meeting and my self-proclaimed State of the Church address. From the President to Governor Whitmer to Billy Porter's LGBTQ State of the Union to Mayor Andy Schor's State of Lansing address, there has been one shared theme: they are all very, very serious. No time for laughter. No time for joy. Even worse: hours and hours filled with words and no singing! Apparently reflecting on the year and anticipating the year to come is very serious business. With all due respect to the politicians, this pastor thinks they missed an important opportunity.

I have a theory that more people would tune in and the pundits would have a different spin the next day if there was singing in the State of the Union addresses and rebuttals. As we know from our choir, music helps us hear words in different ways. It activates our brains and connects the logical left side with the creative right side. We need more music in our speeches and addresses, in our business meetings and budget hearings.

I propose we incorporate more music into our meetings, starting with the Annual Meeting today. It turns out our hymnal has several rich options to guide us in the endeavor.

When the Nominating Committee makes their report we can sing a verse from hymn #11 “Bring Many Names.” The Safety Subcommittee's report should be preceded by hymn #471 “What a Covenant” for the assurance we will be “safe and secure from all alarms.”

When it seems like debate or comments on an agenda item has gone on too long, perhaps we can sing hymn #523 “Someone Asked the Question” and if that doesn’t work we can fade into hymn #345 “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.”

If the meeting gets particularly contentious, we could pause to sing hymn #437 “We Shall Not Give Up the Fight (We have only started),” or hymn #544 “If I Have Been a Source of Pain, O God.”

If at any point in the Annual Meeting you get lost or don’t know what we’re talking about, feel free to break into a verse of hymn #514 “Over My Head.” Finally, the conclusion of the meeting should be followed by hymn #242 “The Strife Is Over, the Battle Done.”

Unfortunately if we were to incorporate all of these hymns, our Annual Meeting would last well past dinnertime, so you’ll have to stick around after worship to see which one we picked to kick off the meeting.

I think it is important to keep a degree of levity in the business of the church. Even in the business there is joy to be shared, especially when we are making decisions that seem particularly impactful. Today we will be hearing from our Safety Subcommittee with recommendations for critical safety enhancements in our church like fire alarms and a secure lock system, recommendations that come with a significant financial commitment. We’ll also be voting to move our Faith Community Nurse from a pilot staff position to a permanent staff position, another significant financial commitment. We’ll be voting on an overall budget that reflects, you guessed it, a significant financial commitment.

As soon as we start talking finances the joy tends to drain out of the room. We get so focused on the “how will we do that” and the “there’s already not enough money” that we forget what a gift it is that we continue to expand and build upon our ministries, that increased costs

come with increased commitment to our shared future, and that is always good news. If we allow ourselves to spend too much time in the stress of finances, we miss all the joy that can also be found.

In a time when churches are shrinking, Edgewood's pledgers remain steady and add new givers each year. In a time when we lament the loss of a generation of significant givers that sustained our budget for many decades, we rejoice when those same givers choose to support Edgewood through planned and estate giving, ensuring their legacy of generosity continues. In a time when other churches are deciding whether to sell the building or merge with another congregation, Edgewood is wondering how we might grow our budget because our dreams for our ministries keep growing, not shrinking. The stresses that we are worried about are very real, but they are present because we know that God is still at work in our midst - we just need to strategize for how the money will follow the vision.

The worst feeling in the world would be to serve a congregation that is sitting on a giant pile of cash and have no idea how to use it. The best feeling in the world is to serve a congregation that has significant hopes for spreading a message of love and working for justice in our community, so much so that we hope the finances will catch up with our vision. There is never going to be a moment when everything is exactly equal - when our dreams line up with our bottom dollar cent for cent. And that is okay. It's always give and take, and our commitment to who we are called to be has to be greater than our fear of financial conversations.

Speaking of who we are called to be, this past year was the first full year we dove into our Communities of Calling initiative. Edgewood has begun exploring in earnest what it means to be called by God, to use our gifts in our homes, workplaces, and wider community, and what vocation means whether you are working a job to pay the bills or you have the privilege to

follow your passion into a profession. Our leadership team for this initiative continues to get questions about what it means or how we will tangibly see it at work in the congregation, but the truth is it is an initiative that is being woven into the fabric of who we are. We are learning a new language of vocation together through immersion, not sitting in a classroom where a teacher is reciting vocabulary words and sending us home with worksheets to fill out.

