

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Built to Last: Wise Builders

Matthew 7:24-25

Sunday, October 24, 2022

*Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor*

---

I will always remember my very first Sunday at Johns Creek UMC a little over four years ago. Leading up to that Sunday, I felt welcomed and sensed the excitement folks had for a new chapter of ministry. What I did not anticipate was the experience I had when I stood before you to preach my first sermon in our sanctuary. I was overwhelmed by a sense of the Holy Spirit among everyone in the congregation. It took my breath away. It was palpable.

What I felt and experienced from you was a deep love for Christ and a strong passion to be the hands and feet of Christ in this community. All churches make that claim, but I felt it from this church that Sunday and knew in my heart it was true. I knew I had been appointed to a special church.

And, indeed, we are a special church. For the last 35 years, Johns Creek UMC has made an indelible mark on the Johns Creek Community in the name of Christ. The impact of this church in this community is undeniable.

It all began in the late 80's when this church was founded and continued to grow in faith and size. Every year it deepened its love for God and expanded its reach into the community. Worship began in our chapel and then grew to the gym. Finally, in 2013, our glorious sanctuary was built. Soon after that we installed our magnificent organ.

Throughout our church's growth, there has been one constant: a desire to share the light and love of Christ in this community.

In fact, the reason this church has thrived is because it has always been outwardly focused. You have heard me say before, "Inwardly focused churches die but outwardly focused churches thrive."

One of the questions that is often asked is "If your church closed its doors tomorrow, would the community miss you?"

The answer for Johns Creek UMC is a resounding yes!

Johns Creek UMC is known as a friendly church that reflects the love of Christ and cares about the community. We are known for our meaningful worship, intentional faith development, radical hospitality, extravagant generosity, and a huge capacity for mission and service.

I must confess a sin to you. When I talk to people who have been touched by the ministries of this church, I am guilty of the sin of pride. I am so proud of this church. I think God makes allowances for that kind of pride. Our church is changing lives with the love of Jesus Christ.

Let me give you an example. Just recently, I was speaking with a lady who began attending our church a few months ago. In fact, this is the very first church she has ever attended and she is in her 70's! All she heard her whole life from family friends were negative and critical comments about Christians and the church. And she said, "I just assumed the comments were true, and so I never went to church."

Fast forward to just a few months ago. She walked into our church doors one weekday needing help. She met Natalie. Natalie not only told her we could help her but she gave her a tour of the church, told her about our SS classes and worship services, and helped her find the assistance she needed. The following Sunday this lady attended Sunday School and worship for the very first time in her life. Her Sunday school class surrounded her with love and support and she was overwhelmed by our inspiring worship service. She has not missed a Sunday since.

When she shared her story with me, she kept saying over and over again, "This church saved my life. I am just blown away. I never knew this is what Christianity was about. I never thought church and faith could be like this...I can't believe I have missed out on this all these years. I am just blown away by this church. This is Christianity."

Well, just a few weeks after I had this conversation with this lady, she passed away unexpectedly. I don't believe it was a coincidence that she

experienced the love of Christ through our church before she passed away.

Our church is making a difference for Christ and it makes me so proud! From the marriages that have been saved to the people who receive financial assistance to the children who are tutored by our kids hope program to the people who have given their lives to Jesus Christ...to the way this church remained faithful and strong throughout the pandemic, this church makes me proud and it should make you proud too!

So, when people ask me why people drive by 10 other good churches to come to our church, I tell them what I just shared with you.

However, we are being held back as a church. Something is happening that is preventing us from making an even bigger impact.

We are not even close to operating at our full potential as a church. There are many important things we could be doing and should be doing but cannot because of a big obstacle we have. And if we don't overcome this obstacle our next 35 years will look much differently than the last 35 years.

If we want to continue to be a thriving, loving, giving, serving church for the next 35 years we will need to address our current situation because it is not sustainable. We want to be a church that is "built to last." And in order for us to do that we must overcome our challenges.

So, here is our current situation. Please take a look at the screen. For the last five years our annual giving has remained stagnant. Between pledged and unpledged giving we stay around 2.3 million dollars annually. Over the last five years, our leadership and finance committee has grown a few gray hairs trying to balance our budget!

A big contributor to our problem is the heavy debt our church carries from the construction of our sanctuary. Our church carries a loan balance of around 5.1 million dollars. The annual debt service on our loan is \$650,000, which is about 30% of our annual giving. Think about that. Nearly 30 percent of our annual giving is dedicated to paying off debt, which has caused us to operate with a deficit for too long.

