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FCC's Vision: Re-Claim and Re-Commit III. Mixed Feelings

(Ezra 3:10-13 NRSV) "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; 11 and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away."

Neither Barbara or I have had occasion to say it for a long time now. But when our four children were small, we probably said it at least once a month – even though it was one of those things my parents used to say to me that I self-righteously swore *!* would never say to my kids (even though my mother only smiled when I would assert that, since she knew better.) What is it? The sentence, "*Someone's going to start crying soon.*" You see, our children would get to playing and something would strike one of them as funny and he or she would start giggling, and then, like a fast-spreading virus, all of them would be giggling and laughing at the top of their lungs, usually accompanied by rough-housing. And that's when Barbara or I would often say, as if it would make any actual difference to their behavior, "*Someone is going to start crying soon.*" Usually we were right, because one child's high-pitched giggle and laughter would suddenly slide right into high-pitched sobbing, and the spirited rough-housing

turned into more fight than fun and then two or three of them would make that sudden switch from laughing to lament, from carousing to crying.

This is but one example of how seemingly contradictory human emotions are actually often closely tied together. For example, we say “I didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry.” I always enjoyed John Mellencamp’s sometimes accurate if ungrammatically titled song “Hurts So Good.” And of course every one of us has had something strike us so funny, so hilarious, that we laughed until indeed we cried. Psychologists tell us that pleasure and pain, laughter and tears **are** linked more closely together than we sometimes realize, and that is particularly the case when the occasion for our emotion is something about which we feel strongly.

All of that is why I find myself so very intrigued with that line in this morning’s scripture that describes the Hebrew people’s reaction, having returned from 70 years of exile to their homeland in Jerusalem, to the work that had begun to rebuild their Temple: *“many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people **could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping....**”* Did you hear it? They couldn’t tell the difference between laughing and crying.

We are looking this month at First Christian’s Vision and Ministry statement and are seeking to re-claim it and re-commit to it as it calls us to be a people of radical hospitality and joyful generosity, as it presumes and presupposes that in order to be and do the things God has in store for us that we can and will grow back to being a

congregation – as we were not that long ago – of 300, 350, 400 in worship. But we have to be honest and say that in the face of that commitment there are times when we too will find it hard to distinguishing between laughing and crying, we too will have mixed feelings about the gains and the losses that growth – re-growth! – will bring to us.

A few years ago, there was a study done of seven Lutheran congregations in southwestern Pennsylvania. These churches were all in the size range of our church, what church consultant Alice Mann calls “transitional size churches,” churches of between 150 and 250 in worship. All of them, also like us, had lots of good things going for them – all of them were in growing communities and all had a steady stream of new visitors. The study showed that 91% of the members of those congregations believed that their church should grow in its membership. When the question was asked a different way, again, a solid 85% said that their congregation should indeed grow in size. But, speaking of mixed feelings, the very same survey also showed that when asked to question “*Do I prefer our church at its current size,*” 93% said “yes.” Moreover, 96% said that everyone’s being able to have a close and personal relationship with the senior pastor was absolutely essential. Do you see the mixed feelings here? We should grow! I wish we would stay the same size! Is this laughing or crying?

Well, to dig into those questions, we have to first of all realize that study after study, and the experience of countless churches, shows that it is simply not possible for any single pastor to have a “close and personal” relationship with more than about 150 worshipers. Experience shows that churches tend over time to drift down to the number of worshipers such a ratio would predict. Which is why it will be so very essential, as

we do re-commit ourselves to growth for the sake of God's mission in this place, that we look in the coming months and years at adding back pastoral staff so that our ratio of pastors to worshipers is where we want it to be in order, as it were, to "staff for growth." The other day Bruce Milhollin was talking with me about what life was like at First Christian Church in the mid-60s when we had 650 in Sunday worship, and he named all the ministers who were on the staff. And you know what? That number of ministers turned out to be pretty much exactly on the mark – about 4+ full-time pastoral staff – that you would expect from that one to one-hundred-fifty ratio!

But – what of those other mixed feelings that that survey of those Pennsylvania showed? What of that very clear commitment to the importance of numerical growth, and at the same time that equally clear **preference** for remaining at the current size? Well, let's take a deeper look, and notice exactly how that second question was asked; folks were asked if they **preferred** to stay the same size as they were now. This is absolutely key. Because there is and ought to be in many things in life a huge difference between **preference** and commitment. There are a whole lot of things that I would prefer that aren't going to happen. There are lots of things that aren't my preference that are going to happen despite those preferences. I would **prefer** that every traffic light on Platte between here and Powers turn green at the moment my car arrives at the intersection. I would **prefer** that my cell phone bill was written in a language that is actually understandable. I would **prefer** that as that our children and grandchildren would never encounter unwarranted hurt or pain or troubles in their lives. In fact, I would **prefer** that for every child!