Last fall when we gathered together with our Muslim neighbors at the Islamic Center and then in our own church for two full evenings of incredible food, rich conversation, and deepening relationships, that was our congregation learning to live into our call to love our neighbor. To love your neighbor, you have to know them - their hopes and fears, their faith and their families. Many folks walked away that night saying, “I got to know someone in a new way,” or “In listening to someone’s story, even though it was different than my own, I learned something about myself and my own purpose in life.”

Likewise, the small groups that have been offered throughout the year are an opportunity to reflect on our individual calls - how might God have equipped me to serve in the world and what are the barriers that stand in the way of answering that call? These types of questions and more are at the heart of these small group experiences. Our small groups are spaces where folks can wrestle, question, doubt, lament, and rejoice together - all while digging deeper into their sense of spirituality and how they see God at work in their life.

This spring our church is going on retreat! You are all invited whether you are a member or a friend or a new visitor who thinks spending the weekend with the folks in this room seems like an adventure you want to be a part of! The only thing you have to do to be included is register, and soon so that we can confirm our rooms! On this retreat we will do a deep dive into calling and vocation - looking at how God calls us no matter what part of the lifespan we are

currently in, and how those different calls can complement, support, challenge, and inspire us, especially when we come together. We are a community called to take time apart, to take time together, and I hope you will all join in. I anticipate that our Communities of Calling initiative has been and will continue to be a source of new life and joy in our congregation.

Another joy is our continued covenant with our wider denomination, the United Church of Christ. In particular this year it has been amazing to see them become a national leader in medical debt relief. For years our denomination has been on the forefront of advocacy for healthcare reform, and it is now powerful to see that continued advocacy be matched with impactful giving in the form of over \$5 million dollars of debts wiped out. The United Church of Christ understands the necessity of both/and - advocating to change our systems AND bringing relief and care to those who cannot afford to wait for change to happen. I'm proud of our denomination for continuing to be a loud voice on justice and to back up their words with powerful actions.

I'm starting to realize that State of the Union addresses are so long because there is a lot to cover. I'm not going to try to capture it all, but I want to say that this is a day for celebrating the church, all we have done, and all we will do. When we come to this church, we enter through the front doors as individuals, but when we are here, something shifts. When you belong to a church, you become a part of something that is bigger than you, that is a part of you but also not just about you or your ideas or your perspective.

It's a place of compromise, a place of teamwork, a place where we can do hard things because we know we are not alone, a place where we know we will disappoint each other and are then called to practice forgiveness. This church is a place where together we build something that is greater than any one of us could do alone. The truth is, when I think about all the events that

are happening in the world or are conspiring to possibly happen in the world in the coming year, I believe that we need the church.

I believe we need this church. We need a place where we can bring our fears and name them out loud. We need a place where we can speak our most painful truths and hear someone reply, “I thought I was the only one who felt that way!” We need a place where we can be reminded of the joy of connecting with people outside of our generation, outside of our social circles, outside of our comfort zones, and where together we can find common ground. We need a place where we are inspired and challenged to work for justice, to choose love, and to find our way back to joy. We need this church more than ever.

This year I’ve got a song in my heart for Edgewood and I hope it comes out loud and clear. I’m singing hymn #50 “I Sing the Praise of Love Almighty,” hymn #36 “To God Compose a Song of Joy,” and hymn #38 “Lift Up Your Hearts.” I’m belting out hymn #565 “God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending,” and hymn #43 “Love, Divine, All Loves Excelling.”

Most of all, I’m singing hymn #524 “This Little Light of Mine, I’m Gonna let it shine.” The Gospel of Matthew says, “You ARE the salt of the earth. You ARE the light of the world.” You don’t have to change or upgrade or grow to become the light. You don’t have to transform or add more flavor to become the salt. You already are. The church isn’t my church - it doesn’t belong to any of us - it is God’s church. But the light of God radiates through each one of us here, and it is up to us to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.