What does that mean? It means we are hamstrung as a church. We are unable to operate at our full potential. There are ministries and needed projects we are unable to accomplish.

For example:

- We are unable to expand the mission and outreach of our church, which is the heart of our church.
- We are unable to invest in our modern worship service.
- We are unable to fully repair and maintain our property and buildings, deferring maintenance (have you seen our parking lot lately?).
- We are unable to fund advertising and marketing campaigns to reach more people in the community.
- We are unable to make needed media improvements in the sanctuary for worship.
- Most troubling of all, the way we are operating is not sustainable long term.

Eventually, something is going to give and we will not be able to be the thriving, giving church that we want to be. So, we must act now and take control of the future of our church.

So, what is the plan? I am so glad you asked!

First of all, I am excited to share that we are refinancing our debt with the Georgia United Methodist Foundation. This refinance will save us \$200,000 annually! Isn't that wonderful? But it is only the beginning.

This fall we will kickoff our "Built to Last" campaign. The goal of this campaign is not only to fully fund our 2023 budget but to retire at least 1 million dollars of our debt. We are calling this our "unified budget" for the campaign or "one fund." It combines our ministry budget needs with our goal of retiring 1 million dollars of debt.

Our pledge goal for this unified budget is 3.5 million dollars. This will fund our budget and retire 1 million dollars of our debt.

Now, just imagine with me for a moment. When we refinance our loan and retire 1 million dollars of debt (20% of our debt), just imagine how much that will liberate us as a church to do the work God has called us to do. Just imagine how much it will free up our budget to focus on being the hands and feet of Christ. Imagine how many ministries and missions we could invest in. Imagine how free our church would be to make a bigger impact on our community!

But more than that, just imagine the bright future of this church! This campaign is about reversing our

financial position and moving forward with the resources we need to be church God has called us to be. This campaign is about securing our future.

It is about the communication of the gospel to the next generation. It is about the people who aren't yet here who need Jesus. It is about the little children who run around here who one day will have families of their own. It is about being a church that is built to last. It is why I chose the text in Matthew where Jesus speaks of a house built on rock that is strong and secure, regardless of the challenges that come. Its future is secure because it is rooted in Christ.

We want to be built to last for the next generation. I see tomorrow in our children today. Maybe one of the kids in our church will discover the cure to cancer. Maybe one of these kids will be a preacher or missionary. Maybe one of these kids will be the President of the United States. Who knows? But one thing we do know is that they will need this church!

There is an old legend told about Zacchaeus. You remember Zacchaeus. He was short so he climbed a tree to see Jesus in a crowd. Jesus told him to get down from the tree because he was coming over to his house. Jesus transformed his heart and he was never the same again.

The legend goes that after his conversion it was Zacchaeus' habit to rise early and leave home for a while with a rake and shovel. Mrs. Zacchaeus noticed this one day and asked, "Where are you going?" Zacchaeus replied, "Do you remember that old sycamore tree I was in when Jesus found me? Well, I'm going to take care of it. It has been neglected by the city fathers and needs my care. You see, it held me so Jesus could find me."

I know that for many of you this church has been the tree that held you so Jesus could find you and love you. The church was there for you because people were willing to give generously. Now, it is our turn. Why should we invest in this campaign? Because the church holds people so Jesus can find them. The church loves people so Jesus can save them. The church cares for people so Jesus can empower them. The church supports people so Jesus can call them.

And if we are generous JCUMC will continue to do this for the next 35 years and beyond. We will have a church that is built to last for our children and grandchildren.

I want you to know what I would never ask you to do something I am not willing to do myself. I have spoken and prayed with Brandy and we have decided to increase our giving. We are already tithe over 10 percent to the church, but this campaign is so important to us that we have made the commitment to increase our pledge.

I hope and pray you will consider increasing your pledge as well.

I don't know where you are on your giving journey but I have discovered that, generally speaking, there are three stages of growing in giving.

### **Initial Giver**

- Gives out of obligation.
- Giving is seen as customary and expected.

### **Sacrificial Giver**

- Gives because it is the right thing to do.
- Giving is seen as a spiritual discipline that establishes priorities.

### **Generous Giver**

- Gives with an attitude of gratitude for the love and generosity of God.
- Giving is the natural response to a growing relationship with God.

I want to show you a tool that is extremely helpful. It is called the Gift Profile Guide. You can also find it on your pledge card and in your booklet.

This tool illustrates one possible way we can reach our goal. It is a large number but I believe our church has the resources to do it.

In order for us to reach our goal, we must have 100% participation from everyone who calls this church home. It will also require every one of us giving sacrificially for something that is bigger than us and will have an eternal impact.

