First Congregational UCC
October 25, 2026
Rev. Nick Hatch
“Live Gratefully”; 1 Timothy 6:17-19

Let us pray: Generous God, give us eternal generosity to seize the real life, that is at hand. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, oh our rock and our redeemer.

On this Sunday we have much to be grateful for; we praise God for our Reformed heritage grounded us in Grace, cultivating contemporary relevance by being “Reformed and always be reforming”, and dedicating ourselves to Scripture, the Living Word of our Still Speaking God, trusting that where some have placed a period, we place a comma - knowing the Spirit of God exclaims, interrupts, and dialogues with us daily.

Likewise, today we praise God for our heritage as the Church of the Open Door which was, is and shall be, miraculous in nature. Lately, our legacy continues to take shape through the unfolding works of our Capital Campaign. Most recently our newly surfaced and re-planted Memorial Garden.

So how fitting that this week of all weeks, we would accidentally unearth the long-forgotten cornerstone of the Old Red Brick Church which sits before us, adorned in moss with the hand-chiseled date: 1888.

What a timeless material expression of our ancestor’s commitment to the good news and a tangible reminder of God’s enduring presence!

Our church record from July 10,1888 reads: *At four o’clock pm many people congregated in and around the new church to listen to the exercises and witness the laying of the cornerstone.*

Then the next spring, on Thursday morning April 18, 1889, a three-fold service took place. First came a “Goodbye” held at the smaller Old Brown Church down the street from this cornerstone. There, a poem by church member Mrs. Dr. Stanbury was read by Pastor John Faville. I share selected portions with you now.

Old things are dearest; the old friendly faces

Bright with remembered smiles, that shine away.

The mist of the years: the old familiar places

Where memories cling like moss to ruins gray.

……

So, we, for whom today in gracious waiting.

The portals of a statelier temple swing.

For one brief hour our thankful joy abounding,

To this dear shrine our hearts last offerings bring.

…….

Impalpable to sense the spirits treasures,

The sacred story of many a vanished year!

Their priceless worth no earthly standard measures,

And love and memory guard them ever here.

…….

God’s work is done through time and place may alter

No fond regrets our willing feet may hold,

If with us the New-lest steps falter,

That presence go, which sanctified the old!

- April 18, 1882.

That afternoon the bible which lays on the communion table, was carried to the New Red Brick church where the Pastor and church together read Psalm 23 from its pages. That evening at 7:30 the whole church assembled to dedicate the Red Brick church in song, sermon, scripture, and prayer - all to the eternal Glory of God.

Wow.

It makes me reflect on the belief that if only we had the foresight and discipline to consider the sacrifices of so many faithful people, that our lives would be sanctified by gratitude and gilded in generosity.

Will we for whom today in gracious waiting, spend just one brief hour, our thankful joy abounding?

Our scripture this morning from First Timothy is a letter from the Apostle Paul to one of his beloved emissaries - Timothy. Paul writes to encourage him, reaffirm proper church behavior, and define how members of God's household are to treat one another. And specifically, Paul speaks to the church and its individual members with how they are to relate to worldly wealth against the backdrop of heavenly riches.

One author says this:

This is not a passage for moralists, merely meant to condemn the wealthy, or a passage to inspire futuristic hope in an eternal life to come. Rather, this passage articulates a perspective upon this life that is meant to shape the way humans relate to others and this material world." – Stephanie Mar Smith

Paul teaches us about this particular perspective using two specific phrases: eternal life and true life. And each time he mentions these, he offers them with commands urging us to be intentional and fierce in application.

The first command comes earlier in scripture, in verse twelve which says:

Fight the good fight of the faith; **take hold of the eternal life**, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Here the Greek word *epilambanomai* translates to "take hold of, grasp, to seize, sometimes with forcefullness." So yes; the eternal life is meant to be grasped now, because, as it says in Mark (1:15) *The kingdom is at hand.*

Theologians across centuries including Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltman recognized the overlapping of eternity, God's kingdom, in our present material time. Thus, this Christian conflation has profound.

