

The Truett Pulpit



Sermons Preached During Worship
in the Paul Powell Chapel
at George W. Truett Theological Seminary
2010-2011

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Sermons Preached During the Community Gathering for Worship at George W. Truett Seminary 2010-2011

The sermons in this volume of ***The Truett Pulpit*** were preached in the seminary's Paul Powell Chapel during the 2010-2011 academic year. The sermons by Truett faculty members were all part of a two part series encompassing **Community and the People of God** and **Worship and the People of God**. In doing so, each professor offer his or her own unique insight into life as the people of God.

The audio and video versions of all of these sermons can be found in the Truett Media Library at "<http://www.baylor.edu/truett>" under "Resources".

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The Truett Pulpit

*The Community and Worship
of the People of God*

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Dr. David E. Garland

Dean and

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George W. Truett Seminary

“A Shared Life”
John 14:15-24
W. Dennis Tucker, Jr.
Associate Dean and
Associate Professor of Christian Scriptures
Fall 2010 Convocation

In his book *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools*, Daniel Aleshire, the executive director of the Association of Theological Schools not only ponders the future of theological education, but perhaps more significantly, articulates a case for what we are all about in this place.

In the beginning of the book Aleshire reflects upon his own seminary experience.

He writes,

—More than any other educational institution I have attended, seminary changed me. Theological education is formative and in many cases transformative. It weaves together two powerful human activities, believing and learning into a common cloth. Seminary affected parts of me that other school’s never touched. I did not realize how much it impacted me at the time, but the longer I work in ministry, the more I find myself going back to seminary experiences that defined reality, defined me, and defined Christian faithfulness.”¹

¹ Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 2008), 2-3.

When I visit with our alumni at various gatherings, they speak a similar language. They speak of learning and believing, believing and learning as the strands of a cloth woven together during their sojourn in this place. But without fail, they will say something of the people in this place. In some way, perhaps difficult to articulate, the people were a third strand woven into this cloth. Like believing and learning, the people aided them, transformed them, in ways that ~~defined~~ reality, defined them, and defined Christian faithfulness.”

In your time at Truett, there will be great focus on the strands of learning—after all we are one of the few seminaries embedded within a major research university. Learning is critical to who we are and what we do. There will be great focus on the strands of formation and transformation—after all, we are a place that takes seriously the call each has received and the calling we have received together as the people of God. We learn best when we live in community. We believe best when we live in community. It is in community that we discover best what it means to the people of God.

Many of you are familiar with the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Having completed his doctorate in theology by the age of 21, Bonhoeffer made his way to the United States for further study and to teach at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. When he returned to Germany, he found that the German Evangelical Church had fallen under the sway of the Nazi movement. He aided in organizing a group called the Confessing Church, a group of Christians clearly at odds with what the state church had become. When things grew worse under Nazi pressure, Bonhoeffer accepted a two-year pastorate in London, hoping that while in London he could leverage ecumenical pressure on the German regime. While in London, he was invited to go to India to study non-violence with Gandhi. But in that moment, as Nazi

suppression of the church intensified, members from the Confessing Church asked Bonhoeffer to return home and to lead an underground seminary to train ministers. He returned to found this clandestine seminary at Finkenwalde. It was based on life, this shared life under Nazi suppression, that Bonhoeffer wrote his small work *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer wrote,

—Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of year, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.”²

The remainder of his book focuses on questions of learning and believing, believing and learning. Yet the notion of community, of shared life together, permeates all that is said. —“We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.” That sentence has lingered with me all summer. What does it mean to belong to one another through and in Jesus Christ? What does it mean to live in this kind of shared life? While I believe in that statement, I rarely tend to the meaning of it for my life, for the lives of those with whom I share community.

To Whom are We Committed

Our text today appears near the start of a series of Farewell Discourses in the Gospel of John. While John 14 is often noted as the first mention of this *allos parakletos*, “another Advocate,” I would like to suggest that this text also calls us, as disciples of the Risen Christ, to enter into the kind of shared life envisioned by Bonhoeffer and experienced by those gathered at that clandestine seminary in Finkenwalde.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1954), 21.

John 14 calls us to a new way of living predicated upon our commitment to Jesus. Three times in this short text we are told to love Jesus. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the theme of loving God reverberates. In the Old Testament, when the community failed to love God rightly, the prophets called the people of God back to their first love. And while one may note that the repeated call to love God with all that we are appears frequently in both the Old and New Testaments, one is hard pressed to find language in the New Testament that calls us to love Jesus. In fact, the call to love Jesus occurs only twelve times in the New Testament.³ Six of those can be found in the Gospel of John.

But we should be clear about the nature of this kind of love, lest we trail off into some notion of sentimentality. The writer of the Gospel of John has carefully embedded throughout allusions, references, and connections to the Old Testament. This language of “love” is no different. Throughout the Old Testament the word “love” is used in covenant language. Even among political parties in the Ancient Near East, the term was used to indicate a binding covenant. Just as the covenant God demanded at Sinai that his people love him exclusively, so too does Jesus demand exclusive love, unbending love, a love that at times calls us to live in radically new ways.

Henri Nouwen knew something of this kind of love. Having taught early in his career at Notre Dame, then moving on to teach at the Divinity School at Yale, he assumed a prestigious position at Harvard late in his career. But it was his next move that proved most surprising. He left Harvard to work at a community named L'Arche, a community for the mentally handicapped. He left the hallowed halls of an Ivy League institution to enter into the sacred

³ *Agape* is used in John 8:42; 14:15, 21, 23; 21:15, 16; Eph 6:24; 1 Pet. 1:8 and *philein* occurs in Matt. 10:37; John 16:27; 21:17; and 1 Cor. 16:22.

ordinariness of life shared together. In commenting on this abrupt transition to a small, relatively obscure community he spoke of life and said, “The question is not: How many people will take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show me some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus?” He continued, “To live a life that is not dominated by the desire to be relevant but is instead safely anchored in the knowledge of God’s first love, we have to be mystics. Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-formed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the Incarnate Word, Jesus.”

Did you hear his last line? Our ~~l~~eadership must be rooted in the permanent intimate relationship with the Incarnate Word, Jesus.” Or put differently, we might say, —On leadership must be rooted in our love of Jesus.” Or even more simply, our lives must be bound to his.

This year at Truett, the focus of chapel will be on our identity as the ~~p~~eople of God.” I want to encourage you to be here weekly for chapel. We are all busy, and there is much work to be done. But if we are not careful we will fool ourselves into believing that the work of formation and transformation happens only in isolation. As we come together week after week, we are doing work—critical work, life-giving work. The word ~~l~~iturgy” actually means ~~t~~he work of the people.” In our gathering and in our worship, in our liturgy, we are sitting side by side, sharing life with those who love Jesus—with those who have bound themselves to him and to one another in this place. But we need each other in this shared life because in the midst of our learning and our believing, there will be days when each of us will find it difficult to bind ourselves to Christ. There will be days when the call seems faint and the commitment seems weak. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that

this is why we need this kind of community. We need each other because there will be days when the Christ in our own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of a brother or sister; our own hearts uncertain, but the heart of our sister or brother is sure.

To live a life rooted in the Incarnate Word, Jesus, is not an easy task. To bind ourselves to Jesus is work—but it is work that we can and must do together.

How Shall We Live

No doubt among the early Christians, they must have wondered, “Can we still love Jesus when he is gone?” In her work on John, Gail O’Day explains that the response to this question might be a qualified yes,

—The disciples can still love Jesus, but neither by clinging to a cherished memory of him nor by retreating into their private experience of him. Rather, they can continue to love Jesus by doing his works (vv. 12-14) and by keeping his commandments (vv. 15-24).⁴

Three times in our text today Jesus indicates that those who love him will keep his commandments. Jesus is no legalist; he believes in formation and transformation. As we do the works of Jesus, as we keep his commandments, we slowly take on the shape of the cruciform life. Throughout the Gospel of John, the miraculous works of Jesus are called “signs.” They point people to the irruption of God into this world.

In his small book of prayers, Michael Quoist reflects on one scene in the Passion narratives.

He fell.

For a moment he staggered, then fell prostrate,
God in the dust.

⁴ Gail O’Day, “John,” in *New Interpreters Bible vol. IX* (ed. L. E. Keck; Nashville: Abingon, 1995), 749.

And so Lord, I follow you, setting out with confidence, and now I
have fallen.
I thought I had given myself irrevocably to you, but I caught sight of
a flower on the footpath.
I left you, I left the cumbersome Cross, and here I am off the road,
possessed of a few faded petals and my solitude.
And the others, Lord, pass along the road, broken and exhausted.
And the crosses are in the making and backs are bending.

I am no longer there to fight evil and to help men to drag their loads,
I am off the road.

Lord help me not only to follow after you but to keep steadily on.
Keep me from sudden weaknesses that leave me stupefied and empty,
far from the place where you are shaping the world.⁵

Jesus said to his disciples, If you all love me, you will keep my
commandments. If you all love me, you will join me in the places where I am
shaping the world.

If you all love me, you will become signs—signs that point people to the
irruption of God into this world. If you all love me, on occasion, you will
even join me in the dust. If you all love me, your life, even your shared life,
will become a cruciform life. So let us return to our initial question: ~~What~~
does it mean to belong to one another through and in Jesus Christ?” Surely it
must mean that even as we bind our lives to Christ, we bind ourselves to one
another, and as we seek to love Christ, we seek to become a community of
people who collectively embody a cruciform life.

We Have Not Been Left Alone

⁵ Michael Quiost, *Prayers*, (New York: Sheen and Ward, 1963), 155-156.

Such ambitions, however, seem far too lofty. Our lives are too busy to love God and one another in such a way. Our schedules demand too much of us. We find ourselves throwing up our hands admitting that such loving and that such living are well nigh impossible for us. *And here is the Gospel for today-- Jesus knows that.*

That is why he says, ~~I~~ will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.”

In the ancient world, after the death of a great teacher, the disciples would have been known metaphorically as orphans—a term applied to the followers of Socrates upon his death. But this teacher, this Jesus, is unlike any other teacher. All other teachers left their disciples as orphans, but Jesus announces, that he will send *allos parakletos*, ~~a~~another Advocate.” Jesus announces that there will be no orphans among those who bind themselves to him and his way. Just as Jesus walked alongside, just as Jesus advocated, just as Jesus was a *parakletos*, for his disciples then, he says, I am coming to you and I will send another Advocate. Jesus takes these three strands and knots them into one cord in verse 23, ~~Th~~ose who love me will keep my word...and we will come to them and make our home with them.” This is life shared together most fully. Life shared with one another; life shared together in the full presence of God.

I suspect there are very few students here today that had the opportunity to sit under the teaching of Dr. Ruth Ann Foster. She was a founding faculty member of the Seminary and over the course of the years, we as a community watched and lamented as her health failed and as she finally lost her battle to cancer in the fall of 2006. In preparing for today’s address, I happen to come across my journal from that year. If you will indulge me, my entry from October 5, 2006 reads as follows:

Ruth Ann passed away a week ago today. Several of us went to visit her on the Sunday before she died. I slept very little that Saturday night. It would be the first time in many years that I had visited someone, knowing that this would be the final time to exchange words.

All night long the words of Isaiah kept coming to me, —~~F~~ear not, I am with you.” All night long, relentlessly, these words kept coming to me, rolling over and over in my head.

The next day I was rather certain that these were the words I was meant to share with her. As this small gathered community stood around her bed, I kept waiting. I kept waiting for a lull in the conversation, for that one moment to utter these words.

The moment never came... Instead I was reminded of a line by Ron Rohlheiser in which he says the Incarnation is not over. We see the incarnated face of Christ in those around us. And then I looked down at my friend Ruth Ann—I looked down at the frail, emaciated, cancer-worn face of my friend. And as Ruth Ann looked back at me, I saw the face of the suffering Christ. —~~F~~ear not, I am with you,” her eyes seemed to say. Christ had made his way to the deathbed again, offering redemption and hope, even in the brokenness of a cancer-ridden saint. I am with you. ‘With Ruth Ann, with me, with my colleagues, and yes, even with the suffering world.

When life is shared together, really shared together, we hear the words of Jesus, —~~I~~ will not leave you orphaned.” When life is shared together, really shared together, we hear the words of Jesus, —~~I~~ am coming to you.” When life is shared together, when we bind ourselves to Jesus and share in the cruciform life, we hear the words of Jesus, —~~W~~e will come to them and make our home with them.”

Perhaps *that* is what it means to ~~be~~ belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ”—sharing our lives together, binding ourselves to Jesus, finding our way in the cruciform life, only to discover that the God of the dust is the God in our midst. May that be our commitment, may that be our prayer, for this year.

And so my friends, as you begin the semester,

May the peace of Christ be with you in your learning.

May the hope of Christ be with you in your believing.

And may the presence of Christ be among us all as we share life
together in this place.

Don't Be Dumb
Psalm 19
Stephen Reid
Professor of Christian Scriptures

Preaching in chapel. There is nothing quite like it. It is an interesting congregation. You can use words you can't use any place else. And you can talk about books in a way you cannot do in a normal Sunday. It is normally in bad taste to over disclose everything you have ever read from the pulpit. But when you are in chapel you can scatter a couple of bibliographical bits, and you will be okay.