But, as Mick Jagger so famously sang, “*You can’t always get what you want,*” and, in fact, the issue is not about our **preferences** but about **commitment** to what God is calling us to do even in the face of what we might “prefer,” even in the face of our mixed feelings. You see, I think those folks in those Pennsylvania churches were being dead honest: if it were **JUST** a matter of what they **preferred** (which is, after all, what the question asked), then they’d love to stay the same size. But at the same time they also knew that their **preferences** were not the key to the Kingdom, their **preferences** didn’t trump Jesus’ clear and unambiguous directive to “make disciples,” their **preferences** ought not stymie and stifle the opportunity to grow in numbers so that they could do more for the world, more for those hurting around them. It is the same for us: it is never our **preferences** about church that ought to guide our actions and our words and our commitments; no, it is God’s hopes for us that must be our guide.

As those Hebrew people began re-building that temple in Jerusalem, they were full of mixed feelings, they didn’t know whether they were laughing or crying. But here’s the thing: they didn’t stop building. They didn’t cease their commitment to a new and renewed future. They may even have preferred to stay small, huddled in their comfortableness with one another but they did not. They moved forward in their re-building, in their own version of re-claiming and re-committing. And what about us? I want to get specific and name three very specific things I think that our own re-claiming and re-committing to numerical and spiritual need to mean for us, even in the face of any mixed feelings we may have. These are three rules, if you will, that I believe will

help us move forward in our mission.

First, on every Sunday morning I hope each and every one of us will see that ***the most important, urgent, and essential thing that we will do on that Sunday is to greet and welcome a visitor.*** Yes, you or I may have something we need to be sure to tell another long-time member, and yes, we do so enjoy making sure we speak with as many of our friends as possible and that's a good thing. But if you don't get the chance to convey that message you needed to convey, or you miss speaking to a certain friend, well, there's always the phone, email, or next week. But if you miss greeting and welcoming that visitor who has tentatively come to try us out, then that may be an opportunity gone forever. After all, you have your friends' phone numbers. But we may never get that visitor's phone number or email address if you don't greet them. And, what's more, your word of warm welcome to that person may be exactly what he or she needs to be hearing in that moment of their lives.

Second, we need to ***commit ourselves to being eager and excited to tell new folks of all the good things that are going on at First Christian.*** Yes, there are no doubt some things that vex you at times about life at First Christian; that is the nature of any extended family. *But do not hurry to tell those who wander their way through our doors what those things are.* They don't care, they don't need to know, and they are not searching for another fight to join. No, tell them what God is doing in this place. Tell them about one or two of the events and activities and groups in this place *even if you happen to personally dislike those events!* - after all, it's not about your or my **preferences**, it's about God's hopes for those we can reach out to!

In fact, I'm going to generalize this rule and make it even more encompassing. In any conversation you have with anyone – member or visitor – on Sunday mornings, ***I want us all to discipline ourselves to say something good and complimentary about something going on in the church.*** This isn't exactly your mother's rule that "if you can't say something nice, then don't say anything at all" – because sometimes we **do** need to civilly and prayerfully discuss problems together; but let's not do that on Sunday mornings. For I do believe that our attitudes and our attractiveness to new people will be enhanced if we commit ourselves to first and always speaking a good word about something good that is happening for God in this place.

Third, but it really is first, last, and always, pray. Pray for those that God will lead to us. Pray that we will continue to become even more radically hospitable. Pray that it will not be our preferences that guide our mission, outreach, and evangelism, but God's hopes for what we can yet do in and from this beloved community. Pray that we shall always keep Jesus' Great Commission – "Make disciples" – as near to our hearts and actions as His Great Commandment, "Love one another." For, after all, as always provocative but usually correct church commentator Bill Easum reminds us, "the church is the only institution in society that exists for the sake of those who are not part of that institution." This means that being "members" of First Christian doesn't confer on us extra-special privileges, as if this were a credit union, but only extra-special opportunities and obligations to reach out in Jesus' name to those who are hurting.

I invite us to commit together to doing those three things:

- Sunday morning is for welcoming the stranger. You can call your friends

later in the week.

- Sunday mornings are for sharing with ourselves and others the good news of what is happening at First Christian. Share your concerns or complaints on other occasions.
- Pray always and unceasingly for our mission to be faithful, for God to use us even in the face of our mixed feelings.

Will you join me in those things?