

Lyons Muir Church  
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## January 2022 “Choosing To”

*When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. (Matthew 8: 1-3)*

Happy New Year, Sisters and Brothers in Christ Jesus:

In both the churches where I serve as pastor, there is an open question that remains unanswered for everyone: Why do so few people find meaning in church membership? This question is not new, and many thousands of gallons of ink have been spilt by people trying to understand the problem and offer solutions. But the short answer, I think, is this: the Gospel has lost its credentials.

The New Oxford American Dictionary defines the word “credential” in this way:

- 1) a qualification, achievement, quality, or aspect of a person's background, especially when used to indicate their suitability for something.
- 2) a document proving a person's identity or qualifications:

The word comes from

“late Middle English: from medieval Latin *credentialis*, from *credentia*. The original use was as an adjective in the sense ‘giving credence to, recommending’, frequently in letters or papers, hence credentials.



### Attendance:

*The average attendance for the month of December was 37.*

### WEEKLY

### SCHEDULE

SUNDAYS	Worship on the Lord's Day, 11
MONDAYS	No regular events
TUESDAYS	Office Hours, 9-12
WEDNESDAYS	Bible Study, 6:30-7:30 Ionia First UMC, Cafe
THURSDAYS	Office Hours, 9-2 Bible Study, 12-1

### UPCOMING EVENTS

- Tuesday, January 4  
Blood Drive
- Monday, January 10 @ 7 P.M.  
Board Meeting
- Sunday, January 16  
3rd Sunday Potluck after Church
- Friday, January 21 @ 5:30 P.M.  
Warmth in Winter

We think of a person having credentials, but I'm suggesting that a particular worldview – in this case the Gospel – can also be received as valid or invalid as a means of interpreting our experience and circumstances. If someone in authority appoints an individual to a task because they have the personality and qualifications deemed appropriate for the job, we can also imagine individuals taking authority to adopt a way of looking at the world which appears to be valid. An individual hired to perform a task has to provide results. Similarly, a worldview has to provide an individual with the ability to make meaning out of the experiences and circumstances of life.

I think Americans in general have drifted away from the Gospel as a valid worldview because the Creator's desire to redeem what is good from death has been reduced to a theological idea from what it originally was in the life of Jesus: a choice to enter into the suffering of individuals and their communities with words and actions that bring life. In the passage above, Jesus gives the word of healing to the leper, but he also *touches* him, and then he goes a step further to teach him how to become reconciled to his community once more. To touch a leper in Jesus' culture was unthinkable. And in our culture, we hardly ever see congregations of Christ-followers doing the unthinkable to bring healing and relief, or to welcome those whose life experiences and circumstances have cast them out of community. Without the Gospel *touch*, the Good News remains a message about the identity of Jesus: The church preaches Christ and leaves the poor to dissolve in their despair; the church preaches Christ and leaves the rich to rot in their luxury; the church preaches Christ and leaves the addicted to atrophy in their debauchery. The church says a lot and does little, thinking that all the things that are wrong with human life will be fixed in some far off imaginary time when "Jesus comes back and everyone who believes on his name shall be saved..." Or something... To which I say: How you gonna pay the light bill when year after year, more and more millions of people see through that nonsense for the power play that it is? The Lordship of Christ is not a worldview to which anyone can meaningfully subscribe who doesn't feel his touch and hear his word of communal reconciliation. So in the gospels of the Evangelists, we find that the credentials Jesus offers for his controversial teaching and loving and commanding are the moments when the kingdom comes in the present.

Here at the turn of another year, in the frost and snow and sideways-sun of midwinter, I want to help the churches focus, because I think we're onto something. I think we're beginning to make sense of the idea of giving the Gospel some credentials through our ministry. I think there is potential to present a worldview that others in our communities can understand, appreciate, and even desire to be part of.

At First UMC, Ionia, we're about to open our doors for a ministry called "Community Drawers." This outreach program was conceived in group-prayer and has been put together piece by piece over the last year and a half. It

offers undergarments, sleeping garments, blankets, and hygiene products to those in need on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of every month, piggy-backing on the great ministry being done at the food pantry hosted on Wednesdays by our sister church in Ionia, Zion UMC. The idea is simple: If you are homeless, working or not, you probably don't have money for adequate undergarments and hygiene products. So you live in discomfort and you neglect the basic health needs of your body. Or if you have a family but work an hourly wage job that doesn't cover everything, you're buying gas to get to work, groceries for the table, and heat for the house before you're going to get new pjs and long-johns and underpants for your kids. The congregation at First UMC discerned the need, but it's their willingness to receive and enact a solution that will give credentials to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Over in Muir and Lyons, our rural community suffers from isolation. In the ongoing complications of Covid-19, a community that is already spread out with few points of connection has become increasingly lonely. This has been emotionally distressing for the children of our towns in particular, which causes concern and harmful stress to parents. We feel lost without our ordinary points of connection in schools and youth programs and special social events. So Lyons-Muir Church is launching an outreach program called Warmth in Winter. On the third Friday of every month, families come to the church for a meal and a movie. Having installed a top of the line air filter in our HVAC system, we have the ability to filter harmful particles out of the air. So, despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we can arrange families into units with space in between and safely create a sense of being together: we can enjoy the warmth of community. It may not be the same as a lock-in, but its way better than being stuck all of the time in our homes and in our heads.

These two outreach efforts look and the suffering in the community and ask not "What would Jesus do?" but, "What can we do?" Both ministries represent attempts to be faithful to what God has revealed in the life of Jesus about the Divine intention to relieve the suffering of created life. These ministries say to each community what God says to the Cosmos in the incarnation of the Living Word: I will not leave you alone here to die. Congregations of Christ-followers who not only proclaim this Gospel, but live it too begin to show their neighbors that believing in the Holy Name, the Name of Jesus, actually makes a difference... not in some far off future, but today. And maybe, just maybe, as we are faithful, the Spirit will help friends we don't yet know come to choose the Gospel as their worldview too.

Hoping against hope for things not yet seen...

Pastor Jonathan