I know some of you are a little rusty. Because the last time you were in chapel was last year. So I thought we would begin with some exercises. Are you game for some exercises? See in Black church tradition there is something we call antiphonal preaching. In antiphonal preaching you all are supposed to say something. But this is a growing edge for Truett students. So I want to help you out with some exercises. I know it is not that you don't want to say something but you don't know what to say. So here are some responses you might try this morning and other times when you engage in antiphonal preaching. —~~h~~rd help him.” —Can we get a word from the Lord this morning?” And today I want to add to your repertoire —~~D~~on't be dumb.”

I was a new Ph.D. student at Emory University in Atlanta Georgia. It was the fall of the year. I was so glad to be there. In major university you have honored scholars come through. This semester, Ernst Käseman came to Emory. He was born in Bochum Germany in 1906 and took his Ph.D. at Marburg in 1931. The Wikipedia entry on Käseman says that he ~~was~~ one of Rudolf Bultmann's more well-known politically left-of-centre „pupils‘.” As a Lutheran pastor he joined the Confessing Church movement opposing the Nazi

regime in 1933. By 1937 he was detained by the Gestapo for supporting communist mine workers. Later he was drafted into the army only to be captured and spend time as a prisoner of war. His daughter Elisabeth Käsemann was abducted by security forces in Argentina and subsequently disappeared presumed murdered in March 1977. I had read his articles and books: —The Problem of the Historical Jesus”, *Jesus Means Freedom: A Polemical Survey of the New Testament*, *Essays in New Testament Themes*, *Perspectives on Paul*, his commentary on the —etter to the Romans.” But this was a chance to meet him face to face. Now, my momma raised me to be polite so I did not raise any difficult questions during the question and answer sessions. Nevertheless, I had friends who were raised by different mommas. A young colleague said, —Professor Käsemann, you say that you learned your theology in your fight against the Nazis, but here we are at Emory University, the lap of luxury, of privilege. How will we ever learn theology?” Käsemann responded, —You will find your teachers in the challenges God has in store for you.”

I went to Manchester College in North Manchester, Indiana, which is a small, Church of the Brethren College. At Manchester College there were only two Black students who were religion majors. So when James Cone the famous theologian of Union seminary in New York City came to Manchester, we spent the afternoon with him as he shared with us his early time. He told us that when he was a hard working Ph.D. student in Chicago in the age of the Black Power movement his friends asked how he could be caught, enmeshed in school while the revolution was all around him. They said, —How can you study Tillich, Barth, Athanasius, Tertullian and Augustine at a time like this. Don’t you want to be there when the revolution takes place?” Cone in his own distinctive voice said —The revolution will be there when I have a degree in

hand.” And it was. Many of you will remember that Cone has helped the revolution in his books such as *Black Theology and Black Power*, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, *Spiritual and The Blues: An Interpretation*, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare?*, *God of the Oppressed*, to name a few.

Professor Dr. Cone said to us more or less you will find your teachers. The revolution will still be there. Both of these men talked about theology formed in testimony, and testimony formed in the conversations. For Käsemann it was Germany. For Cone it was Bearden, Arkansas. For Käsemann it was the Confessing Church movement. For Cone it was the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Both of these men talked about testimony that is formed in conversations that you will have. I am not talking about the nice conversations you are going to have in covenant groups while here at Truett. No, I am talking about the heated conversations you are going to have in congregations, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, at Missionary Baptist Association meetings.

Don't Be Dumb!

When I arrived at Truett Theological Seminary I had the pleasure and honor to meet Dr. Levi Price. Dr. Price is a son of Texas. He played football for Baylor University. He served in Vietnam. He took degrees at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary in California and served prominent congregations in California and Texas before joining the Truett faculty. He is a man of deep piety but he is also a plain spoken Texan. One of Dr. Prices' favorite sayings was —Don't be Dumb.” When he retired many of his students got t-shirts made with this saying emblazoned on them.

We need to understand what Christian community is. It is about not being dumb. It is about living into the testimony, living into the Word of God. Last week Dr. Tucker told us we are going to spend this semester and year asking the question, —~~what~~ it means to be a people of God?” And he reminded us, echoing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that what makes us a community is Jesus Christ. He referred to Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*. Drs. Bonhoeffer and Tucker make the point that it is Christ that makes us community. Let me say that again it is Jesus Christ that makes us a community. Some of you may think that what makes a community is that we believe in Jesus Christ. That is to confuse the work of Christ and our work. People who believe in Jesus Christ and come together for that reason are affinity groups. Affinity groups are good.

What makes a church is that Jesus makes it a community. Not your believing in Jesus, that is to say not your work or belief. But it is the profound work of Jesus. For even in Jesus, especially in Jesus you have a witness. Jesus is not dumb. Jesus gives testimony.

Psalm 19

This a fascinating Psalm and famous Psalm and it has more in it than we have time for. It begins with a hymn of creation. The heavens are recounting. The NRSV translates this as “telling” but I think that is not sufficiently dynamic. Recounting, *sepher*, come from the word for count but also to recount. We can think of this as to innumerate the glory of God. And the firmament that beat out place, it discloses God’s handiwork.

Now theologians have talked about this as biblical evidence of natural theology. When you get to the Text and Theology courses (T & Ts) you can talk about that but we will not be able to tarry there this morning. I think what the Psalmist is about to say is that if the sun, if the heavens are smart enough to testify then how can we fail to do so? You see the word dumb can mean two

things. First it can be slow to understand or second it can also mean inarticulate. In your time at seminary I hope that you are not dumb.

Bonhoeffer makes the point if you are grasped by God you have got to testify. How many of you are Baylor Bear fans? (A few people raise their hands.) Did you notice that some testified and others only hesitantly disclosed. Bonhoeffer is right that if you are captured by Scripture, if you are captured by the Word then you cannot help yourself, you are going to testify. We have this word by the greatest witness in the world, Jesus Christ. You see the whole world testifies to God. And the testimony that captures us is Scripture, for the writer of Psalm 19 the Torah. The law of the LORD is perfect in reviving the soul.

Let me tell you something about the law of the LORD. It is perfect. Let me tell you something about seminary, faculty, staff and seminarians. We are not. Did you even notice that? Some of y'all are new and haven't yet noticed that.

The law of the lord is perfect for reviving the soul. You are going to testify. Sometimes people are hesitant to testify for fear of getting it wrong. Psalm 19 says, of course, sometimes you will say the wrong thing. The law of the Lord is perfect and even your own mistakes will not mess it up. There will be a Sunday morning when the sermon will come through no matter how badly you misspoke. There will be a time in class when you thought you had no idea what is going on but God will speak through you and you will understand something that you did not know before. The law of the Lord is perfect but you are not. Please remember that during your seminary time. It will make seminary go a lot easier for all of us.

Don't be dumb has a couple of components and we will walk through them quickly.

Watch your mouth

Don't be dumb means you want to watch your mouth. ~~May~~ the words of my mouth..." The use of *'amar*, ~~to~~ say" is used as a noun here. The word occurs some three thousand times in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. It is often a verb meaning ~~to~~ say". But here it is a noun referring to the mouth, the place where *'saying* comes from. May the sayings of my mouth be acceptable. Don't be dumb!

Mind your mind

Don't be dumb, also means pay attention to your internals. The NRSV talks about this as the meditations. ~~The Meditations~~" is an interesting phrase. The Hebrew here can mean musical ruminations. Pay attention to the rhythms of your heart and your head, the inside discernment. Sometimes you will be thinking and pondering questions such as ~~What is Paul saying here?~~ ~~What is Tertullian doing here?~~ You will try to figure out ~~How~~ do I present Rauchenbusch's argument?" Pay attention to the meditations, to the rhythms. As you work together and pray together in covenant groups pay attention to the heart, the inside discernment.

Watch your hands

Don't be dumb. The third element is watch your hands. Some of you thought, that being an Old Testament professor that I would get out of here without talking about Jesus, but y'all would be wrong. The third element of don't be dumb is to watch your hands. The book of James reminds us that while we are students, we are student who have heard the mission of God. You will hear the word mission more times than you can count before you graduate from Truett Seminary. Mission is putting the Word into action in context. Think of it as testimony in action as well as speech.

James chides us, —Don't just be hearers of the word but be doers of the word. —Because hearers of the Word who do not do anything forget what they look like but doers of the word have their identity forged into Christ and the Church. In classes, whether it is Mentoring or Scriptures IV the goal is to be forged into the identity of Christ and the Church.

We do this because we saw it at work in the person who made us a community, Jesus Christ. For indeed Jesus modeled for us what it meant to be a witness to the Father in what he said. Jesus modeled for us the rhythms of the heart and the deliberations of the mind. Jesus modeled for us the work of the hands. If you want to be an embodiment of Jesus' community it is important that you not be dumb. And to not be dumb means that you will spend this time in seminary watching your mouth, watching your heart, and watching your hands.

May God make it so!

How Do You Keep At Ministry?
John 3:1-21
William Willimon
Fall Preaching Convocation

I suggested last evening to those who came to the Preaching Conference as pastors, that the reason they were there, whether they knew it or not, was rallying around the question, —How do you keep at ministry?”

Christian Ministry is a demanding vocation. And you seminarians preparing for and just starting out in your ministries I suggest to you, that’s your assignment while you are here. To get enough stuff to keep you at a peculiarly demanding vocation for the rest of your life. It isn’t easy. How do you do that? Thus, I take you to this morning’s gospel, the story of the nocturnal visit of Nicodemus to Jesus.

Nicodemus is identified as a ruler of the Jews. He is a synagogue official, a member of the Sanhedrin, right up there at the top of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. He is a ruler of the Jews. He is in charge of spiritual matters there in the synagogue. And, he comes to Jesus by night. You know in the gospel of John, these tales, particularly that expression, “by night”, “it was night,” it’s fraught with meaning. Why does he come to Jesus at night? Why couldn’t he get everything he needed from Jesus during the day? Well, maybe he doesn’t want anybody to see him, coming to this uneducated, un-credentialed rabbi, this wandering itinerant rabbi. Coming to him at night, you know he’s got a reputation here, he can’t be seen as weak or as somebody that doesn’t have the answers. After all, that’s what religious leaders are sort-of paid to do is to have the answers. That’s why you’re in seminary, to get the answers! People come to us with their questions and we give them the officially sanctioned answer.

So, Nicodemus goes there by night, to Jesus. And you can tell he's a ruler, you can tell he's in charge. Because he comes to Jesus, first of all, talking about what *he* knows before he asks Jesus, what *he* knows.

—Now we know, we have done an investigation and we know that you must be a prophet sent from God cause nobody can do what you've done, except... And we know..."

And in the middle of his exposition of all that he knows, Jesus blurts out, —You gotta' be born again!"

And [Nicodemus] says, —Born again? How can you do that when you're old and go back in your mama's womb and come back out and...?"

And [Jesus] said, —Turn up your hearing aid, I didn't say again I said another'. You gotta' be born from above! You gotta' be born from top to bottom. From heaven, down. Up-side-down."

—Well how?"

—Hey! The wind blows where it will."

Nicodemus [says,] —~~A~~ you using nooma' in the kind of general sense of, like wind' or in the more specifically, spiritual sense of, like spirit'?"

And Jesus says, —Right!"

—What... how... how... wha... how can this...?"

And smart know-it-all Nicodemus, in just a few verses is rendered into this, babbling —Well, I... how... what, how... we... what... how can that hap... what...?"

But here's the thing I would like you to fasten on this morning in this rich story; and that is that Jesus says to Nicodemus, —You must be born another'. You must be born, from above'." Jesus said to his disciples, these fisherman, tax collectors, —Follow me." Jesus is confronted by a rich

man and he says to him, —Go, sell everything you’ve got, give it the poor, come back and you can be my disciple.” He said to the woman taken in adultery, —You go and you sin no more!” He said to the man that he healed from the demons, —Yo go home and you tell everybody what God’s done for you.”

But only to Nicodemus, did he say, —You must be born from above.” He doesn’t say that to anybody else, just this one person, Nicodemus.

Nicodemus, a synagogue ruler.

An ecclesiastical bureaucrat.

An official.

Somebody whose in charge of God’s Kingdom stuff.

Me.

The only person Jesus looked at and said, —You know, I’ve never seen anybody that needed to be shoved back through the birth canal and born. I’ve never seen anybody that needed to get ripped up by the nooma’ than somebody like you.” The only person Jesus said to be born again, to be born anew, to be born from above, is somebody who looks like me, somebody who’s in charge of something, somebody who’s an official of the church.

Isn’t that interesting? I want you to listen because just about everybody here is either currently an official of the church, a ruler of the Christians or preparing to be one. And it was only to people like us that he said —You must be born from above.” And that’s a challenging word, because look, we’re clergy and what do clergy do? Well, clergy, we tend to pacify people and keep everybody [calm]. You know,

—Settle down, settle down. Quit throwing things, settle down.”

We tend to be good at stabilization, good and continuity. You come to church to kind of settle [people].

—I know you have an anxious, demanding life, but you come to church and we just kind of [provide a] peaceful place. There's a sweet, sweet spirit here that will tone you down some."

I remember when I was at seminary, James Didus taught pastoral counseling at my seminary. [He] told us about research he had done on the personality types who come into the ministry. And from interviewing hundreds of seminarians he came up with a theory that he called, the Little Adult. And his theory was that a very high percentage of us come into the ministry as little adults. We grew up, we weren't really children like other children. We were like little adults. We were the ones that the teacher left in charge of the class to take names when the teacher had to go down to the principal's office. We were the one that was on the school patrol. We were only elected to class office, if those elections were done on the basis of people the other students respected. But we were never elected if the elections were on the basis of popularity or people they liked. The Little Adult. And you see, his thesis was, these people that just enjoy enforcing adult rules as kids when we grow up, we get to enforce the big adult rules with all these wayward adults. The Little Adult. It's kind of devastating because for most of us there, it fit.