Barth said that Christ came to interrupt the present time, to interrupt the powers and principalities in a way that was both abundantly transformative and abrasively destructive- depending upon where our interests locate us in the structures of power which sustain and dominate us.

Jurgen Moltman furthered this argument saying that not only did Christ come to interrupt our present time, but to convert our present time and create new life. That which is fleeting then becomes hallowed, blessed, and eternal.

Now comes Paul's second command found in verse nineteen. After exhorting us all towards generosity and good work, which is laying our foundation for the future, he says: so that they (we) **may take hold of the life that really is life**.

Paul is encouraging a judicial, even strategic embrace of God's eternal Kingdom. Through the redemptive power of God's Son, Jesus the Christ, all creation is actively being

gathered up, things in heaven and things on earth, including you, and me and all those yet to sit in these old, dear pews, gifted to us, their stewards for now.

Fifty years after this cornerstone was laid, our church gathered for their congregational jubilee. The front of the church was beautifully decorated with a profusion of evergreens, chrysanthemums and carnations. An artistic inscription read "Yea shall hallow the fiftieth year."

The speakers included former Pastor John Faville. He spoke of the great work accomplished in building the new church, saying the most remarkable thing of all was that the church was not only actually paid for, but that there was a balance in the treasury a short time after its completion. Less than one percent of all pledges made remain unpaid. Then he said this:

"If I should gather up what the church has stood for in four words, they would be simplicity, catholicity, or the appreciation of the spirit of good, certainty, and cosmopolitanism. The latter term includes two great principles, independency and fellowship. Not simply free of for ourselves, but that we have fellowship for other churches. We stand as a church for the freedom of all churches. Look ahead fifty years. It seems to me if we build on this foundation there will be no question about the next fifty years." – Dr. John Faville. The Appleton Daily Post. Wednesday, December 19, 1900.

Maybe to really seize the eternal nature of our faith, we need to look back to consider how we are to be today and in the future. For what once separated us from our ancestors and from those yet to come, is actively being converted, by the eternal Grace of God into this moment, this hallowed time we find ourselves, sanctified by our real resurrection life.

How will our heritage, our appreciation of the church's universal and unique cosmopolitan discipleship continue to stand for freedom? For the freedom of all churches and the freedom of all God's peoples?

I believe these questions and Paul's words challenge us to continue our peculiar, rich legacy of generosity and gratitude. Yet amidst this enlivening charge, we should not forget that our scripture also cautions us to the corrosive effects of short-lived material accumulation.

One theologian comments:

I used to think when I was a child that Christ might have been exaggerating when he warned about the danger of wealth. Today I know much better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one's eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people's hands, eyes, lips, and hearts. – Helder Camara

Friends, our task is serious. Ours is the two-fold spiritual practice of gratitude *IN* generosity, and generosity *IN* gratitude. This means that in all the ways we can offer of our time, talents, and treasures, we make a concerted effort, a plan, to counteract and balance the powerful forces of this world in constant tension with our unseen spiritual livelihoods. In doing this we invite the living Christ to shape the way we relate to this world with the hope that room is left for us to seize the real life, to invest in the eternal kingdom, which is at hand, rightfully hallowing the moment at hand.

For *"everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer."* – 1 Timothy 4:4-5

Will you join me in generosity in this year's stewardship campaign and live gratefully?

May our church continue to pour forth the milk of human kindness from generation to generation. May gratitude unfreeze our hands, eyes, lips, and hearts. May we continue becoming, a becoming without any passing away, a conversion that is forever in the presence of God. For it seems to me that if we continue build on this foundation, with Jesus the Christ as our Cornerstone, there will be no question about our next fifty years.

To God be all Glory, Laud and honor, for what was, what is, and what is to come! Amen.