

Dear Friends in Christ,

I recently read a great piece of advice. Someone was talking about what makes marriage work. She said, "Don't be afraid to be the one who loves more." I think often people are afraid to risk themselves in love for a spouse or for others if they feel that the love won't be returned. But loving another is its own reward. It doesn't have to be returned. At the end, I want to have given more love than I received. Don't be afraid to love others more than they love you. In the end, you will be so glad that you did.

Thank you all for the Christmas cards and well-wishes and gifts. Of course, as a pastor, the best gifts I experience are the faith and joy that you share with me as we worship and study and serve together. You know that pastoral ministry is circular. A pastor is supposed to encourage and nurture faith in the congregation by the ministry of the Word and the congregation is supposed to encourage and nurture faith in its pastor. The best pastors are often the ones with the most encouraging congregations, and the best congregations are often the ones with the most encouraging pastors. When congregations or pastors struggle it is often because the circle of encouragement has broken.

I am grateful for those who have encouraged me in the past year. Three groups have been especially encouraging for me. One is the group that has studied the Book of Revelation over the past 8 months. Revelation is a challenging book, but we have worked together to try to make sense of its symbolism and message. Thanks for that. We have concluded our study in the Revelation and now in January I would like to move on to 1 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians is all about the problems and promise of the Church. I am sure we will find plenty to talk together about.

A second group that I would like to thank is the 12 or so who have gathered for prayer over the past year. Our times of discussion and prayer have encouraged my prayer life. We began last year in January during the LCMC 3 days of prayer. I would like to invite you to join me again during the 2020 LCMC 3 days of prayer January 7-9. Each night at 7 p.m. those who are available and willing will gather in the chapel with Jesus to talk about the needs of ourselves, our congregation, and our world. You are welcome to try it out.

A third group that I would like to thank is the members of the Church Council of recent years. You have encouraged me and guided me to be a better pastor. I love your willingness to look honestly at our work together and to dream of new ways to serve God's mission of grace in our midst. Even just considering the possibilities of our future is encouraging to me. In a world that is so negative and critical, you have been very positive and hopeful. Thank you for that. Lots of congregations are struggling to stay positive. So I don't take your faith and hope for granted.

Thanks to all of you who keep this congregation going with your generosity, your faithfulness, and your service. Thanks for being willing to follow the example of Jesus who was willing to love us more than we would ever love him.

Yours in Christ, *Phil Nielsen*