When I travel, as I did yesterday, I got to the motel room, I got out my shaving materials, toothbrush, toothpaste, put everything out, just like it is at home. Because, you know, when you're on the road, it can be kind of disruptive and it's just good to have a few things in place when you stagger out of bed in the morning, everything is right there in its place. I think we put a high value on that. I notice, in dealing with churches pastors secretly want for this place to be transformed, they want for this dying church to be on the move again and start growing, but they just don't want to hurt anybody in doing it. They want a do it in such a way that we can fully honor the past and

all those dear people who came before us and still not be enslaved to those people and move forward. And it's very difficult. But, we're clergy and we just hope there's some way to bring it all along and without too much disruption.

[I have] a friend and he's an Episcopal priest and he decided to have a mid-life crisis. And so, the only way to do that is to go buy a motorcycle. So he went to this motorcycle place and the salesman is saying —Oh, this baby here, it's unbelievable. This little baby here can outrun anything on the highway. I tell you, we're looking at 0-80 in, I don't know, 2-3 seconds. It's just amazing”

And then the salesman said, —What do you for a living?”

My friend replied, —I'm a pastor, I'm an Episcopal priest.”

And suddenly the salesman said, —Hey! This is a very, very safe motorcycle. There is no way you could get hurt on this motorcycle.

Jesus in the gospels is represented, curiously as peripatetic. He never stays anywhere long. He is always on the move. And thus it's not that weird to hear Jesus say to this established, powerful church official —You gotta' get out of here, you gotta' move. You gotta' be born from above and the wind blows where it wills. I think one of the biggest mistakes you can make here at seminary is to think that you work hard in seminary and do all the assignments and [you think] that —You got it. —Got out of seminary, I went to a great seminary, I got the stuff, I got it! And I'm going to go out and deliver that stuff in my first church. And I'm gonna' fine tune it and then I'll deliver that stuff in my next church. And the next and the next. Because I got my degree, and I got the stuff.”

Well, unfortunately, this isn't the law school where you can get away with that kind of stuff. We serve a Living God, ok? A God whose nature it is

to be in motion, on the road, on the move. In my current job, here late in life, I get called to a ministry. The Episcopacy, a job for which I had very little experience and no talent. And that means that every day in my new job. I have to ask for help. I walk in there and they say,

—Bishop, it bothers us you’ve never even been a district superintendent and now you’re the Bishop and running all this.”

And I said, —That’s only *one* of my virtues!”

I tell you, maybe this is just me justifying myself, there’s a lot to be said of experience and knowledge. There’s a lot to be said for stupidity too. Because my first year or so, I would just wander around saying, —Hey, show me how you do this? How do y’all normally make these decisions. How do you do this?”

And then they would explain it to me, —We do that, we do that.”

And I would say, —That’s the dumbest thing I ever saw in my life. Are you getting the results you want from that? Are you happy with what you got? Would you like to think about something else, something different?” And it bothers me now that I’ve been in this job for six years, I note that I’m asking fewer questions. I note that I have fewer days when I am utterly dumbfounded. I’m starting to think that I know something. I’m starting to really get a kind of coherent plan together. And I think therefore, that I am less valuable, to a moribund, decaying organization than I was when I was stupid.

My wife and I have noted, in a weird sense, we feel younger now, in our marriage, in our lives, than we did twenty years ago. What’s that about? Well, I think now, Sunday morning going out to a little church together, I said, —This is kind of like us in the first days of our ministry, going out to some dead little church out in the wilderness. Maybe that’s why we feel young.” I tell

you, I think I feel younger because I have been moved by my vocation out of my comfort zone. I've been moved away from that world that I had learned how to work pretty well to my advantage. I've been moved out there away from people who are just like me and think like me and who got where they are the same ways I got there. I feel like I'm twenty-two again and I'm out in my first little parish in Georgia. And I'm looking there thinking, "Who are you people? What is this?" And thus I feel sort of born again.

It's very important for a leader of any organization, but maybe particularly the church, to be supple, to be adaptive. Adaptive leadership, that doesn't just arrive with a bunch of iron-clad principals. "This is the way I do it! It worked for me at the last place, I'm sure it's work here. This is what I tend to enjoy, [etc.]." You gotta adapt! We're called servant leaders. We've got to somehow serve in such a way that we give the leadership needed by this church in this time in this place. I think, at least in my church family, we put way too much stress on continuity and stability and seniority, and the virtues that old people just love, because they work to our advantage. What we need now is adaptability and movement and innovation, and change and throwing out and starting over! That's a good principal of leadership.

And yet, for pastors if you can find a book that's got great principals, for how to lead a church, with sure-fire, knock-down, no-fail principals for how to lead a church, my advice to you is you go worship those principals and don't fool with Jesus Christ, because it'll be easier that way.

We don't worship a principal of good leadership, we worship Jesus who is alive and on the move and constantly surprising us with what he says. He looks at Nicodemus and says, "I don't know when I've been around anybody who knows so damn much, since you're such a ruler and all. You need to be born again about as bad as anybody I've ever seen." You can't do

this unless you're born from above. And it's therefore one of the great things I love about being a pastor. If you're going to be a faithful pastor, you've got to keep reinventing yourself and reaching out for help and asking questions and being surprised by who God sends you to help you do this work in this time in this place [which is] different from the people at the last place. It can be great!

As a bishop, what I do is mainly sit in my office and I get letters. Letters from laity complaining about you, the clergy. I got this letter that said, —Our pastor has been seen at a bar, down there next to the church!” And I thought of the pastor, kind of harmless, kind of older guy, I was kind of surprised with this. Well, I can certainly understand as a pastor, having a drinking problem. You people are a good rational for that. But I called the pastor and I said —Hey I got this letter from a lay person that said you've been seen a couple of times at this bar down near the church! What is this?”

And he said, —Well, it's not just a couple of times, I'm usually down there every Thursday and Friday and most Saturdays.”

I said, —Aa bar? We're Methodist! You know you can't do that! The laity don't know how to take this! A pastor down there at bar! What are you doing in that bar?”

He said, —Bishop, have you looked at our numbers? This church has been in precipitous decline for twenty years. I know why I was sent here was to close it. Have you noticed that we've had more professions of faith this year than we've had in the last ten years combined? Eighteen people brought to Christ and ten of those people I met in that bar! They thought God was mad at them until they heard about Wesleyan Christianity. I'm going to baptize another couple Sunday, him and his partner that I met in that bar.”

I said, —Wow, have you always enjoyed working with people of alternative lifestyles?”

And he said, —No, I really can't stand em. You know, those guys really make me really uncomfortable. I don't like some of the stuff they're into and some of the stuff they're doing."

And I said, —Really? Well that kind of makes it all the more amazing that you're hanging out at this bar so much."

And he said, —Look Bishop, if you can figure out a way to keep Jesus Christ out of that bar, I'll stay out of that bar!"

I said, —Thank you."

How is it possible to stay at ministry? What do you have to have to make it? Well, in a fundamental sense, that's not your problem. The spirit blows where it will. That's your hope. And when you're working with Jesus, you never get so smart and so old and so fixed and so sure what you're doing, that you might not just get born from above when you're least expecting it. Jesus Christ is on the move and we can't worship him unless we're willing to go with him.

I was at a large church awhile back. The pastor is on the verge of retirement. I went to the early service, the contemporary service, their fastest growing service. I got in, there are 500 people in there, mostly young families and there's Don. Don who's about my age. And Don's sittin' on a stool and got on like a sweater. And Don's up there and he's preaching and he's talking about a text and he said, —This is what I think this text is about. Take a look." And there was a film clip, cut right into the sermon! Then Don talked a little more, walked around. Kind of looked like a really old Shane Claiborne. I'm just amazed! And then Don ends and he says, —This is it!" He points back on the screen and another 2-3 minute film clip comes up and then it ends. And Don says, —You want a new life, come on forward.

After it was over, I said, ~~Don~~, wow! That was amazing, how'd you learn to do that?"

He said, ~~Well~~, some people taught me to deliver a sermon in that way."

I said, ~~Wow~~, you are good! That's just amazing! That was so well done. It must take you hours to get that together."

And he said, ~~Yeah~~, it does, I have to spend a lot more time on it than I did with traditional sermons."

I said, ~~Well~~ you're so at ease in it, you're so good at it."

He said, ~~Bishop~~, I hate doing that! I can't stand those stupid film clips!"

And I said, ~~Really?~~"

And he said, ~~I~~'ve watched more trashy movies than I can count to get those film clips! I can't stand it!"

I said, ~~Really?~~"

And he said, ~~But~~, you know, this service has become the door to our church and we're receiving more people and younger people in that service than anywhere else. So darn'em! They respond to it, so, what can I do? I gotta do it! I'm just too old to be out here in blue jeans."

I said, ~~Well Don~~, you are really good, you didn't even know you had a talent for that."

And he looked at me and he said, ~~Hey~~, the wind blows where it will."

Amen.

Gazing at the Glory: Closer to the Center
John 17:20-24
Joel C. Gregory
Professor of Preaching

When I was in first grade, I considered it a real feat to find out how many red dots were in the green pinwheels of all the 1950s-style stained glass windows on both sides of the sanctuary. Strangely enough, I'm back to counting them now when I attend my home church. I can tell you that there are five windows close to the ceiling, each with 12 red dots, which comes to a total of 60. There are four windows at eye level. Each of them has eight red dots, totaling 32. These 92 red dots inside the green pinwheels, multiplied by the windows in both walls, equal 184 red dots.

Now, I'm not quite as excited about adding them up as I was back then in first grade, but that goes without saying. Sometimes if I look around at the people sitting there in the real church, it just makes me want to count red dots.

Over there is a couple who didn't like me when I was a teenager, and they don't like me now either. (This invariable constant of Baptists disliking others in the church is as old as dirt; it's just there.) Over here is a sweet old man who taught me in Sunday school when I was a child. Now an octogenarian, he teaches the adult Sunday school class. It seems like he's gotten to be more like Jesus ever since I was a child. And over here is a row of ladies who used to be in Sunday school with my late mother. They know so much about me that it makes me nervous just to sit in front of them.

Over there is another childhood friend my age. He was in Sunday school that day when Terry Dan Brooks took some scissors and cut my clip-on tie in two. We were both exiled to our parents' Sunday school class, which

was the ultimate humiliation—having to sit there for either some kind of reformatory or retributive punishment.

It is far easier to love the church universal than it is to love the church local. I could get all sappy thinking about a wedgewood-blue Orthodox cathedral in St. Petersburg, Russia, where I visited church because it's way over there. But it's a different thing to look in the pew right around me. I can feel wonderful up in the Washington National Cathedral when I remember the great stories about that church where national events are held. It's another thing to look up and down the pew right by me.

Sometimes it's helpful to listen to the Devil when you're doing church work. Remember Screwtape, who first visited C.S. Lewis in his rooms at Magdalen College in July of 1941? You may have run into this senior demon who wrote letters to his tempter nephew Wormwood about that very problem I've described.

My dear Wormwood,

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread but through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is the spectacle which makes even our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham, Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face, bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks around him, he sees just that selection of his

neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided Let his mind flit to and fro between an expression like “the body of Christ” and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains Your patient, thanks to Our Father below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religious must therefore be somewhat ridiculous. At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of “Christians” in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial. His mind is full of togas and sandals and armour and bare legs and the mere fact that the other people in church wear modern clothes is a real—though of course an unconscious—difficulty to him. Never let it come to the surface; never let him ask what he expected them to look like. Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords.

Your affectionate uncle,
Screwtape

That’s the rub of it, isn’t it? It’s not just that we have to love the church universal; we also have to love those people in the pews around us and be a community with them, even when they have known everything about us since we were a baby.

Jesus Looks Through His Disciples and Prays for Us

We’re in John 17. Maybe it’s in the upper room. The firelight from the lamps causes the shadows of the eleven to play against the wall. There are still some crumbs from the Passover bread on their fingers. The tart tannins of

the Passover wine may still be in their mouths. Lamb bones lay askew on their plates.

Jesus has already prayed for Himself, as well as the eleven. But now in verse 20 He says, “I’m not asking on the behalf of these alone, but those who are believing in Me through their word.” He’s using the present tense form of the word “believing” in the future sense, as if it is already happening.

By the firelight that is flickering in Peter’s eyes, Jesus not only looks at His close disciple, but He also looks *through* him. Somehow behind the face of Peter, He sees a line of believers extending through Pentecost, Cornelius, and all the way throughout to the horizon. He says, “I’m praying for them.” There’s John. He looks at John, and there behind Him at that church in Ephesus and the Christians of Turkey and the Greek isles. Somehow that line sneaks all the way out to infinity. And He says, “I’m praying for them.” He looks at Thomas. If the legends are correct, behind Thomas He sees a line of swarthy faces and the indigenous church of India. Then He looks at that gap where Judas would have been, and maybe He sees Saul of Tarsus and the churches of the west. He says, “I am praying for them who are believing on Me through these.”

