

Discerning Our Call  
Jeremiah 29:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:11-18  
June 9, 2024 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

This morning, I want to create a chain, and I hope you can follow me, link-by-link. There will be a test at the end.

**Link #1:** God has plans for this church. The prophet Jeremiah tells us, “I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” That was a promise to the people of Israel, in exile in Babylon, a people without hope, feeling abandoned and betrayed by their whole understanding of God, the universe, and everything – a people with no way home and no way forward, a people in despair with no hope for the future. To these people, God says, “I have plans. I’ve got this. Trust me.”

The lovely thing about our sacred text is that so many of the messages there are timeless. We can know that God is speaking directly to our times and our lives, too. God is speaking to this church right now: “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

At our last congregational meeting, our research team gave you some information that may have felt shocking, or at least disturbing. Solo pastors are expensive. Lots of churches are searching now, and we have lost two seminaries in the area (Andover Newton and Bangor Theological School) that used to provide graduates to New Hampshire churches. The cost of housing is prohibitive for many candidates, and there just aren’t a lot of candidates out there right now. All of that may have taken your breath away. But the research team also shared a lot of the ways that churches are adapting – reducing the pastor’s time commitment so that they can have a second job, pastor-sharing with another church, lay leadership, various hybrid options that combine some of these pieces. Somewhere in there, if we could just ferret it out, is God’s plan for this church – a plan to prosper and not to harm, a plan with hope for the future. But how do we figure out what that plan is?

**Link #2:** In the Reformed tradition, of which we are a part, we believe that we can discern God’s will through earnest prayer. We believe that – if our hearts are open and we listen for God’s desires and not our own – the Holy Spirit can act even in a committee meeting or a congregational vote. Now, I have to tell you that sometimes – often – committee meetings are just business. Sometimes they are just necessary work. Sometimes I need to reread and rewrite Romans 8:38-39, where Paul says, “For I am 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 – not even committee meetings – will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Sometimes the work of the church can be deadly dull.

But sometimes – sometimes! – the Spirit joins us at the table. Sometimes the Spirit whispers to us – “Listen!” “Check this out!” “Look at this a new way...” “Hear that quiet voice. She has something important to say.” Sometimes the work of the church can be filled with wonder and joy and love. I have seen it happen. Sometimes God can act, even through the votes we take. We have to pray for that. We have to believe it can happen. The way we make decisions together can be deadly dull, or it can breathe new life into us. Pray for life.

**Link #3** – The Bible tells us how we are to treat one another in threatening or challenging times – and any time of change is both threatening and challenging, so let’s just assume that is where we are. 1 Thessalonians tells us, “Encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.... Respect those who labor among you.” [That originally meant pastors, but I would say it applies equally to our elected leaders, board members, and committee members. They do such good and important work, and they deserve our respect for their decisions.]

1 Thessalonians also says, “Encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.” And then it concludes, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.”

Well! That sounds easy enough, right? Encourage one another. Build up each other. Treat one another with respect. Be patient with all God’s children, even in congregational meetings. Rejoice. Pray. Give thanks. It sounds easy, but sometimes, when it seems like the membership is not coming to the right answer – meaning the answer you brought with you into the meeting – it can be tempting to abandon all that patience and encouragement and rejoicing and prayer. Encourage one another anyway. Be patient with one another anyway. Be open to the movement of the Spirit, even through the words of someone who wants to go a different direction from the one you had in mind. Pray without ceasing. Rejoice.

**Link #4** – We made a promise to one another and to God a couple decades ago, after a very traumatic conflict in the life of this church. We renew that promise every year at our annual meeting. But I think we may have let its meaning slip from view in recent years. It is time to resurrect it now. We promised (and I’m paraphrasing here):

- We will listen, acknowledge, and strive to understand each other’s viewpoint and be respectful and courteous toward one another. We will encourage all to feel free to express opinions.
- We will support the decisions of the majority of the membership and carry them out with integrity.

Our Promise actually sounds pretty similar to the passage from 1 Thessalonians, doesn’t it?

So, let’s review the links in our chain:

- Link #1 - God has a plan for this church, a plan for our good, a plan to provide hope and a future.
- Link #2 – God can work even through a congregational meeting to reveal God’s plan.
- Link #3 – We act as the Body of Christ in challenging times by treating one another with respect and encouragement, by building one another up, by praying without ceasing.
- Link #4 – We have promised to one another and to God that we will listen to one another for deep understanding of other viewpoints. We will treat one another with courtesy and respect. We will encourage one another and support the decisions of the majority. We will carry out those decisions with integrity, even – or especially – if they are not the decisions we ourselves might have preferred.

I said there would be a test at the end of this sermon, and you know that test comes in the congregational meeting that will follow this service. I won’t be there to grade your performance, but God will be present, watching, listening, whispering to you, ready to blow through the room like a mighty wind or call you out into the streets to do God’s work in a new way. I charge you to pray earnestly for God’s help and guidance, to stop and pray again if the meeting seems to be going off-track, to listen deeply to one another and to expect God to speak through the least likely person. I charge you to enter the meeting with curiosity and depart with wonder. The very best sign would be for all of you to leave the meeting saying, “Wow! I had no idea THAT was what God has in mind for us! Cool!”

I know you all to be people of good hearts, and loving spirits, ready to help one another at every turn. I know you love this church and want it to continue to serve as the Body of Christ in this community for many generations yet to come. I have faith in God. And I am so curious to learn how God will act through you this morning.

So, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen