

After listening to Becky, Nancy, and Randy give three wonderful testimonies to what this church means to them, I thought that on this Thanksgiving Sunday, I would add my Thanksgivings to theirs.

I remember many years ago coming to this sanctuary for the first time. It was for the memorial service for George Noah. Kay Noah Held has been a good friend of mine for many years and although I didn't know George or even Gwen at that time, but I wanted to be here for Kay. One of my colleagues, Emily Click, who you may remember preaching at my installation service here, came with me to George's memorial. And as we waited for the service to begin we each agreed that this would be a nice church to serve as pastor. Now Emily is teaching at Harvard, and I have the privilege of having that fleeting thought come true.

Of course, the comments Emily and I made that day were based more on the space and feel of this sanctuary since we didn't know many people here. I guess this space creates a feeling that here a group of people could worship God and connect with each other. There are too big churches, too small churches, and just right churches, and it seems to me that this one is just right.

Although people can sense God's presence in sacred space, it is truly the people that make a church. One thing I value about San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ is the variety of people. We're young, old, and in-betweens. We don't all have the same ideas, theology, or politics; we have different world views and different priorities about what church should be about. But I've always thought that God's community ideally would be big enough, welcoming enough, and inclusive enough not only to accept and value others but also to learn and listen to them. I know I've learned from listening to you.

Part of what makes this diversity of people possible is when church feels safe. It's the churches who have “secrets”, the churches in which people can't really be true to their beliefs and conscience, where people are afraid that if people really knew who they were they wouldn't be accepted, those are the churches who earn the label “oh, that church, that church is just a bunch of hypocrites.”

I hope you feel that this church is a safe place even if on occasion we mess up as human beings do. Even if sometimes we are not as good listeners as we should be. If we see the overall picture, I believe this church is a place where we honor others even those who are different than us. The good thing about differences is that it is the way we grow.

If we are never challenged, if we are never questioned or posed a new idea or a new way of doing things, it is hard for us to become anything more than just our past. We know as parents that children must be challenged in order to learn and advance in their thinking. As a safe church, we can challenge each other with gentleness and great care to think more carefully about what God intends for our lives and for this church's future.

The hallmark of this church is its deep care and love for each other. This love is demonstrated in our prayer time and in all the ways we pay attention to the needs of others and try to be supportive. In really big churches it's easy to think that someone else will take care of that person's needs. But in churches our size, we know that it's up to each of us to step up to the plate and give of themselves to the well-being of the community.

I hope (and I am confident) that while I am away you will pay particular notice to people's needs. Don't be shy about reaching out and checking in with members, friends, and

visitors. Be good listeners and be especially kind. Make sure anyone visiting our church sees your love in action!

Churches that thrive are churches that reach out beyond themselves. They don't worry all the time about "numbers"; they think about faithfulness. Because it's not all about us. We hope this church thrives long into the future; but whether it does or not, we are not the center of God's universe. God's work in the world will not cease. God values us as part of a whole world; so anytime we minister outside of ourselves to a world in desperate need, we are being a faithful church and whatever our legacy as a church, it will live on because it lives in the lives of others.

The Psalm read today is an old familiar praise song that people of faith have recited or sang throughout the ages. We see in this psalm and in other psalms that praise and gratitude are the mature faith's response to the way the world is and the way life is. We can concentrate on all that is wrong; all the injustice; all the sickness; all the poverty. And it is important to pay attention to these wrongs and do what we can to make them better. Yet, human beings are meant to give praise and thanks and to engage life with grateful hearts. We have been born from the creative responsive love of the whole universe. Each moment is a gift. The past is gone forever, the future is unknown, the present is a gift to be received and rejoiced in.

Today we give special thanks for this community of God's grace where for almost 100 years people have gathered to try faithfully live for God. Today we think about and in faith, make a pledge of what our intentions are for the coming year. We do this not because we want to know anyone's business; in fact, David Wright, our faithful financial secretary, is the only one who knows what you and I pledge. We pledge so that we can act responsibly as we plan our ministry for 2009.

This year has been a year of challenge and a year of blessing for Tom and I. This church has been high on our list of blessings. What you do and who you are calls upon our hearts to align our future with you. We plan to increase our faith pledge 10% and to continue our annual "This Old Church" pledge so that the work here can continue. It's easy to give to this church because we love you and believe in you. By the way, our "this old church" fund is not for the construction of a golden temple; all that glistens is not gold. We try to use these funds for the necessary repairs, safety concerns, and maintenance so that this place can be used for the glory of God.

Above all I witness today that this is a church where grace abounds. We mess up; I mess up. Yet, God's grace through is sufficient. We don't have to be perfect people or perfect Christians. We are called to faithfulness not perfection. So today we give God our thanks and praise for all that has been and all that awaits us in the future. Thanks be to God.

Amen