I know we Baptists are not really comfortable with the idea of apostolic succession. And yet, in one sense we’re all part of an apostolic succession, whether we acknowledge it or not. Have you ever been to that website called ancestry.com? You put in your name, your grandfather’s name, and the date and place. If you’re willing to get out your credit card, you can see where you all came from. In a sense, if we were able, there could be a spiritualancestry.com. We heard from somebody who heard from somebody who heard from somebody—all the way back to those eleven around that table, or the one who wasn’t there, Saul of Tarsus (Paul). We can go all the

way back. In a sense, Jesus in this passage is looking at *us*.

At Sacré-Coeur on Montmartre in Paris, the hill that looms over the city, there's a beautiful white basilica that was built as a pledge by two businesspersons if God would prosper them. In the apse of this church is the largest mosaic of Jesus in the world. It's an interesting study in perspective because He's always looking at you. No matter whether you look straight at Him, go to the far side aisle, walk over to the other side, or even stand at an oblique angle, He's still looking at you. In a sense He is looking right at you in this passage.

Jesus Prays That We All Might Be One

Do you ever think about what He might have been praying that night? I would have been distracted. Judas is already on his way to lead the torchlight parade of betrayal. Peter is sitting right there, hugging himself to death and saying, "I'll go to prison and death," when Jesus had already heard the curse of denial. There's Caiaphas over there, ready to step on Jesus like we'd step on a cockroach in the baptistry. Then there's Pilate, ready to hand Him over, just to get Him out of the way.

Ancient philosophies about unity

Jesus might have been distracted, but do you know what He prays? "I pray that they might be one . . . so that the world might believe that You sent Me." Now, that's not a new idea. The ancient world was at least as obsessed as we are with being one. They had theories about it. Some thought monotheism made everybody one, a philosophy that was not only espoused by the Hebrews but by people such as the Greek philosopher Plutarch: if we all believe in one God, we'll all be one.

Others thought that our shared humanity made us one. Protagoras and Alexander the Great both held this belief. Alexander the Great wanted everyone to be one so much that after he defeated them, he joined them. He started dressing like a barbarian and adopted barbarian customs, hoping that he could get everybody together and be one.

Another school of thought said that we can get everybody to be one if we could just enact perfect laws. Read Plato's *Republic*. And still others believed what somebody called a cosmological cosmopolitanism, which is almost as hard to do as it is to say. This philosophy says that the world should just be one big, happy city. Alexander and Philo shared that idea.

True unity in Christ: a reality that is out of this world

These philosophers were worried about getting together, but here comes Jesus crashing into all of that failure with something that has absolutely no analogy. He says, "I pray they might be one, just as I am in you and you are in Me and we are in them." Now, if you understand that on the first reading, you are a hermeneutical Einstein. I have to think about that: "Just as I am in you and you are in Me, we're in them." It's literally something out of this world.

When I read this verse, I think about those Russian nesting dolls designed to hold a president inside of a president or a dictator inside of a dictator. You can also get Barbie dolls inside of Barbie dolls now. That's a ridiculous thought, isn't it? But in a way it's not because that's about as close as our mere, finite human minds can get to what Jesus was talking about when He said, "The only thing that keeps God's people one is that they're somehow swept away into a reality that is literally out of this world."

Whitaker, in his commentary on John, actually takes a whole page to draw a circle—one circle inside a circle inside a circle to help us understand. Even that seems faintly short of the mark.

Sometimes We Strive for Uniformity, Not Unity

Uniform organization

We try other things to make us one. We church folks think that if we can just get things organized the right way, we'll all be able to get together. That impulse runs deeply in us. Some of us think that if we can all be free churches who vote on everything, we'll be united. Others believe that if we have connectional churches that get together, we'll achieve oneness. Still others think that if we can be a monarchical church that has a magisterium, a teaching authority, it will keep us all one. Yet, that particular system hasn't really worked well at all. The two biggest denominations in the world that use it—Catholicism and Orthodoxy—have mutually anathematized one another. And even though the Pope and the Patriarch meet, they have both decreed long ago that the other one is headed straight for the netherworld.

Organization does not keep us one. Oh, we can keep things organized. I can go to Greenwood Cemetery and look down at the gravestones that are in a perfectly straight line, but everything's dead. Ice cubes coming out of an icemaker are uniform, but they're cold because they're ice.

Uniform doctrine

Jesus didn't pray that we'd all have the same doctrine so that we would be one. Some of our lives have been framed by an argument about certain doctrines, such as the way we got the Bible. We've watched lives and families and churches and communities divided over arguments about issues like that.

Uniform niceness

Niceness doesn't make us one either. Around these parts, sometimes it seems like unity is just the doctrine of niceness—"If we could all be nice, then we'll have unity." It's nice to be nice, but niceness doesn't make us one.

In fact, in a seminary community where we spend all day dealing with ultimate concerns, niceness can wear thin. We've gathered here together, and some of us have come from churches that may only be just one half-step away from Unitarianism. Others of us have come from churches where we sing, "There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood." And we're all right here together.

If you don't think niceness can wear thin, go back to Marburg Castle during the Reformation. There's Huldrych Zwingli holding out his hand. "Here Luther, we agree on 14 things. The only thing we can't agree on is the nature of the sacrament. Luther, I'd rather be your friend and Melancthon's than anybody else in the world. Take my hand." Luther said no.

No, genuine unity is something different than that. It occurs through the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son, and us in them, and being swept away by something that's absolutely a gift. It is not uniformity; it is unity.

Thomas Merton, writing about this in his book on contemplation and the difficulty of doing it even as a monk, says,

Christian folks' minds and judgments and their desires, their human characters and faculties . . . are all imprisoned in the slag of an inescapable egotism which pure love has not yet been able to refine. As long as we're on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is a resetting of a Body of broken

bones. Even saints cannot live with saints without some anguish, without some pain at the differences that come between them.

Gazing at the Glory of Christ Brings True Unity

Is this a counsel of despair? No, Jesus gives us a hint—a hint that I call, —~~g~~azing at the glory.” In verse 22, they’re overhearing His prayer: —The glory which you have given to Me, I have given to them.” I don’t know what that was, but it has something to do with John 1:14, —The Word became flesh and lived among us. We saw His glory.” It has something to do with what happened at Cana, when they saved the best wine for last. The author of the fourth Gospel says, —He showed them His glory.” They got just enough glimpses of that to keep a group like them together.

Have you ever considered the group to whom He gave the keys of the Kingdom? Good night! Here’s Peter—I don’t have to tell you about him. Here’s James and John. Why in the world do we call John the apostle of love? At one point, John said, —If they won’t let You in town, Jesus, let’s call down fire and burn up the whole place.” Here’s Thomas, who’s doubted all along. Here’s Philip. Everywhere Philip showed up, he was clueless. You talk about an unusual church business meeting: here’s Matthew who sold out to Rome to collect taxes and Simon the Zealot, who would have liked to have slit the throats of people like Matthew.

How in the world did all of those people ever stay together, and why did He give them the keys? There’s only one answer—because they kept on in spite of it all, gazing at the glory. Every one of those signs and wonderworks caused that disparate group to get closer and closer. And just like following the spokes of a wheel toward the hub, the closer you get to the center, inevitably the closer you get to one another.

But there's already a ~~not~~ yet" in this passage because He looks out ahead to something else. He prays in verse 24, ~~F~~ather, I desire that they also whom You've given Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory." That's the ~~not~~ yet" of the ~~already~~." Looking far out beyond the horizon, He looks at those eleven and knows what they're going to face. If early church tradition is right, all but one of them would die for their testimony.

Do you know that we really see more things that look glorious in a sense than they ever saw? In those little house churches, they gathered by lamplight, hiding for several years. They never even saw a stained glass window of a triumphant cosmic Christ. Yet we've seen that. They never saw a steeple thrust up toward heaven with a gold cross on top of it so that 100,000 people a day driving down the freeway will look over and see it. They never had any idea that anything like that would ever happen. They never even saw a codex (a bound Bible) in that primitive church.

Jesus looked at them and saw everything that they wouldn't see. He said, ~~I~~hope someday they'll be with Me so they can see what this is all about." You might say, ~~W~~ell preacher, are you telling us that we'll stay as one here in the community at Truett because we gaze at the glory? Does that mean we walk around the hallways with our eyes looking up, mumbling to one another something like a chant?" No, I can't really tell you any more than what Jesus said in John because it is literally out of this world. ~~I~~in them, You in Me, I in You." Look at it.

Some years ago I was preaching at a meeting of the European Baptist Convention, those sixty or seventy English-speaking expatriate churches from England and the rest of Europe. They know how to have church camp there. We were meeting at Interlaken in Switzerland. That somewhat more attractive

that most state church camps. On a day that the late Dr. William Hendricks and I were speaking together, we decided to take the Jungfraubahn, the world's highest train trip. There's a train that goes from Interlaken up toward the three peaks: the Jungfrau, the Mönch, and the Eiger. The station at the top, the Jungfrauoch, is the highest railway in Europe. It's a small, crowded cog railway. That day, it was hot.

Most of the way, we were going through a tunnel, and it was somewhat discouraging. There were all kinds of people there—not only Europeans. I heard five different languages, including an Asian dialect. It was tense, and not really a pleasant ride. We were jammed in there, all speaking different languages and getting on one another's nerves. But then, we came out of the tunnel at the Jungfrauoch. To this day, it's the most spectacular sight I have ever seen—alpine peaks on either side as far as the eye could see the horizon and a massive glacier punctuated by them and going on toward infinity. The strangest thing happened: Everybody got quiet. Mouths were open in astonishment, eyes were staring, hearts were pounding. All of a sudden we were gazing at the most glorious thing any of us had ever seen. And in that moment, everybody on that little cog train was one.

Our hope for unity, here and beyond here, is that we learn what it means to gaze at the glory. When we're closer to the center, we're closer to one another. If on a lower, lesser, lighter level physical manifestations of natural glory make people one how much more on a higher, holier, heavier level could we be one gazing at the glory.

Your Community Is Too Small
Isaiah 49:1-6
David Wilhite
Assistant Professor of Christian Theology

Good morning everyone.

As I was thinking about this sermon series, Community and the People of God, I was doing some sociological research on a database that Baylor gives us access to. Okay, I was on Facebook. I was looking at some pictures that some of my friends had uploaded to their wall. They had just recently moved to Boston and they were seeing some of the historical sites and they put up pictures of all of the places they had been. One picture in particular caught everyone's attention and got the most comments. It was a picture of a very simple sign hanging on the side of the building. It had a hand pointing inside the door, and one word- Cheers.

And what caught my attention was, within moments, you know Facebook records the time of every comment, within moments someone wrote under the picture; ~~—~~“sometimes you wanna go.” Then minutes later someone wrote ~~—~~“we everybody knows your name.” Just about every word of that song went up there. It's been years since that show went off the air, but still there is something about this idea of a place you can go to find community, that captures our imagination.

I wrote to my friends on a private message, not on their wall, and I asked if they went inside, because I wanted to know if I should report them to their pastor. No, I wanted to know if when you went inside did it feel like an authentic place you can go? I didn't really expect everyone to shout out their name when they went in, ~~—~~Norm, Frazier.” Did it feel like that kind of place, or was it more of a tourist trap? And they wrote back and they said No, it was tourist-y with a capital T.

Now I realize this is a seminary chapel, and I also recognize that this is an academic institution, and I probably could have started off with a more sophisticated way of talking about community. For example I remember the French philosopher, the famous Deconstructionist, Jacques Derrida. He refused to use this word community because he always saw it as exclusive and exclusionary. He himself was Jewish, even though he was an atheist in his own beliefs, but his people, (the Jews) had too often been on the outside of what community is, and he thought that community was an unhealthy word.

In 1961 JB Phillips wrote a famous book –“Your God is Too Small.” Now Phillips didn’t really think you had a pocket-sized God. He thought your view of God, your vision of God is too small. I think we could adapt Phillips’ idea for our message today. Your community is too small. Whether you’re talking about our pop culture’s idea of “looking for a place you can go,” or a philosophical understanding of community as “too limited, and too exclusionary,” your community or at least your vision of community is too small.

To help us think about that I’m going to look at Isaiah 49:1-6. When I thought about a seminary sermon I was looking forward to really delving into the questions and the scholarly debates that go on with Isaiah. You would do this in any sermon and it would form the background of your preaching, here I thought we would just really argue about what’s going on here, and while I want to take that very seriously, I realize as I put this all together that it might take too much of our time, and I want you to get to class on time. So I’m going to run through the options for us, in order to set up what I’m doing, and I hope you’ll bear with me because I’m going to do this very quick. Are you ready? Here we go.

Now you all know I'm an Early Church scholar and so I always like to hear what the Early Church wants to say, and if you ask the church fathers, —~~who~~ is this servant Isaiah?" they will tell you ~~the~~ answer is Jesus." Well, amen to that. I really do think we should listen to the Early Church. I do think we should take them a little more seriously than we Baptists typically do, but I also sincerely think that we should hear this text on its own terms, and that's what I want to try to do this morning.

And when you try to understand the history of this text there are two interrelated questions about the author and the date. We can understand that this is Isaiah himself as the title says and he's writing during the Assyrian period prophetically foretelling what it will be like in exile. Or this could be, since it seems to assume a period of exile from chapter 40-55, we could assume that this is actually written during the Babylonian period, maybe in Isaiah's name by a deuterio-Isaiah. Or maybe it's a very late compilation of prophetic utterances put together under this title in order to show those returning from exile to a decimated homeland that God has been comforting them all along.

Even if you figured out all of the history, we would still have to ask about the identity of the servant. And the options fall into two broad categories: the individual and the corporate. Under the individual option we have several possibilities. The servant could be Isaiah himself, or maybe deuterio-Isaiah. Or maybe the servant is Jeremiah because much of the language here virtually mirrors Jeremiah's call and story. Or maybe it is Moses, because a lot of language in here refers to the Exodus or maybe it's a messianic King like Zerubbabel who is seen to restore Israel to its homeland, or maybe it's King Cyrus of Persia, who has already been called God's

anointed one in this section of Isaiah. Or maybe it is the future Messiah that is to come, also known as Jesus. Now that is just the individual options.

We also have the corporate options which are threefold. The servant could be Israel, the whole embodied Israel figuratively talked about as a servant except for those parts where the servant is supposed to call Israel back to God, which doesn't quite fit. Maybe this sounds like Moses, sounds like Elijah, sounds like Isaiah, sounds like Jeremiah, because it's meant to typify the entire prophetic school who serves Israel to call them back to God. Or maybe this is Israel, but not all Israel is truly Israel, this is the spiritual Israel, ~~the~~ the righteous remnant who will call back Israel according to the flesh."

Once you figure out all of these possibilities in the commentaries you quickly realize that the battle lines have been drawn. On one side of the valley there are all of the German Protestant Liberals and they are led by their champion of a man, in German, Goliath, is pronounced ~~Gesenius~~". And he says ~~just~~ read the text on its own terms and you will clearly see it assumes a period of exile.

Then on the other side of the valley there are all the American Evangelicals they are led by their young leader and by young I mean, E.J. Young. And he says, ~~someone~~ should slay these uncircumcised blasphemers! Just read the text on its own terms and you will clearly hear this is Isaiah speaking." After both sides refuse to actually engage each other the game is called on account of rain and they both go home and the only one left standing on the field is a small child, that is Brevard Childs, and he says ~~Just~~ hear the voice of Isaiah speaking to those in Exile, you unchrist-like bunch of rationalists."

As I was sitting there in my office with all these commentaries piled around me suddenly the door burst open and in flew Saint Phillip himself, and

he screamed at me ~~do~~ “do you understand what you are reading?” And then it turns out I had been dreaming, I fell asleep reading Beal and Carsons commentary on *The New Testaments Use of the Old Testament*. Here is my attempt to contextualize what we are reading.

Imagine you have just set up your canopy for a nice shady day over your masters goods that you are selling in the Babylonian marketplace. It’s going to be a good day. You have a good spot close to the city gates you have a nice view of all who will pass by and a nice breeze. But your day is once again interrupted by one of these street evangelists who is constantly coming through shouting and screaming, and scaring off all of your customers. One time he shouts ~~com~~ “comfort, comfort, my people,” and you think to yourself, ~~Yeah~~ “comfort. I would just settle for some peace and quiet.” And the next time he comes along and he’s hollering about the ~~co~~ “coastland, islands, people from afar listen to me.” And you do the math in your head and you think ~~ow~~ “if you went northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest, it would be about an equal distance to get to the Black sea, the Caspian sea, the Red sea, the Persian sea, and you would have to travel days if not weeks to get there, why is this guy talking about those at the far ends of the earth?”

He comes along another time saying, ~~Here~~ “here me, oh Jacob, listen, oh Israel.” And you think, ~~Yeah~~ “yeah, yeah I’m listening but I feel like I’ve heard all this before.”

One day he is preaching about King Cyrus of Persia, and you kind of nod like this (nodding). ~~Yeah~~ “Cyrus is one of the good guys,” and you are like, ~~Now~~ “here’s change we can believe in.” The next time he comes along preaching about Babylon, and it’s a dirge of, ~~Babylon~~ “Babylon, come and wallow in the dust.” And now, now he’s preaching! Amen to that! Babylon deserves whatever Persia gives it.” Next time he comes along and he’s crying again.

Our passage 49 [says,]—Isten to me oh Islands pay attention you peoples from afar.” Why is he talking about these islands, the coastlands far-far away, and for one brief moment your horizons are expanded just a bit and you have to take into account everything outside of your immediate vision. But you think, —Why is he talking about those people? Who cares about them? I just want to be left alone, if anything I just want to go home. Who cares about them? Who cares about them?”

Henry Martin was an Anglican Missionary. He preached in Persia and in the ancient regions around Babylon. He died at the age of 31 because he had spent his life exhausted himself trying to preach to the people at the far ends of the earth. He cared about them, but he didn’t always. When he was a young man, he went to Cambridge. He went there to study the classics, the Greek language. And all of the New Testament professors said, —Aren”. And he studied the classics of the Latin language, and all Gods people said, —Aren”. But he found out he also excelled in Math. He won the top prize in Cambridge in mathematics. Everyone knew that Henry Martin had a bright career ahead of him he would probably stay and be a lecturer at Cambridge. But while he was there he attended a church ministered by Charles Simeon. Charles Simeon was an Anglican Priest but he preached with the Methodist zeal and Simeon had a very bad habit of inviting into the church all of the commoners and the low class people and it was very often that the high society, respectable members of the church, would come in and find that their pews had been taken by some of the riff-raff. And as Henry Martin watched this scene unfold again and again, he had to rethink his understanding of community, his understanding of the people of God. It forced Henry Martin to rethink his own calling.

—“The Lord called me from the womb” says the servant in Isaiah 49:1. —“The Lord called me from the womb. From the body of my mother he named me. He has made me and my mouth into a sharp sword. He has made me into a polished arrow.” Again the language here virtually mirrors what we read about Jeremiah’s calling. There’s also a lot of imagery here that sounds like Moses being hid in God’s hand, like much of the passages in these chapters. When we think about calling, it reminds me of that famous line from the movie *The Blues Brothers*. Do you remember the scene in their car? It’s dark, they have their hats and their sunglasses on. And they say (In a Chicago accent), —“We’re on a mission from God.”

No matter what happens, no matter what stands in their way they cannot be deterred because they know, —“We’re on a mission from God.”

Now I just don’t really believe that’s how God’s calling works in our life. It is true sometimes God blesses his servants with divine foreknowledge. But most of us have to walk by faith, and not by sight.

It’s usually when we look back, all those wrong turns we thought we took, all those pitfalls we thought we were going into. When we look back we can see that those were God leading us around all of the problems that were in our way. It was like God was a shepherd calling his sheep all along. It’s when we look back we can say —“From my youth. No from before I was born the Lord called me.”

It’s when we look back we can say —“we’re on a mission from God.” But if we’re honest we don’t always sound that trusting. Most of us sound more like this servant. Notice, —“This is what the Lord has done, the Lord called me, the Lord made me.” But servants often have to say what this servant is going to say- this doubt that he seems to have. I said this sounds like Moses and Jeremiah. When Moses was first drawn from the river Nile, when

Pharaoh's daughter first lifted him out of the basket I doubt that Moses sat up and said, "The Lord called me from my womb, the Lord made me to be a polished arrow." We know that Jeremiah from his youth wasn't saying "the Lord named me from my mother's inside he made my mouth a sharp sword."

And to be honest I don't really think Jesus, young Jesus, young fully human Jesus thought this way. Luke 2:52 tells us that he had to grow not just in stature but also in wisdom. I doubt that Jesus was a young man seven years old in Alexandria saying "Hey Philo, did you know that God called me to be a sharp sword and a polished arrow?" I think Jesus had to come to fully understand his father's calling in his life. It's when we look back we can say God called us. But too often we say what this servant says in verse four. "I said I have toiled in vain I have spent my strength for nothing. Vanity." This again echoes what we hear in Moses, "God, why did you lead me out into this wilderness to lead this stiff-necked and hardheaded people?" And it echoes again the ceaseless lamentations of Jeremiah and I think we hear echoes of Elijah who just a few days ago was on Mount Carmel calling down fire out of heaven and then later he's on Mount Horeb wishing he could die. "God I'm the only one left standing for you and I've accomplished nothing."

I think even Jesus will cry out, this type of sentiment on the cross when he hollers to his father "Eli, Eloi, Lama Sabbachthani." My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Even Henry Martin, he was only 30 when he had already translated the New Testament into the Hindi-Urdu language for the first time in India. Then he went on to Persia and created the first ever New Testament translation into Persian. And then he had his first draft of his New Testament into Arabic all before he was thirty. Most of you aren't thirty, what have you been doing all of this time? But all of his accomplishments he

writes back home to England, and he says ~~in~~ all these years I've accomplished nothing."

You know I've never seen this with my own eyes, But I've been told by a reliable source that you can train a flea. Fleas are made to jump. If we were to jump the same distance to body height ratio we would jump 900 feet to jump the distance that a flea jumps. But if you put that flea in a jar, and screw the lid on tight, that flea will jump and it's going to learn its lesson. Pretty soon that flea learns. I don't know how long it takes the flea to learn, but pretty soon that flea learns that if it doesn't jump but a few inches there's a lot less pain in life. Once that happens you can take the lid off, and that flea is free to go into God's world, but that flea is still just jumping a few inches.

I'm afraid that flea syndrome happens to too many of us when we get into our ministry. God called us to jump. God made us to be servants. But we get out there and we hit our head against whatever lids people put on us. The famous deacon board is always out to get us, or the personnel committee, or maybe we hit our head against Sunday school attendance that won't increase, or church growth plans that don't seem to work, or neighborhoods that don't respond how we want them to respond. Whatever pain we are dealing with we soon learn it is just more comfortable in our ministry not to jump too high. Well, I think God has a word for you if that's the case.

I've only been here three years this is the start of my fourth year. I can't even count the number of times that some of you have sat in my office, sat in my chair, and said "I'm not even sure that God called me anymore," and you say "I'm not sure that I'm cut out for ministry." And I've had some of you big tough, strong guys who are supposed to be too big to cry. I've had you sit there and you start telling me about the pain you've been experiencing and it's all you can do to hold back the emotions. Well, if that's describing you this

morning, I have good news because there is another word which God has for his servant.

Notice the first few verses. This is what the Lord did: the Lord made me, the Lord called me. Then the servant's lament. He says, ~~But~~ I've toiled in vain I have spent my strength for nothing. Now we hear the Lord says something new in verse 5. ~~The~~ Lord who formed me from the womb, the Lord who made me to bring Jacob back to him," He says, ~~It~~ is too small a thing that you should only restore the tribes of Jacob. It is too small a thing. You should be a light to the nations, and my salvation to the ends of the earth."

Now very quickly I just want to point out, we need to not overlook the mission to Israel. We don't want to be too quick in our supersessionism. The mission to Israel is still valid. But it is too small a view of community. You know I mentioned the Blues Brothers, but I think they are a little too silly. It's not my favorite movie. My favorite movies are always the movies where there is a radical shift in paradigm. *The Matrix*, the movie of all movies, the first time I saw that and we thought this whole world around Neo was real and then it turns out it was nothing but a mirage of computer generated holograms. That just blew my mind. But if you're not a sci-fi person a tamer version of the same story; do you remember that Jim Carey movie *The Truman Show*? Poor old Truman, he was a good guy. He thought he had a real sense of community, a good neighborhood, a nice job, good people to work with. Turns out his whole life was nothing but a sound stage in Hollywood and all he had to do was walk to his horizon, open the door and go on out into the real world. You know in these movies the problem is not really with the world as it appears. The problem is with the characters vision of the world. Your community is too small. I think this is what God wants to remind everyone of his servants. Henry Martin knew that his community was too small. I said he was an

Anglican missionary. He was sent to India with the East India Trading Company to be a Chaplain to the English colonists there, but while there, he knew that it was too small a thing to only serve those in our inner circle. And he was constantly going outside of the walls of his church to preach the gospel to all nations.

I think we need to be reminded that sometimes our vision is too small a thing. You know the Blues Brothers never had that kind of paradigm shift. They are as naïve from the beginning as they are to the end. They walk into one bar and they ask the bar tender, —~~wa~~t kind of music you folks got here?” And the bar tender proudly responds, —~~w~~e got both kinds of music, country and western.” And all God’s people said, —Amen.” Well I’m afraid too many of us, too many of our churches, too many of our communities have a country and western mentality. We’ve got both kind of folks here, folks who look like us, and folks who think like us. We got both kind of people here, people who have heard the gospel all of their lives, and people who have heard the gospel almost all of their lives. This is why God wants to remind us that your community is too small. This has been true ever since he called Abraham and called him to be a light to the nations, and a blessing to the gentiles. And we’ll need to be reminded of this again until Jesus returns.

I need to fess up I don’t have any easy answers for you. I certainly don’t want to make it sound like all ministerial burnout is due to a lack of vision. I know that’s a complicated thing, but we need to be reminded that our community is too small, and I also want to be clear- I don’t have the easy way to see this unfold in our life. I suspect that nothing short of the spirit of God hovering over our ministry, nothing short of that will accomplish this. I looked on Amazon.com before coming here and there is no such textbook called —Missiology for Dummies” or the book,” The Idiots Guide to Evangelism” and

if it did it would not work. I don't have a 12-step program to church growth. I don't know how this is going to unfold. But I do know what God's vision of success looks like. It's given to us in Revelation chapter 7 where every people and tribe, every nation and tongue are gathered in community around God's throne and they're singing ~~salvation~~ to our God and to the lamb."

