

2 Thessalonians 3:6-18
Matthew 16:13-20
January 22, 2012

On This Rock

Article II section three of the Constitution states that; “the President of the United States shall from time to time give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” Most Presidents of our country have turned in a report to the Congress, but every President since Woodrow Wilson has given that report in the form of an address given personally to the congress. This Tuesday President Obama will address our congress and nation.

While you are not the Congress and I am not the President and neither of us is a powerful or important as those people; it has become my practice to give a State of the Church Sermon every January in worship. I dare say our popularity ratings are much higher than theirs. Next Sunday is our annual meeting and at that time we conduct the standard business at 6PM. I hope you will be present and I hope you will attend the Pot Luck dinner beforehand at 5PM.

In the Gospel reading Jesus speaks about the church and tells Peter, his lead disciple that he is the rock upon which the church will be built. There is a word play in the Greek that we who are English speakers

likely miss. The name Peter is pronounced *Petros* in Greek. Actually *Petros* is a nickname that literally means stone. Peter, *Petros* we certainly could figure that out even if we were reading the Greek. What we may or may not know is that the Greek word for rock is *petra*. So *Petros* is the *petra* upon which the church will be built. Not only is Jesus commissioning Peter here but he has a little poetry on his lips. It is clear that Jesus sees Peter as a solid Person. Peter is the first disciple to recognize Jesus as Messiah and Peter is very close to Jesus and Jesus has plans for him. Peter is the foundation and the base of the church. Our sisters and Brothers in the Catholic Church see this text as one form of proof that Peter was the first Pope. We in the Protestant church tend to understand this text as a profession of the strong faith of Peter. Some people understand the Gospels as history books but the Gospels themselves claim that they are written so that we might have faith. Matthew is saying to us who are in the church; We are the Rock upon which the church is built. We are the foundation for faith in the world.

That being the case, how do you think your church has done in this past year? Have we been faithful? Are we a healthy congregation? Are we building on a strong foundation? Well one measure of a church is its membership and Ark and Dove grew by three members in 2011 from 268

to 271. Any decent statistician would tell you that 3 out of 268 is a pretty tiny percentage. Statistically insignificant I would say. Hey at least we didn't have a net loss. Another measure of a congregation is its worship attendance and our average worship attendance dropped by one from 196 per Sunday to 195; Also a statistically insignificant margin. Our membership and worship attendance is either steady or stagnant depending on your world view.

So what other numbers could we inspect? Well we could go to giving and if we took a quick look at the 2010 and 2011 Mission and Ministry fund giving we would see that giving in 2011 was almost 14 percent higher than giving in 2010. We went from \$335,000 to \$381,000. By any analysis, that is awesome. It is not statistically insignificant but rather it is a barometer of appreciably increased generosity and a good foundation for ministry, especially if you take into account that membership and worship attendance were steady or stagnant depending on your world view.

We could also take a look at our building fund and there we find that giving went from \$145,000 to \$158,000 a nine percent increase. So both of our funds showed a healthy dose of increased giving.

But the Lord Giveth and the Lord Taketh away and we ran two stewardship campaigns this year. Our building fund pledges made in May,

which are for three years, were about ten percent lower than three years ago. Our forecast for total giving to our Mission Ministry Fund is about three percent higher. We had hoped to add another much needed half time administrative position to our staff but we were unable to take a leap of that length or size. My sense of the giving and pledging is that even though we didn't get all that we hoped for; our overall three year total trend is modestly in the positive direction and with the level of anxiety there is in our nation about budgets; that perhaps is a solid statement of faith.

So, so far we are painting a really steady or stagnant picture here about Ark and Dove. Aren't there any bright spots in our congregation? Well for one thing, some people in moments of fatigue were heard mumbling and rumbling that it's the same old same old 80 20 80 20 thing. Twenty percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. This didn't sit well with some of our members who were serving on the Long Range Planning Team and so we worked with our church consultant and we counted all the leaders in our church. We counted Team Leaders, Small Group leaders, Worship Leaders, Sunday School teachers and LOGOS Leaders, Elders and Deacons and we came up with over 120 people. 46% of the members of our congregation are leaders and 80% of our congregation is regularly involved with worship and education. We have an 80 20 split all right but

it is the inverse of the common assumption. 80% of our people are moderately or highly active. On top of that our worship attendance of 195 is a very high percentage of our membership of 271. Most churches in our nation who are our size have a worship attendance of about 75 or 80.

I want to call attention to some other bright spots in our congregation. There are lots of good things going on but these are foundational ministries upon which relationships and faith are built.

We have this women's group that meets on Saturday mornings – they have been going for a few years now and call themselves "Faithful Women." They have light moments, deep conversations and strong relationships and they are open and welcoming to new members. They usually read books but I hear they are watching a movie real soon.

This year for the third time our congregation working with Arundel House of Hope, hosted the Winter Relief Homeless Shelter an extraordinary effort to house homeless men in the cold months of Maryland. Well over a hundred members put in over a thousand hours of discipleship. The impact upon our community and our church was both powerful and weighty.

We have this every other Wednesday evening group of parents with young children. They pool resources for childcare right here in the church.

They read books about parenting, swap stories, support one another and even sometimes talk about the book. They are very welcoming of new couples, or singles with young children and if only one parent of a couple can come that's just fine.

You come here on a Tuesday evening and you can't find a place to sit and you can barely hear yourself think because our kids are so excited to be here. That's because our awesome Logos program takes up the whole building until about 7:45. We share Bible study, we work on worship planning, we enjoy recreation and we share dinner together and the best thing is developing close relationships with kids and adults who are not in your family. LOGOS people say that faith is more caught than taught and Logos is for children, youth and adult leaders of all ages.

Lastly our newest bright spot is our Godly Play Class at 9:30 on Sunday morning. As I have mentioned in Sermons before our second and third grade children are experiencing deep and moving spiritual formation and feelings of belonging. We have plans to expand to fourth and fifth grade at 9:30 and Pastor Michelle and I would like to offer this at 11:00 Sunday School but we need to train teachers. If you would like to have a deep impact on the faith life of a child, build a foundation for faith, perhaps

you could be trained in Godly Play by Tina Anthis and Cindy Oquist our Godly play leaders.

Behind the scenes our elders, team leaders and Long rang Planning Team have been working very hard this year to create systems to undergird our ministry. When you get to be our size, which the church experts call medium sized, you have to establish systems for things that were done spontaneously and informally back in the day when we were smaller. There has been huge progress in our Admin, Worship and Discipleship Ministries. In fact we are dividing our Discipleship Ministry into two Ministries in February and we will be talking about that at the congregational meeting.

In the year to come 2013 I think it is essential that we add more support staff in the church office. Our pledging was not adequate to take this step and really leaves heavy duty employee tasks to certain members of the church.

Lastly, I would like to point out that many of our bright spots or foundational ministries at Ark and Dove stem from the relationships developed in small groups. I would encourage all of you to read the Richard Rohr book Falling Upward and join one of our March Lenten small

groups. Each group will meet four times. I think these Lenten Groups could make a real difference in your life.