I want to give you the same challenge that was given to me. Find the line on this chart that best represents your giving level today.

Now please look up at least one line, maybe two.

Russell Conwell was a minister who was former president of Temple University. He was an incredible fundraiser, made millions of dollars with

one speech. The speech was called ACRES OF DIAMONDS.

The key part of the speech was a true story about an African farmer who was barely making a living on his farm. He heard stories at the market about those who had discovered diamonds on their property. He said he was tired working on his worn-out farm and that he was going to sell his property and go discover diamonds. He did. He sold the farm for a good price, and went off to discover diamonds.

The new owner of farm was down by the creek one day, looked in the stream, and saw a really bright rock in the middle of the water. He went into water, picked it up, and said, "That's so unusual. I'll take it home." He cleaned it up, put it on his mantle, and people would come and admire it.

One day someone came and saw this bright rock and said, "That's not a rock! That's a diamond!" Farmer said, "That stream is full of those things!" That rock was the largest diamond ever found, and that farm became the most prosperous diamond mine in all of Africa. The original owner, who did not see diamonds, died a pauper wandering all over the continent for diamonds.

Johns Creek, there are diamonds all over this church! Do you see them? There is the diamond of our fine arts ministry—the diamond of our youth ministry—the diamond of our children's ministry—the diamond of our outreach and missions—the diamond of our adult ministries—the diamond of our worship—the diamond of our laity—diamonds are everywhere. And these diamonds need to be invested in! "Eye has not seen no ear heard" what God is going to do at Johns Creek UMC. But God will not do it without us.

So, if you want Johns Creek to be a church that is built to last, we need three things from you: Pray, Participate and Pledge!

I can't believe I have the privilege of being the senior pastor of this very special church. There is nothing more exciting to me than moving forward in ministry with you. Let's make sure JCUMC is built to last.

**Monday** – Read Matthew 7:24-27. It is important to note that both builders in this story heard Jesus. However, only the wise one acted on what he heard. It may seem obvious but in order to be rooted in Christ and find strength for living we must do what Jesus asks of us. Hearing Jesus is only half of the equation. Many people read the Bible, listen to sermons, attend Sunday School and small group studies but only those who apply what they have heard and learned reap the benefits and grow. What do you believe Jesus is saying to you about your giving and generosity? Will you act on it?

**Tuesday** – Take a look at the verses proceeding the passage for our series (Matthew 7:15-23). What triggered Jesus' words about a wise builder were his thoughts on true and false disciples and prophets. How can you tell someone is a true disciple? In verse 20 Jesus says "By their fruit you will recognize them." For Jesus a good sign someone is a disciple is the fruit that is evident in their lives. In other words, their behavior and actions will reflect the light of Christ. For example, they will show kindness, love, faithfulness and discipline. No one is perfect but you will often see disciples bear good fruit. Another fruit would be generosity. Could someone tell you are a disciple by what they see from your bank records? We spend money on what is most important to us. If we follow our money, we quickly see our priorities. What does your spending say about your priorities?

**Wednesday** – There are three things that we ask of the church during our Built to Last campaign: Pray, Participate and Pledge. Prayer is an essential element to our campaign. We need our campaign and the future of our church to be covered in prayer. Do you have a daily prayer routine? If you don't, now is the perfect time to start one. Find a comfortable spot in your home and have a Bible and perhaps a devotional guide handy. The Upper Room is a good one. Take ten minutes to read scripture and your devotional. You may also wish to journal. During your prayer time, would you please pray for the success of our campaign and that God would move us to be generous givers?

**Thursday** – Your participation in our campaign is very important. There are several ways you can immerse yourself in our campaign. Sermons, prayers, devotionals, videos and updates are all provided so you can grow in your giving journey. Take some time today to share this devotional with someone in our church and encourage them to read it. Feel free to share with your Sunday school class and other church friends what you are learning from the resources provided in this campaign. Help spread the word!

**Friday** – Obviously, your pledge is key for a successful campaign. Why pledge? A pledge is a sign of faithfulness and obedience to God. Our pledge is our promise to join God in working through the church to transform this world. A pledge is also a way of holding ourselves accountable to God and the church. When you write your commitment down you are more likely to follow through with it. Churches also must have pledges to plan a budget. A church cannot plan a budget effectively without having a solid projection of giving. In my sermon on Sunday, I asked everyone to find their current level of giving on the "Gift Profile Guide." The guide is provided in the campaign booklet and on the pledge card. Would you prayerfully consider going up one more level or two in your giving?