Oh, by the way this word salvation, 'it's used here in 49:6. It is too small a thing for you to only serve Israel. Your mission will be a light to the nations and my salvation will reach the ends of the earth. I couldn't help but notice this word salvation in Hebrew is Yeshua. Yeshua. Now I'm going to be very careful here because I want to uphold the same hermeneutical principals that we teach here. I really do stand by these same theories about how to exegete a passage not isogete a passage. You remember the difference right? Exegete is what you read out of the text, isogete is what you put back into the text something that is not there. My Old Testament professor told me, ~~Don't~~ read Jesus back into the Old Testament. He ain't there. His name is not on the page." Well I couldn't help but notice that this time, *his name is on the page*. You shall be my Yeshua, 'which will be Hellenized, Latinized, and Anglicized as Jesus.' The angel Gabriel will explicitly fulfill the Isaiah prophecy when he says to the virgin. You will conceive and bring forth a son, and you will call his name Yeshua, for he will yeshe". That is you shall call his name Jesus for he will be God's salvation. Now I grant you, I'm still trying a bit too hard to force this text into that application. So maybe I could turn this idea around on its head. Instead of asking how to read Jesus into this text, I wonder if I could ask, ~~What~~ would Jesus have read out of this text?" Imagine young man Jesus, still growing in stature and in wisdom. I can just see Jesus sitting by the gates of Nazareth listening to the elders debate the scriptures and suddenly he is called to attention when he hears his own name read from the

Isaiah scroll. You shall be my yeshua. I know Jesus is much more sophisticated than I am. He would not have tried to adopt this cognate of his name directly to himself. But we do know from Luke the first sermon recorded there, is Jesus reading from the Isaiah scroll saying. This is fulfilled in me. And I can imagine that Jesus is going to come to understand that he will be the fulfillment of everything that Israel is expecting. He will be God's servant. And it's true that Jesus himself did not, like Henry Martin, go to India and Persia and the ancient regions of Babylon. The resurrected Jesus did not stay on earth and go to the far ends of the earth. But I believe that in Jesus' mission to Israel he understood that —**h** was on a mission from God." And that's why Jesus can say —**H** I be lifted up I will draw all unto me, that is, all nations, all tribes, all peoples, all tongues, servants of God."

People of God, your community is too small, or at least your vision of community is too small. I know, because I like you, am tempted with the same thing. Sometimes we wanna' go where everybody knows your name. But sometimes God calls his servant to be a stranger in a strange land, and sometimes you wanna' go where they're always glad you came. But sometimes they won't welcome you. And sometimes you'll be persecuted for righteousness sake. Sometimes you wanna' be where you can see people who are all the same, but other times God calls us out of our homogenous unit and he calls us to preach the gospel to all nations. Sometimes what we thought was an idyllic community is nothing more than a tourist trap. Tourist-y with a capital T. So in the mean time we need to continue to preach God's Yeshua, God's salvation to all the nations. Until the chaos of this world is conquered, until we all gather around God's throne in that great community that is to come. So until that day let us repeat those words and say —**G**lory and honor,

wisdom and thanksgiving, honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever.” And all Gods people said, Amen.

The Church of the Future
Ephesians 4:11-16
Dr. Robert Creech
Hubert H. & Gladys S. Raborn Professor of Pastoral Leadership and
Director of Pastoral Ministries

Generosity is one of the virtues of the Christ-like life I most admire. I enjoy seeing it in action. I appreciate people who are generous with their time, their knowledge, and their money. I aspire to being like that. Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said that it is more blessed to give than to receive. When a generous heart connects to a significant vision, then wonderful, powerful things happen, like this endowed chair at George W. Truett Theological Seminary that will ensure the training of effective pastoral leaders for many years to come.

I'm grateful to the Raborn family and to other anonymous donors whose generous hearts connected with a vision for equipping effective pastoral leaders, and then connected that vision to their resources. We are all together grateful for such generosity here at Truett.

I would personally like to express my gratitude for the generosity of this faculty and administration in naming me to this chair. I humbly receive the honor and will attempt to live into the confidence you've expressed in me by this decision.

I would also like to thank those friends who have made an effort to be here to share this time with me. I know the demands of their lives and appreciate their carving out a morning to celebrate with us – my wife, Melinda, is here. My pastors from UBC Waco (Josh Carney, Toph Whisnat, and Craig Nash), Dr. Katie Long who directs the Wesley Foundation here at Baylor. Doug Tipps, a fellow pastor and a longtime friend made the trip to

Waco. Rick Carpenter, one of my colleagues at UBC in Houston. And thank you Jim Herrington and Dr. John Wilson for being here and for the kind and encouraging words.

I'm grateful to all of you for being here and I'm grateful to God for the privilege of being part of the community of faith with you all.

Introduction

Our future questions are often so short sighted. What are you doing this weekend? What are you planning to do when you graduate? Let me stretch your thinking a bit this morning: Where will you be in forty years?

My hands-down favorite movie, I've watched it a dozen times, once in Spanish, is *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

For the culturally illiterate, let me enlighten you. Based loosely on Homer's *Odyssey*, *O Brother* is the story of Ulysses Everett McGill, Pete Hogwallop, and Delmar O'Donnell, who have escaped from a Mississippi prison chain gang and are on the run. Everett (George Clooney) organized the escape. He told the two others he was chained to that he had a treasure buried from an armored car heist he'd pulled off and promised to share it with them if they would run away with him. In fact, Everett McGill wanted to get back to his ex-wife to keep her from remarrying. One of the really moving scenes in this story is when Everett breaks the news of his deception to his two not-so-bright comrades. His buddies stare at him in disbelief. Then Pete stares off and thinks out loud, angrily:

...No treasure... I had two weeks left on my sentence . . .

...With my added time for the escape, I don't get out now 'til

1987...

I'll be eighty-four years old.

Delmar, not angry himself, is trying to work it out: –Huh. I guess they'll tack on fifty years for me too.”

Pete continues in angry disbelief: ...Eighty-four years old.

Delmar brightens up as he finishes doing the math in his head: I'll only be eighty-two.

2050 -- that's not so far off. Forty years. When you say that you start thinking about where you'll be, you start doing the math. Many of us faculty will not be around to know that church.

A few among us are young enough to still be hanging on forty years more. In 2050 you might find Drs. Arterbury, Wilhite, Brewer, Weaver, Tucker and Sands playing bingo at the Dancing Bear Nursing Home. Drs. Amy Jacober and Angela Reed might be sitting at home in their rocking chairs, putting on their reading glasses to look at the article in the Baptist Standard about your retirement celebration. Even Dr. Still might be feebly finalizing that list of Pauline passages he will want to quiz the apostle over when he eventually runs into him.

But there's a pretty good chance that the rest of us will already be on the other side, doing whatever it is they let glorified seminary professors do. I can imagine Dr. Gregory swapping sermon illustrations with Spurgeon. Or Dr. Olson listening to apologies from Calvin and Piper. Or Dr. York suggesting a hymn or two for the four living creatures to try out. Dr. Gloer taking daily silent strolls with St. Benedict. I don't know what we'll be doing, but I'm pretty sure that by 2050 many of us will be among the church triumphant, the communion of saints, that great cloud of witnesses cheering you on as you approach the finish line of your ministry.

You, however, will still be here in 2050, among the church militant. Most of you who are now students will be within sight of retirement. You are likely serving the last church of your ministry career, the church of 2050, the church your grandchildren will grow up knowing. What will that church be like? What does the church of the future hold?

The Future of the World

If we could move back in time for a moment, revisit 1990. I was about to turn thirty-eight. The era in history was about to turn 2000. The coming turn of the century had people's interest in the future and their fears turned up a few notches.

- Some fundamentalists were predicting the end of the world. Their eschatological calculators were humming.
- Another segment of the church had Y2K as the year that world evangelization would be completed.
- New Agers were looking for a cosmic convergence that would mean entering the earth's golden age.

Prophecy books were making a comeback.

- In 1990 Hal Lindsey's LGPE went into its 108th printing.
- Zondervan re-released John Walvoord's 1974 book, *Armageddon and the Middle East Crisis*. The future was a hot topic.

In 1992 I attended a conference in Minneapolis sponsored by Leadership Network. The conference was called "The Church in the 21st Century." The Minneapolis area was home to a Baptist pastor named Leith Anderson. He'd recently released a book with a similar title. Several hundred interested pastors and denominational leaders gathered to consider the future. What would the church of the 21st Century look like?

Truthfully, much of the speculation of that day was about the externals of this future church. Traditional or contemporary worship? Denominational relationships? How ~~user~~-friendly” would it be? Megachurches? Metachurches? House churches? Programmatic churches? TV churches? The questions focused much on the forms and organization the church would take as it entered the changing world of the 21st century.

Leith Anderson used a metaphor, comparing the old propeller-driven airliner, the DC-3 to a Boeing 747. He said,

“The new-century church will be an updated version of the old-century church. It will differ in everything from cost to complexity. But both are the body of Christ and share the purpose of doing God's work in God's way, evangelizing non-Christians, and edifying Christians.” (Anderson, 1992, p. 30)

As far as the first ten years of the new century are concerned, the speculators got some of it right and some of it wrong. The biggest issue, I suspect, is the wild card of changes they could not have anticipated: the growth of the World Wide Web, technological advances by the mile rather than by the inch, the spread of global terrorism, polarizing issues in our culture, immigration issues, and the list could go on. But that is the nature of the future. The deck is full of wild cards. Some aspects of tomorrow can be anticipated and some cannot. Some can be controlled and planned for. Some cannot.

The church took on more new forms than anticipated as the new century opened. The church asked new questions about itself.

- I look at the stack of recent books on my shelf related to church life and I see there a portrayal of a living church adapting to the wild

cards of history: the Seeker Sensitive Church, the Purpose-Driven Church, the Missional Church the Equipping Church, the Externally Focused Church, Simple Church, the 3rd Culture Church, the Multi-Site Church, the Sticky Church, the Gathered AND Scattered Church, Church 3.0, the Viral Church, the Hybrid Church, the Whole Church, and Church Next.

- I drive past the niche churches that are no longer specific only to language or ethnic groups, but to unique popular culture, like cowboy churches and biker churches.
- I have watched the efforts of the emerging church movement to attempt to take the gospel to the mission field of a post-modern culture.

Some of these efforts are experimental and short-lived. Some seem to be sustainable. But all are attempts of the living church to do what it has done over two thousand years -- through persecution and with imperial blessings, in times of war and peace, on six continents, throughout every historical and ideological era – the church has adapted and thrived as it negotiated the future.

What will the world of 2050 look like? To what will the church have to adapt?

The technology that will be part of that world is probably unimaginable. Who can look forty years ahead in a world where knowledge is doubling every 2-5 years, depending upon the field? I cannot go there but I know it will be a factor.

Some aspects of that future are much more predictable, such as demographics and ecology.

- For example, the world you and I live in is populated by 7 billion people, twice as many as when I graduated from seminary. By 2050, that figure will reach 9 billion (some say 10 or 11).
- In the U.S. the population of 310 million will swell to 420 million, twice as many people who lived here when I received my seminary degree.

Where will these 9 billion people world-wide, 420 million Americans live? In cities. In huge, overcrowded cities.

- In 1900 only 150 million people in the world lived in cities. In 2007, for the first time, the world had more urban people than rural, with more than 3 billion. In 2050, more than 6 billion people, 2 of 3 on the planet will live in huge cities under such crowded conditions we can hardly imagine it.
- The number of cities with a population of more than a million people has exploded over the past 100 years, from a mere dozen in 1900, to 83 in 1950, to more than 400 today. Eighteen “megacities” now have populations over ten million.

The factors that go with crowding in cities are not mysterious. The issues of crime, disease, quality of life, transportation, food supply, waste management, energy demands and others will grow exponentially. If you are doing ministry anywhere in the world in 2050, you are likely to be doing so in a large, densely populated, urban setting.

Property is likely to be scarce and therefore expensive in these cities. Models of church life dependent on large pieces of real estate and massive buildings may no longer be sustainable. It is likely only a matter of time before an increasing secular culture decides that the potential tax revenue available from church property is duly owed to the local and state governments, and

churches may no longer get a free ride. Simply owning such facilities may become too burdensome for many congregations.

Add to that the environmental issues that lie ahead in the next two generations. Adequate clean water world-wide is an increasingly serious issue. With the growth of the cities, it is more so. Food supply systems that depend on cheap petroleum leave large cities vulnerable. Global climate change remains a wild card for coastal cities. With up to seventy-percent of the world crowded into cities, growing up surrounded by asphalt, concrete, and glass, people will be increasingly alienated from Creation and from each other.

You who will live into the middle of the 21st century are recipients of the proverbial curse: may you live in interesting times.

The Future of the Church

So what will the church of those interesting times look like?

The text this morning, Ephesians 4:11-16 is a future-oriented text. It is graced by no less than six teleological clauses that speak into God's purpose for his church's future. It is written in the eschatological language of promise. It is a statement of hope for the church in every age, every culture, every era, every interesting time.

And it describes the church of the future.

The church of the future will be what it has always been in every place and age: an intentional, Spirit-filled community of followers of Jesus Christ, pursuing the mission of God. It will be marked by an authentic, relational unity and a distinctive Christ-like maturity.

