

Because of You Our Church Changes Lives

Isaiah 43:1-3a, 15-19

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Isaiah 43:1-3a, 15-19

But now thus says the Lord he who created you, O Jacob he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Church changes lives.

Every one of us has a story, or even stories, on how the church has changed our lives. Perhaps it was a childhood Sunday school song that taught you about how much Jesus loves you. Maybe it was a sense of belonging to God, belonging to a welcoming community, when you were struggling with teen awkwardness and insecurity. Perhaps you felt the sudden inspiration and wisdom of the Holy Spirit just when you needed it most. Perhaps the 23rd psalm wrapped you in mercy in the rawness of your grief. Perhaps you found your own story echoing in the stories of our faith ancestors. Perhaps a youth group introduced you to new friends. Perhaps in a pastoral prayer you found the comfort and peace you were silently seeking. Perhaps the church is where you discovered your passion and action for a social justice concern. Perhaps the church is where you found forgiveness when you could not forgive yourself. Perhaps the church is where you learned to share the graces of generosity and service. Most likely the church is where you felt the old of your life pass away and you became a new creation in Christ.

The very purpose of the church is to change lives. The body of Christ is sent out as ambassadors of Christ to live out, to live into, the Great Commission as the mission statement of the Church. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have

commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”ⁱ The very mission of the church is the task given by God for the people of God to accomplish in the world.

The church has always been about changing lives and hearts and minds and situations in a gospel response to the needs and the challenges of the world, and in joyful gratitude for the blessings and love of God.

We are a part of the church for all of these reasons because they matter to us. They tell our faith story, and our place in the story.

Our church changes lives.

We earth this centuries old and world-wide mission of the church to our own church--- to the people who have gathered as Smith Church in Hillsboro, NH for nearly 200 years. We are not here just because of the well-known clocktower or because it is conveniently located, but because here—in our prayers, in our mission and outreach, in our worship, in this sanctuary, in our faith seeking and exploring, in our offerings, in our ways of being connected to the community and beyond--we want to be a part of how Smith Church changes lives—our lives and the lives of others.

Smith Church is our spiritual home. As Frederick Buechner wisely said, “For some people, going to church is going home. In a very profound sense, I would say the same thing. Home is where Christ is.”ⁱⁱ In our church home we find a connection to Christ in the ways we can best understand and resonate with. It is the place and the time in our lives when we can hear God say to us, “I have called you by name, you are mine.” Here is where we gather, worship and live with others in the light of God’s redemptive love.

We are at home in a church which is active inside and outside our walls, that welcomes everyone just as they are, that practices an open table on Communion Sunday, that offers care and support and a place for many people in personally challenging times, a place that stretches seniors bodies in exercise and preschoolers voices in song, a home that welcomes the youth of the community for their Monday night church life and little ones to a monthly worship service for them in their pajamas. We are a church where all God’s children have a voice in the choir and where we share the offerings of our time, talent and treasure for the work of the ministry of reconciliation so that all things may one day put in the right order as God sees it and calls us all to see it as well.

Because of you our church changes lives.

Because of you our church changes lives. The UCC theme for the Stewardship Campaign this year emphasizes our unique, individual role in the life of the church—the wider Church and Smith Church. Because of you—and not ‘you’ in a self-centered, pat-on-the-back way, but as an opportunity to step back, to pause, to reflect, on that phrase in your own life. What have you done, what do you do, what do you donate, what will you pledge this year so that Smith Church, so that the church, has and will continue to change lives? Our gifts, our pledges, are forces of grace, goodness and generosity that change lives with hope, help and healing.

The global mosaic on the bulletin cover this week symbolizes the ‘you’ for each one of us. What looks like a map of the world is actually a mosaic of individual faces. It takes all of them, every single one of them, to make the picture complete. One missing person and it is incomplete, ineffective. One missing piece and the whole puzzle is incomplete, ineffective.

As we enter the Stewardship season and begin to look ahead to where God is beckoning us in 2024, I invite you to reflect on how it is that ‘because of you our church changes lives.’ What does that mean for you?

In your bulletin, in the upcoming Digital Steeple, and in the KYP, there are opportunities to consider this question. I invite you to write or email me your thoughts, and collectively yet anonymously if you would like, together we will create the Nov 19 Stewardship sermon. With so much awareness yet so many hopes, plans and dreams that began at the Oct 7 retreat, and will be shared with everyone, as because of you Smith Church can continue to change lives. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 28: 19-20

ⁱⁱ https://www.azquotes.com/author/2133-Frederick_Buechner/tag/church