

STATE OF THE CHURCH ADDRESS 2006 **“From Faithfulness to Fruitfulness”**

*“I know all the things you do,
and I have opened a door for you that no one can close.”*

Rev. 3: 8

*“When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples.
This brings great glory to my Father.”* John 15: 8

In the book of Revelation, John writes of a vision he sees about heaven. He describes Jesus in all his glory and majesty, seated on the throne next to his father. In the second chapter he writes a very personal message to 7 of the main churches in the Middle East at that time. These were fairly prominent churches, but by no means the only churches in the area. Why these churches were included and others left off the list, I don't know. But what I do know is that the message sent to each church is personal and descriptive, incisive and insightful. Some have attempted to make these 7 churches represent the 7 periods of time since Jesus left the earth. I'm not smart enough to figure that all out, but what I stumbled across this week was the thought the outline of these letters is very consistent, and what if Jesus had included Bismarck FUMC on his list? What might he say to us in a letter sent...today? So I'm going to run with that idea, using the outline applied to each of the 7 churches of Revelation, I'd like to visit with you about my opinion about the state of FUMC as we launch into 2006.

There are 5 distinct parts of each of these 7 letters and lets begin to explore them now.

1. AUTHORITY

The first obvious part of the letters is that each contains a salutation and greeting from Jesus. Here are some examples:

This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands...this is the message from the one who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive...this is the message from the one with the sharp two-edged sword...this is the message from the Son of God, whose eyes are like flames of fire, whose feet are like polished bronze...

this is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of god and the seven stars...this is the message from the one who is holy and true, the one who has the key of David.

Say whatever else you want to...the author is attempting to get the readers/listeners attention by mentioning the authority with which he writes. He is not writing this on his own behalf; these are not his personal thoughts on the situations in these churches; these are the very words from God that Jesus has employed John to write. These are not John's words, these are God's Word, and they are words of authority.

Often when we pray we submit ourselves to the Authority of God's Word. And when we do we are declaring that we will not be governed by the democratic will of the majority; we will not be governed or driven by the personal preference of any one person, group or PREACHER; we will not be dictated to by the success or failure of main street business principles or practices; we will not be governed only by what seems right unto us, nor by what some consulting guru, or denominational executive suggests, nor by what is currently fashionable, nor by what worked or didn't work in the past, nor by any imagination of our heart, mind or will. We will be governed, and we will be driven, as long as I am the pastor here, by the authority of God's Holy Word. If we fail at our business, and remain true to that submission, I can live with that. But if we succeed or fail; by any other means, I will ultimately be held accountable, and I won't be able to live with that.

2. AFFIRMATION

The second thing you note in each letter is a mention of some positive aspect of each churches life or ministry. Either John or Jesus was a good psychologist, knowing that it's good to start any conversation or evaluation by noting the things being done well. Here are some examples:

I know your deeds! Hard work, perseverance, an intolerance of wickedness, suffering, faithfulness, love, a reputation for life, fidelity to God's word.

There is much that I believe Jesus would affirm in us today if we were blessed to be included in his "Letters to the Church in Bismarck." I believe he would commend us for our fiscal responsibility and faithful stewardship. We are doing remarkably well financially, and that is a good, healthy sign.

We are catching on to the team based approach to ministry. This church has moved beyond ministry being done by the preacher, or even the staff; to ministry being shared by members, staff, and even some who are not yet members!

We are moving our ministry beyond our walls. Not only as a response to some glaring space limitations; but because we are making an intentional (albeit scary) effort to do ministry where the needs dictate! Many of our elderly are currently residing at Missouri Slope, so we have taken at least one UMW circles there; and our Slice of Love program there as well. We are doing many things well, and I believe these are just three representative examples. I could easily spend the rest of the morning tooting our own horn, but note Jesus just mentions these, and moves right on. I will too!

3. ALLEGATIONS

Jesus, and his ghostwriter John, move right on to mentioning some glaring examples of some things that each church could do better, and includes a number of rather stern warnings about not heeding this advice. Again, a few examples:

You've forsaken your first love; repent!...you're going to suffer...you're tolerating immorality...you're fooling with legalism and flirting with Satan's ways...your deeds are incomplete; wake up!...you're neither hot nor cold...you're blind to reality, to the truth.

I also believe Jesus would not let us off the hook, but would gently and lovingly remind us (ok, maybe not so gently) that we have some challenges yet to face.

We must answer the question with great intention; 'Are our best days ahead of us or behind us?'

I believe we must be careful not to fall in love with our fiscal responsibility, and somehow begin to worship our 'responsible' bottom line and forget that every dollar raised and spent at First Church is money from God to reach people for Jesus, and make those people mature, fully functioning disciples of Jesus! We are not in business to bankroll equity, or even finish in the black, but to reach people for Jesus, and make them disciples of Jesus!

We must realistically face the challenge that many of our 'flock' are underemployed in the work of the kingdom. We all have gifts, we all have been called, and we are all ministers. Let's get to work!

We have a wonderful challenge this year to reconnect to our past. We are celebrating this year, the 50th anniversary in this building. That in and of itself should be enjoyable, but I believe God would desire more than just a nostalgic look back. We will be unveiling a new mug with a logo that I believe captures the whole of what this challenge entails. Its logo reads: "From the Roots of our Past, grows the Fruit of our future!" This challenge might involve decisions we make regarding the use of the Land we will shortly have paid off. This challenge will involve recapturing the best of our EUB heritage, the best of John Wesley's United Methodism, and the unlimited potential the people of this church have for impacting the communities of Bismarck and Mandan. There are open doors in front of us, that no one can shut...and it's time to walk through! We have been a faithful church longer than in this building...I believe it is our time to move from that faithful past into a 'fruitful' future. It is not about becoming bigger, for bigger sake, better for being better's sake...but moving our faithfulness into the harvest of fruitfulness. We have produced some fruit...it's time to begin producing "MUCH" fruit! I would propose this be the theme, vision, marching order of our year: "From faithfulness to fruitfulness."

4. AGREEMENT

A most interesting discovery, in most, but not all of the individual letters includes this plea for agreement, this reminder that what has been said involves an individual choice; an agreement, a verbal, physical, and spiritual affirmation that we will do our part to make amends for what is wrong, and work to make things right. Here are the examples:

He who has an ear, let him hear...to him who overcomes and does my will...be earnest and repent...behold I stand at the door and knock, whoever opens will have me for a guest.

In each address to the churches Jesus calls for agreement. He begs for listening ears, obedient over coming, earnest and repentant following; and believers who will open the door when he stands knocking. I doubt he expected unanimity of thought, or probably even belief; knowing there is room in the body of Christ for difference of opinions, and various understandings. But he seems to be calling for a single-minded agreement, and a whole hearted commitment to allowing God to have his way in our individual lives, and also in our church!

I'm not asking or expecting blind allegiance to anything I might dream up or propose, but I am fully asking and intentionally expecting blind allegiance to everything God reveals to us in the open door that is before us! We can disagree on many things, but we must agree on those things that make us Christian, and those things that God tells us to do. We might even disagree on how we are to do some of those things, but when decisions are prayerfully and responsibly made, we all must agree to follow.

5. ASSURANCE

Lastly, John and Jesus end their letters with a litany of assurances, promises if you will; of what will happen to those who commit their agreement. Here is the list:

I will give the right to eat from the tree of life...I will give some of the hidden manna...a white stone with a new name on it...authority over the nations,...a name which will never be blotted from the book of life and which will be acknowledged before the father and the angels...be made a pillar in the house of God...a seat next to Jesus near the throne of God.

It gives me goose bumps just to read that list. Eating from the tree of life; receiving a new name; sitting next to Jesus near the throne of God. There is a reward for faithfulness, and a reward for fruitfulness! We may never again have the opportunity that is before us today! Oh, I'm sure we'll do our best to always be fiscally responsible, we'll conduct significant ministries, we'll continue to reach people for Jesus, and make them disciples, but I believe 2006 may well go down in First Church's history as a turnaround year, a watershed year. Why?

It won't happen because I want it too, or because I have dramatically declared it will happen. It won't happen just because we want it too. It will happen when and if we pray harder and more intentionally than we have every prayed. It will happen when and if we individually and corporately continue to submit ourselves to God's ultimate authority. It will happen as we each live out our Christian lives, faithfully, yes...but also fruitfully. Being authentic and real Christians in our church, in our homes, in our schools, in our offices, in the market place, in our community, in our world! It will happen, and when it does...then we'll catch a glimpse of what heaven will be like.

I'm ready to move...from faithfulness to fruitfulness. Let's GO!

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