This morning, I invite you to study this text backward. Begin at the end. This is the description of the future church:

Ephesians 4:13-16, “Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Nothing here about form. Nothing here about worship style. Nothing here about physical buildings. Instead it is about the life of God’s people in every future. Unity rooted in the faithfulness and knowledge of the Son of God. Maturity marked by stability in the truth, spoken in love, not tossed about by the gusts of false teaching that blow through every era. A body, working together, supporting, growing, building itself up, in love. That’s the picture of the church of the future.

Now move backward in the text and see that behind the church described there stands a group of people. They are called pastoral leaders.

Ephesians 4:11-12, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.”

Here these leaders themselves are spoken of as gifts the ascended Christ gives to his church: missional, apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral leaders. These leaders work at equipping all the saints to engage the messianic mission

and ministry in the world. These pastoral leaders are the key to the church of 2050.

What are these future leaders like?

- The church of the future will be led by men and women who have the capacity to pray and think and learn their way into the future. They will not be clever people with a bag of tricks. (4:11 - he gave some to be . . .)
- The church of the future will be led by men and women who are people of hope, responding to the promise of God. They are not driven by fear, despair, or presumption. They know God as the God of hope, the God of the future, the God whose essence is future, the God who is always coming to us, the God of the Exodus and the Empty Tomb, who stands in the future and speaks to his people in promises and beckons us to himself. (4:13-16)
- The church of the future will be led by people who know how to model unity and maturity. They will not be about creating fear, domination, or dependence. They love God and love people and care little about personal success. They will be people who have been living this way throughout their lives and have become masters of it. (4:1-3, 13-16)
- The church of the future will be led by men and women who are passionate about the work of equipping the saints. They will not be people who attempt to hoard ministry to themselves. (4:11-12)

Equipping Future Leaders

The church of the future was not on the radar when I received my M.Div. The faculty at the seminary where I graduated did not see it coming. They could not. The curriculum thirty years ago was designed to prepare us to serve a rather stable, predictable future that looked very much like the past. It prepared us to serve the American church of the 1950s and 1960s. The trouble is that I received my diploma in December of 1976, and almost immediately the ground began to shift under my feet.

Within ten years my denomination was about to split. Technology was already invading the world rapidly. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on a Kaypro II personal computer, a device that had not existed when I enrolled for my first post-graduate seminar. Churches began raising missional questions about how to serve and reach their specific ministry fields, questions people had little interest in when the world was thought to be more homogeneous. Affordable air travel changed the face of missions as people, no longer dependent on missionaries with slide projectors, left the pews for short-term mission experiences around the world. Churches specialized in ministry niches. Denominations struggled for connection with congregations. Congregations worked on questions the previous generations ignored with impunity: what is our mission? what are our values? what are we called to do here? Church staffs became larger and more specialized. Curriculum was now available from multiple sources, not simply the denominational publishing house. Music and worship styles were changing. Technology invaded the worship space. I could go on and on. The world I was sent into was assumed to be one way -- a mere extension of the past. But it turned out to be quite another.

That was the world in which I spent the next thirty years attempting to be a pastoral leader. What was it in my training and education that made it

possible for me to do so? I have thought about that often. I have thought about it especially since coming here, knowing that the world our students will face will be different from the one I faced. What was I given in my training that allowed me to navigate those waters?

May I tell you what proved least useful? The so-called ~~practical~~ “practical courses” I was required to take. They were obsolete almost before I turned in my final exam. They were training to fight the previous war, not the one into which I was being deployed.

What proved helpful? Greek. Hebrew. Biblical courses. Theology courses. Philosophy courses. History courses. We had no spiritual formation courses or I would list those. That was an area I had to find on my own. Things I learned in those courses I was still using the last day on the job. These were the places where I learned as a leader to think my way into whatever the future of our church held.

Amy Jacober, Angela Reed, Terry York, Hulitt Gloer, Mike Stroope, Joel Gregory, and I teach courses that are called ~~practical~~ “practical theology,” a term that may not have existed when I did my seminary training. That does not mean that what Roger Olson, Paul Sands, David Wilhite, and Brian Brewer teach is ~~impractical~~ “impractical theology,” as we sometimes tease. Rather, it is to say that what you learn in Texts and Traditions and in Scriptures is to be brought to bear in your thinking about the actual practice of your ministry -- your pastoral care, your spiritual formation, your education and discipleship ministries, your plans and programs, your missional strategies, and your proclamation.

What you struggle with in Greek readings or in Hebrew readings is to be brought to the context where you do ministry. The hours spent in Scriptures 1 and 2 with Dennis Tucker, Ron Cook, Steve Reid, or Lai Ling Ngan will be relevant to ministry in 2049, I promise. The time spent in Scriptures 3 and 4

with David Garland, Todd Still, Andy Arterbury, and Hulitt Gloer will inform your thinking and praying on the first day and the last.

Training in pastoral leadership is not the domain of one professor or department on this faculty. The preparation of pastoral leaders for the church of 2050 involves equipping you to pray and think biblically and theologically. We who serve on this faculty are involved in equipping ministry. We are all investing in the apostolic/missional, evangelistic, prophetic, pastoral leaders for the next forty years.

Investing in the Future

In 1995 Bill Gates, the Microsoft guy, wrote a book called *The Road Ahead*. It was the first book I'd ever seen that came with a digital version of itself in the form of a CD inserted in the back cover. Gates book was an attempt to describe the future of information and technology implied by the development of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Some of his predictions were astounding to read back then. But what is really amazing is to read them now and see how many have come to pass.

For example, Bill Gates predicted the time would come when we would have a box atop our TV set in which we could receive incoming programming and record it to watch whenever we want. Or we could order up a movie or TV show on demand. Amazing.

He also predicted the advent of the Wallet PC. Does anyone here know what a wallet PC is? Have you ever seen one?

Here's what it would do, Gates said.

—What do you carry on your person now? Probably at least keys, identification, money, and a watch. Quite possibly you also carry credit cards, a checkbook, travelers checks, an address book, an appointment book, a notepad, reading

material, a camera, a pocket tape recorder, a cellular phone, a pager, concert tickets, a map, a compass, a calculator an electric entry card, and photographs.

You'll be able to keep all these and more in another information appliance we call the wallet PC. It will be about the same size as a wallet, which means you'll be able to carry it in your pocket or purse. It will display messages and schedules and also let you read or send electronic mail and faxes, monitor weather and stock reports, and play both simple and sophisticated games. At a meeting you might take notes, check your appointments, browse information if you are bored, or choose from among thousands of easy-to-call-up photos of your kids."

So I'll ask you again, have you ever seen a wallet PC? Yes. Ironically for Gates, it is called Steve Job's iPhone.

But here's the point. Gates could see the future because he was influencing it. He was helping to create it. It was in his head and his heart.

I cannot tell you what the church of 2050 will be like in detail because it is not in my head and heart. It is in yours. You will be involved in praying and thinking it into existence. You will be the people of faith and hope that move into God's future, regardless of the challenges that technology, demographics, ecology, or some wild card throw in your paths.

You are the leaders who will shape the church of 2050.

It is an unrealistic expectation that this seminary should prepare you to lead the church of the future, at least not in the way that say Hamburger University in Oak Brook, Illinois trains people to lead and manage a McDonald's franchise. What we can do here is equip you with tools, which, if you take them with you into ministry, hone their edges, keep them sharp, and

master your skills with them, will allow you to build and to be the church of the future.

That kind of learning is not a passive act where knowledgeable professors pour information into the empty heads of ignorant students. The kind of learning this will require is that of a learning community. It is men and women coming together to think, to pray, to learn, to worship, and to grow. It requires the best effort of both faculty scholars and student scholars. It requires a mutual respect and commitment from the entire community. It requires a love of both the truth and of each other. It requires an ongoing conversation between faculty and alumni that extends well beyond commencement – a conversation where alums return at times with their questions to engage the thinking of the faculty and who return at other times with their discoveries to inform the thinking of the faculty. It requires a relationship between graduates and seminary that reaches back to take the hands of student generations who follow to provide mentoring in ministry. It requires awareness that at least in this school what is at stake in our learning is related to matters eternal and that such learning is worth the effort.

An enterprise like that is one that generous men and women with a heart for the Kingdom of God can safely invest their resources in, hoping for a return on investment that will reach far into the church of the future, even into eternity. It is an effort in which you who are here to study with us can confidently invest three or four years of your life (not to mention a large chunk of cash!). It is an endeavor that we on this faculty are willing to invest our training, our experience, and the remainder of our lives and ministries in, even if some of us will not live long enough to see the church of 2050

Romans 15:13, ~~May~~ the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

The Madness of Ministry
II Corinthians 4:7-12
By Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Hale
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Pastor of the Day, Fall 2010

—But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

II Corinthians 4:7-12 (NIV)

If anyone had told me how crazy this thing called ministry is, I probably would not have believed him or her. Not that I would have doubted the validity of their testimony or questioned their wisdom in the matter—it is just hard to imagine that one could go through all that we go through in order to be faithful to the call of God upon us to serve God's people.

My father tried to tell me to get a job, make some money, and forget about going to seminary. But, —What did he know?" I said. He's just a layman. He couldn't possibly understand intimately what it means to —take up the cross daily and follow Christ" to the extent that those of us in ministry and leadership are called to do.

The truth of the matter is: when I went to Seminary, I was so excited, so idealistic, so anxious to fulfill the awesome call of God on my life that I may not have taken anyone seriously, even if they had tried to tell me.

But, thirty one years later, after countless tears and sleepless nights, after having persons question the appropriateness of my being in ministry, especially as a woman, and my adequacy for the task, after having to defend my motives and my methods and dealing with all my own issues and inadequacies in ministry, I can testify that the very thing that makes me incredibly happy and fills me with unceasing joy and a sweet sense of satisfaction can at the same time drive me absolutely mad.

Ministry can be crazy! And if there is anyone in the room, that has not yet been made aware, you need to know that though ministry is wonderful, there are those times when it can drive you over the edge.

I mean no disrespect calling ministry mad. I just thought we could be honest with each other, since we're all in this thing together. There's no sense in keeping secrets, like some of us have been doing for too long: pretending that things are cool when they're not, acting as if we have it together when we are coming apart at the seams.

Whether you are in the embryonic stages of ministry, preparing to go there, or you have been in ministry for a long time, there are moments when you have to admit that you wonder if you shouldn't just go back to doing whatever you were doing before you said, —Y~~e~~, I'm available" to God!

Don't sit up in here acting like you don't know what I'm talking about. Some of you are wondering, right now, if you can or should go on. What's the point, you ask. If God doesn't speak to you today, you are not sure what you are going to do.

We need to be real so that some of you can be healed, set free, and encouraged to accomplish the ministry that God has so graciously entrusted to you. You don't need to be afraid; you just need to be aware, so you won't

take it personally, thinking that it is your fault, like I had a habit of doing. Ministry has always been this way.

The apostle Paul, first century preacher, pastor, teacher and church planter, makes this clear in his second letter to the church in Corinth.

~~But~~ we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body.”

Paul’s second letter to the saints in Corinth was, no doubt, a difficult one to write. Some folks were denying his apostleship; some pious people were accusing him of being deceptive and distorting the Word of God. His motives were being misinterpreted, his actions misconstrued, and his words taken out of context.

Paul found himself in a position of having to defend himself. He dearly loved the folks and was committed to serving them. But, he could not and would not let anyone question his apostolic authority. He needed his authority to keep on fighting the apostasy that threatened to take over the church universal.

It would have been easy for Paul to succumb to the pressure and the accusations. It’s not easy to listen to others talk about you, register complaints and criticize you and your work. It is painful when persons question our worthiness, our legitimacy in ministry, and our ability to lead and to administer the affairs of the congregation. It puts us on the defensive. We begin to question ourselves and wonder if God really called us.

The truth of the matter is; it doesn't take much for some of us to start questioning ourselves. Insecurity, a lack of confidence, and low self-esteem plague many of us in ministry. I don't know what it is, but the gifted, the chosen, the anointed seem to have this proclivity towards analyzing, minimizing, and making light of that which has been entrusted to us.

These are difficult times in which to minister. Ministry has become so competitive. As pastors, we have to prove our worth by the size of our churches and the number of people there. What complicates this even more is the fact that people have options concerning where they will worship, and they exercise those options.

People no longer join one ministry and stay there. Members no longer commit for a lifetime. Folks church hop and hang out at the one designated —“favor of the month” for as long as it is popular. Not everyone is convinced that church is the place to be on Sunday mornings. Like I said, it is one of many options.

Traditional churches have been the hardest hit; because folks are looking for the latest and the greatest, causing many churches to have a decline in attendance, churches that once were filled, no longer are. If nothing else makes you insecure and unsure, this certainly will.

We begin to question our legitimacy, our adequacy for ministry, thinking that this is our fault. We ask ourselves, what am I doing wrong? Am I no longer able to reach folks? Is my season over?

Insecurity will make you question your call. —“Did I hear God right?” Did God make a mistake? Did God know what He was getting when He called me?

Of course God knew what He was getting. He says to us like he said to the prophet Jeremiah:

~~Before~~ I formed you in the womb, I knew you.
Before you were born I set you apart.”

Like the prophet Jeremiah and anyone else who has been provoked to question the legitimacy of their ministry by sometimes harsh people and hard times, we have to remember that God chose us before the foundation of the world. Before we were born, before we were even thought about, God called us and set us apart for God’s exclusive use.

