I said earlier, today is our annual meeting, and there's a couple of things I want to talk about before the meeting because people watching online aren't going to get to participate in the meeting. The first thing I want to say is how fantastic this year is. A bit back in January, we had our vision, and this was the same scripture that we used for our vision meeting. And I intentionally did that because I want us to think back about what life was like in January, what it was like for each of us, where we were in our lives, our work lives, our family lives, our spiritual lives. I want you to think about where you were and what goals you set for yourselves. We set a number of goals coming out that night about where we wanted to see the church go this year. How we wanted to see ourselves grow as a faith community, how we wanted to see ourselves grow in the outside community as well, not just within these four walls. I want us to think about where we are in comparison to that.

It's interesting because I used to hate the annual meetings. I know it's a very strong word that we shouldn't use, but I was, like 10, and I knew that we were going to be sitting here for a very long time talking about the same things that we always talk about. And we're probably going to do that again today, too. Because the annual meeting is the same meeting year after year after year. We talk about how we want the budget to go. We already know what we spent last year on everything. We set it up for next year to be similar, plus or minus inflation plus or minus people. We talk about committees, who's on what committee, why we're going to do this. At one point, we talked about what we were going to do on those committees like the committee head gave a report a very, very long time ago, you won't have to sit through that today, of what does it mean to be on those committees? What you do on those committees. We take time to thank our moderator that's going out if it's that year, because inevitably something hard happened during that moderator's time. That's just the life of the church. Things happen.

I was thinking about where we were last year. I've had a number of questions. If I see a difference, what does that difference mean? Then, I started thinking about where we were four years ago. That was my first annual meeting up here. Then, that made me start thinking about where we were seven years ago. At seven years ago was before the Pandemic, is before Derecho. We were a very different church back then. You still had Mary Beth. You're averaging about 52 people a week in the pews, and we had eight kids every week for service. We don't look that much different. A number of those people that were here, then, aren't with us any longer. We have new faces. We have new friends. We have new families that have joined us. With new people, take roles, roles and positions they never thought they would do. We have somebody changing today from one committee that he's been on for 40 years to a different committee. Big changes. They're wonderful changes. And it's great that we get to do it together.

I use this scripture a lot. I think it's very important one. I see how it reflects in our lives here in the church because we spend so much time working out in the community. I think this is a great example of Greater Love. The love that we share there. The work that we do and confidence is most of what the scripture is about. Feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, helping the imprisonment. We have so many people that come in because we are the only friends they have in their own lives. You're imprisoned by depression, in solitude. We do all these wonderful things. We help people who are sick and I say that because I know at Greater Love And Saint Paul's are two different things, but they aren't what is behind

both of those. In this scripture the love that God has for each one of us ,that Jesus is telling us that we need to share is a part of this. It's part of that.

When I was in Cleveland at that event, I got invited to, I had somebody came up to me because I said something that our president didn't like, And I used this scripture and the person looks at me and says, I think that's the only scripture you know, I said, is it the wrong one? Why wouldn't I know this one? Why wouldn't I share this everywhere I go? I guess it's about God's love. It's about doing the right things for the right reasons. Yesterday, I got asked since I share this scripture so much, am I a goat or sheep?

Obviously, you're going to say, sheep, right? You're not going to consider yourself a goat. Goats are bad. They do everything just for show. They don't do it because they're doing it for the right reason. But I turned it back on the person. I said well, since you're asking me, I'm guessing you think I'm a goat and not a sheep. You're thinking that I do these things just for my own benefit, so that I can say I did this, not because I was supposed to do it, not because it was the right thing to do, but because I get to show off and act like it. And the person said to me. well, If you already know that, why are you asking me? I said, you're right, I can be a goat. There are times I see my phone ring, and I look at the name. And I know it's going to be a 20 minute conversation that I don't want to have at that time, because I'm doing something else. And I sent it to voicemail. I know when driving around in a big city, and I'll see somebody panhandling and I don't give him money. I keep walking. I know that there are a number of things I could do better. Yes, that makes me a goat sometimes. But I'm human. We're all human.

I can say easily, there are times in my life that I don't make the right choices. I can say easily I've hurt people over the years. There's no doubt in my mind about that, but I can also say I've done more good than harm. And I can say that I'm a part of this family and that we do more good than harm. Because we do. We talked about those points back in January that we want to make sure we're feeding the hungry. We want to make sure that we're giving water to the thirsty, that we're clothing the naked, that we're visiting the imprisonment. We're taking care of the sick, and we are welcoming the stranger. And I think we have done a fantastic job of that.

Over the year, I have people reach out to me that used to be members of the church and say, how do I come back? You guys are doing a great job outside. I have strangers that come up to me at Greater Love and say your church is the one over by the bank, right? Not the one with the stairs. Yes. We want to come, but we're afraid. I hear that a lot. I hear, we want to be a part of your community inside that church where we don't know people. We don't know if we'll be welcome. We've done things wrong in the past. I laugh. I'm like, you have no idea who you're talking to.

We make those choices every day to be a better person. We make those choices every day to come together and to share God's love. We do a fantastic job doing it. I asked you to think about where we were seven years ago. I want you to think about why we're going through the meeting tonight, where do you want us to be in seven years. And not just the people here. People are watching throughout the week at home. People that can't be here. Where do you want to be in seven years with us?

Let us pray.