

In recent memory, though, the world has moved at lightning speed. Even if we've tried to stand still, the ground has moved out from under us. The fact is, the world always moves faster than the church. So where does that leave the church? What's the state of our union here at The Federated Church? In a word, the state of our union is 'vibrant.'

The state of the church is this: the world has moved, and we must be part of it. But the state of the church is also this: God has remained constant, so that we can move the world.

Our church has a great past, we've been a strong presence in this community for generations; but we also have a glorious future. We are not like any other church in town. We were planted here, for a reason, and that's no less true now than it was when our forefathers and foremothers founded this congregation 150 years ago. We are called to flourish here; we are called to live out our passion now; we called to be in this world, just not entirely of the world. Our calling hasn't changed, we are just finding new ways to follow God out into the world. The way we do church in the future may not be the way we've done church in the past, but until God's Kingdom comes, our ministry here is not finished.

God is alive and moving in our lives, alive and moving in the world outside these doors. So, we have a choice to make: we can engage the world with Christ's message of hope, or we can retreat inside these doors and ignore the world around us. It's hard work to engage the world; it's much easier to stay focused inside these walls. It's challenging to hear God's voice and God's call amid the noise of the world. It's going to take all of us, making a concerted effort, to be an effective agent and a compelling voice in our community.

This was the same challenge the Corinthian church faced. How could they remain faithful to God in the midst of an empire in decline? How could they stay true to Jesus Christ in a world spinning out of control? How could they hear the prompting of the Holy Spirit in a world filled with noise? We find ourselves asking similar questions. How are we to know God's will? How are we to plan for the future?

Paul cautions the Corinthians that wisdom cannot help them, nor can discernment, nor can signs or miracles. In fact, says Paul, the only thing that can move us into the future is foolishness: the foolishness of trusting a God we cannot see, the foolishness of trusting a savior who died on a cross, the foolishness of trusting in the Holy Spirit to strengthen us when we cannot seem to do one more thing.

Such hope is foolishness to those who are perishing, says Paul, but it is life to those who are alive with God. If we look ahead with the mindset that we are a dying church, with too few members and too little money and too few good ideas, then God's future for us will look like nonsense. If, however, we are able to become fools, to rely on God despite the facts, to have hope when all seems dark and to make plans when the resources are slim, then it will all turn out according to God's plan, and it will all make sense. We're called to be foolish, and seek God's wisdom. We are called to be weak, and trust in God's strength. We are called to be plain, old, ordinary folks, working for a God who is extraordinary.

But these are all just words. What does this mean for us in practical terms? In a typical State of the Union Address, this is where the President would outline the initiatives and programs that will take us to a brighter future. But as the Christians, we already know that the future is bright: because of Jesus Christ, we have hope for the future and joy in everyday living.

Our task is to find a way to engage a world that is outpacing us at every turn. Our goal is to speak a word of truth to a world that is busy and noisy and can hardly hear us. Our purpose is to lead people into a future filled with hope when we're often not sure which way to turn ourselves. Seems impossible. But if we're foolish enough to put our faith in God, then we will succeed. One day at a time. One conversation at a time. One relationship at a time.

Remember, we're not called to engage the entire world – Jesus came to do that – we're asked to engage the world in which we find ourselves – at home, at school, at the office, in the bleachers, in our neighborhood, at Service Food, at Wal-Mart, at the Viking, at Lundeen's, at Ben Franklin – wherever we are, that's where God gives us the opportunity to serve.

Paul calls on each one of us to be a "living sacrifice," to present our lives as testimony to the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Are you making chit-chat in the grocery line? Ask someone how they are and hang around long enough to hear the answer! You just showed Christ-like care to someone. Do you see someone changing a flat tire by the side of the road? Stop to help! You just showed Christ-like service to someone. Did you hear of a neighbor in financial difficulty? Surprise them with a gift card. You just showed Christ-like generosity to someone. Do you know an older person who is lonely? Make a visit. You just showed Christ-like compassion to someone. You didn't save the whole world; but you made a world of difference to one person.

As a congregation, we can work in these Christ-like ways, too, making a difference one day at a time, one conversation at a time, one relationship at a time. This year we're offering a parenting class to help us find better ways to raise strong sons and daughters. There will be a

marriage enrichment class open to anyone who wants to build happy and healthy relationships. There are Bible studies to help us discover God's words of comfort, guidance and hope, so that we might share those things with others.

There will be occasions to share some of God's blessings: through our mission giving to assist people in our community; through our stewardship commitment which will ensure that our congregation remains a dynamic presence in this community for generations; through our mission initiative providing school fees for kids in Guatemala.

We will provide opportunities to serve lunches in the community, to offer food for those who are hungry, and to eat and work and play with our congregation's youth through our programming.

As a larger family of faith we will celebrate milestones in the life of our church through a stewardship commitment Sunday, the Mission Dinner, our Christmas programs, the annual meeting, mission trips, Confirmation Sunday, Lenten services and suppers, Easter, the Senior Brunch, and the Ice Cream Social.

We will worship together, eat together, cry together, and laugh together for we are the Body of Christ, the Church, the family of faith, and we are fools for Jesus Christ. Whatever happens in the world, we will thrive because we are transformed by the Spirit, who renews our minds and our spirits, giving us a living hope to serve our living Lord.

On this Rally Sunday, we rededicate ourselves to the mission of this congregation. We offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to the glory of God. We pledge our time, our resources, and our prayers to support the ministries of The Federated Church. We promise ourselves to be fools for Christ in Fergus Falls, MN. For the state of our union is vibrant because it is grounded in the God who created the world; who healed the sick and made the blind to see and helped the lame to jump; who walked on water and multiplied bread; who raised people from the dead; and who lives and reigns forevermore. Our union is based on such foolishness. And that's good enough for me.

## Our State on Union

Rally Sunday, September 7, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

*I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God. As the Scriptures say, "I will destroy human wisdom and discard their most brilliant ideas." So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made them all look foolish and has shown their wisdom to be useless nonsense. Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never find him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save all who believe. God's way seems foolish to the Jews because they want a sign from heaven to prove it is true. And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. This "foolish" plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength. Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. [1 Corinthians 1:18-28, New Living Translation]*

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God--this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will. [Romans 12:1-2, NIV]*

Madame Organist, Esteemed members of the Deacons & Elders, and my fellow Christians. I am come to this sanctuary this morning to give a report on our congregation's state on Union (Avenue).

In 1964, Bob Dylan sang, "The times, they are a-changing!" Well, if Bob thought things were changing then, he should see things now. The world seems to spin ever faster. Technology is outdated almost before it hits the markets. Take music: at home I have 8-track tapes, cassette tapes, CD, and I-tunes. Or how about movies: I have VCR tapes, and DVDs, and now Netflix on demand. And that I-phone I bought three years ago is several generations out of date now. At least I still know how to run the toaster!