God made no mistake when He called you. God doesn’t make mistakes. God knew exactly what God was getting. God knows everything there is to know about us—the good, the bad and the ugly, our strengths and weaknesses, abilities and inadequacies. God knows us! It is for this reason that he says, ~~Before~~ I formed you in the womb I knew you.” This refers to God’s sovereign election or choosing of you and me. The thing about election is that it is hard to understand and regulate! God can choose whomever He wants for His divine purpose, and He does!

Before we were even conceived, God had a plan for our lives. He already knew what we would need to carry out our assignment, the lives He would use us to influence, and the corners of the world that would be impacted by our presence and our prowess in preaching, teaching, and the spreading of the Gospel in whatever ways we are uniquely gifted to do so.

God not only foreordained our lives and ministry, He also predetermined the gifts and graces that we would need for our special kingdom assignment. We have everything we need; we are tailor-made for our task. God formed us and gave us the genetic structure we needed to fulfill the ministry to which He has called us.

This point is poetically expressed in Psalm 139:13-16, a prayer of David in which he articulates his discovery of who he is and what he meant to God.

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made, your works are wonderful. I know that full well.”

We are not here by accident!

He created our inmost being—shaping us emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually for our assignment. You have the personality in line with your purpose. You are intellectually equal to the task. You have been spiritually equipped through your new birth for every good work. You are shaped for significance and made for ministry.

Now, the positive side of our constant analysis of who we are is that we don’t become prideful and think more highly of ourselves than we ought! The negative side is that we expend too much energy dealing with fighting and fears within and without.

There are accusations without; feelings of inadequacy within; criticisms and complaints without; comparisons within. Why am I not like so and so? Why is he so gifted in that area? Why does she preach better than I do? Why didn’t you give me a voice like that? Why does he have a bigger following, a more successful ministry, a greater anointing? Why did you bless her with a larger building? She doesn’t seem to have the same struggles I have. His ministry looks like such a breeze. Let me remind you of a few things: Looks can be deceiving. Everything that glitters isn’t gold. Every time you see success, there was a price paid. The bigger the ministry, the

bigger the headache and heartaches. The greater the anointing, the greater the pain and price paid. My grandfather used to tell me all the time: No cross no crown. Someone else said, No pain, no gain!

No ministry is a breeze! All of us struggle with something: Balancing life and ministry, the needs of family and friends, full-time jobs and supposedly part-time ministry, living single and alone, living in marriages that have grown cold, places where mutual love and respect have vacated the premises and children have lost their minds. Every one of us is dealing with something.

Nevertheless, we are all called and gifted in unique and awesome ways. No two of us are alike. Each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made. We dare not compare ourselves to anyone else. Each of us is a person of dignity and worth.

—Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?”

You need to know who you are! Claim and celebrate your uniqueness, your gifts and abilities. There is no one in the world like you—no one suited, and uniquely qualified for the assignment that God has given you. Be you! —No one can beat you being you!”

No one can preach like you preach, teach, lead, administer the affairs of that ministry, evangelize, nurture, pray, bring down strongholds, or deliver folks from the throws of the enemy like God has equipped you to do.

In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes a powerful affirmation and defense of the ministry in a straight forward way, stating the —truth”

clearly and poignantly, commending himself and his ministry by taking the focus off of himself and putting it where it belongs on Jesus, helping us to see what enabled him and what will give us the power to hang on in there.

Ministry is a divine appointment! I just told you, we were chosen by God for ministry. Paul makes that clear in 4:1.

Therefore, since through God's mercy, we have this ministry we do not lose heart.

How easy it would be for us for us to think that our ministry doesn't really matter. Ministry can be so frustrating, so discouraging at times. It's frustrating to give all you have to a people who sometimes seem so indifferent and apathetic to the Gospel and its claim upon our lives, so unaware of the vision and of what God is doing through you, especially during this postmodern time, when anything and everything goes, and some are coming simply to be entertained.

It is frustrating to say the same things over and over again and wonder if anyone got it. It is disheartening to be aware of our own human limitations to change their lives, which constantly eats away at our self-confidence. This is crazy, you know. We can't even change ourselves. What makes us think we can change anyone else?

We are not supermen or women. We cannot do everything, be all things to all people, and please everyone. We will make mistakes! We will fall short!

We will disappoint others and ourselves. We cannot possibly live up to everyone's expectations, so we need to stop trying. We have to reach a point where we are no longer trying to prove ourselves and defend who we

are. We cannot make everyone happy. We are not called to make folks happy. We are called to make them holy!

We have been called, chosen for this ministry, not because we have it all together, because we always know what to say, how to say it, and what to do. We were not chosen because we are perfect.

Nor are we in ministry by accident. Our ministry is by divine appointment. It was God's choice. I just told you, God knew what he was getting when he chose us. When I think about who and what I was when God called me, I am clear that God is merciful. God loved me enough to forgive me and use me. Hallelujah! One songwriter put it this way:

*"Something beautiful, something good
All my confusion; He understood
All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife
And he made something beautiful of my life."*

I know all too well—and so do you—the condition that we were in when God found us. God loved us when no one else would and saved me when no one else could.

When Paul considered what God had done for him through his love and mercy, he became clear that he couldn't give up! No matter what anyone said, he said in Romans 8:31:

—If God be for us, who can be against us? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."

Therefore, he needed to do all that he could in response to God's having loved, forgiven and redeemed him, a blasphemer. He said as much in I Timothy 1:12-14:

~~I~~ thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man. I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief, the grace of our Lord was poured out upon me abundantly."

God in his mercy had granted him the privilege to be in ministry. Ministry is a privilege.

Therefore, like Paul, we have every reason to be confident in our ministry. II Corinthians 3:4-6 says,

~~—~~Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God, not that we are confident in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

We have this ministry through God's mercy. It's not about us.

Our validation for ministry comes from God. He chose us, hand-picked us out of a crowd for such a time as this. You may not think your ministry assignment is major, but there are no minor assignments in the Kingdom.

Every assignment is designed to impact and transform this present world into the Kingdom of God.

Paul goes on to say that ~~our~~ ministry is not only by divine appointment, but also by divine empowerment.”

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

The King James says, ~~We~~ have this treasure in earthen vessels.”

The reason why we often lose the right perspective of ministry that leads to discouragement is that we focus on ourselves rather than God. People do the same thing. They are looking at us rather than God, expecting us to act like God, perform our ministries like God, flawless and faultless. No way!

In an effort to help the people get the right focus, Paul said in verse 5,

~~For~~ we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants. For God, who said, Let light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Our responsibility is to help others see Jesus! We must preach Christ. It is through the preaching of Jesus that people’s lives are changed and rearranged. When we preach Jesus, broken hearts and homes are put back together again; people are set free, healed and delivered.

There is no other Name given among men and women whereby they must be saved. There is healing in the name of Jesus. There is deliverance in the Name of Jesus. Demons tremble at the mention of that Name. There is power in His Name!

It is through the preaching of Jesus that transformation takes place. We need to help the people see and follow Him.

We have this treasure—the message of salvation through Christ—in jars of clay. We are just the vessels, clay pots. Someone called us “cracked pots.” But there is inestimable treasure that God has placed in us. The vessel is made valuable by the contents.

Paul chose to focus not on the “perishable” container but on the “precious” contents. Paul chose to focus not on himself but on God from whom the power, the adequacy for ministry comes. We have God’s power inside of us.

It’s a paradox. The Gospel is full of paradoxes, isn’t it? The first shall be last and the last first. Whoever would be great must be servant of all. If we want to save our lives we must be willing to lose them.

Treasure in jars of clay—the fact that God would choose sometimes, fragile, weak, insecure human beings and fill us with God’s self is a paradox.

It’s a paradox: God’s power working in and through us. Someone said, “the valuable message of salvation in Jesus Christ being entrusted to those who themselves needed saving.”

To show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

We have this treasure in jars of clay to teach us to trust God and not ourselves.

Remember that sermon you preached that had “fink” written all over it! Humanly speaking, it wasn’t one of your best; nevertheless, the Word went forth, and God’s Word never returns empty or void but accomplishes the very purpose for which He sent it. You may never know how many people were helped, healed, and set free by that Word.

We have this treasure in jars of clay to teach us to depend on Him and not ourselves. Paul had a thorn in the flesh that he asked God three times to remove, but God refused, saying, ~~My~~ "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul then concluded,

~~Therefore~~ "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

All of our mistakes, humiliations, challenges, indiscretions and weaknesses are opportunities for Christ to demonstrate his power and presence in and through us.

Just when you feel like all hope is gone and you can't go on, we are reminded by Paul through a series of paradoxes that contrast our weakness with God's power that under ordinary circumstances we would have been brought to defeat, but because God's power has been evident in our lives in the most ominous situations, we triumph!

We are hard pressed on every side, hemmed in. It looks like there is no way of escape, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not in despair. There is a play on words here in the Greek, which translates ~~perplexed~~ "perplexed but not perplexed to the point of complete despair."

We are persecuted but not abandoned. God never leaves us or forsakes us; God is always standing by. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

We may be knocked down but not out. Our situation is never hopeless because God rescues us, even when we can't see a way out! We have

this treasure in jars of clay to teach us to focus on God and not ourselves or others. Paul was committed to serving the people despite the fact that they often hurt him, disappointed him and did not live up to his expectations. It is only by God's power that we are able to keep on loving the unlovable; leading those who we aren't sure will follow, forgiving those who have tried or continue to try us.

There is a divine purpose in the madness of ministry; it is making us like Jesus. God uses our trials, our disappointments, our trying experiences to trim off the rough edges, to buff and polish us and make us smooth. Tried in the fire, we're coming out gold.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in us.

We face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered! Remember that it was when Jesus was at his weakest, his most vulnerable, as he hung and died on the cross of Calvary that the greatest good for humanity was accomplished. It was through his death that we now have life.

As Paul suffered, as Paul faced the challenges of his own life and ministry, both the death and life of Jesus were manifested in his body. In Paul's dying to self through his suffering, life was at work in the believers. Through his hard-times, the power of God in his life was intensified. Through his difficulties, the glory of God was manifested. And we triumph! We are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us!

There is a point to this madness in ministry. God uses it to teach us to trust Him, to lean and depend on Him, to transform us into the image of His son so that when we stand before, set the example for, and lead the people,

they will begin to see none of us, but all of Him—so that in all things and at all times Jesus is glorified through us.

It does not yet appear what we shall be, but when we see Jesus, when we see Jesus, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Hallelujah!

Who's Missing?
Luke 12:12-14
By Austin T. Fischer
Robert Jackson Robinson Preaching Award Recipient
Fall 2010

He Was Missing

Around a year ago, I found myself sitting at a table. I was surrounded by friends and family, surrounded by people I love, surrounded by —my people.” I’m back home for Christmas break, sitting in a huge comfy booth at one of my favorite restaurants, and I’ve got my little brother to my left, girlfriend to my right, my mom across from me, my grandparents beside my mom, my best friend across from my brother, and a steaming bowl of fettuccini alfredo looking up at me, just begging me to devour it.

We quickly bless the food, and all begin to dig in. Rolls are tossed onto people’s plates, forks and knives fly out of their napkins, salt and pepper shakers zip across the table, but I just sit there...fork and knife not brandished, alfredo untouched, no appetite to speak of. And it was all because I knew somebody else should be at the table. I knew somebody was missing. No one else noticed he was missing, but I did, and that’s because it was my fault he wasn’t there. He was missing, and it was my fault.

Luke 14

In Luke 14 we find Jesus sitting at a table, surrounded by people who in predictable gospel fashion, are not very happy with him. And to be honest, Jesus kind of asked for this one. He’s on this long journey to Jerusalem, and along the way he gets invited to eat dinner at the house of a —leader of the Pharisees”...which in the Greek means —a kind of a big deal.”

Now everybody knows that when you're the dinner guest of someone who is ~~kind~~ "of a big deal" there are certain things you do and don't do. And it's probably fair to say that somewhere near the top of the ~~—dn't~~ "do" list we would have the rule: don't insult the other guests or the host.

I mean, this is table manners 101, right up there with don't eat soup with a fork, and don't show up without pants on. If you violate these golden rules of dining then people are going to think you were raised in a barn...which incidentally might explain how Jesus has managed to break both of these rules and now has everyone at the table staring daggers at him.

He comes into the house and immediately notices a man suffering from dropsy...he's got these big, puffy spots on his body where fluid has accumulated. And as Jesus looks at this man, some Pharisees are looking at Jesus...and you can just see what they're thinking: ~~H~~'s the Sabbath...Jesus better not heal him...surely Jesus knows better...he would never try that...O my Yahweh he just healed that guy." To put it mildly, healing someone on the Sabbath, surrounded by other Pharisees, in the house of a leading Pharisee who has invited you to dinner is not considered good form. It does not start dinner out on a good note.

The Toast

But the show must go on. Jesus' rudeness is tolerated. They eat dinner and afterwards have this post-dinner drink and entertainment time we might call ~~the~~ "symposium." As an honored guest, Jesus would be expected to say a few words, and so, sure enough, he raises his glass. Anticipation is in the air, and Jesus says: ~~I~~ noticed how you all were subtly manipulating and maneuvering your way towards the best seats at the table, and you really shouldn't do that. Cause if someone more important than you shows up (I

hear there's a few) you're gonna look like an idiot when you get sent to the kiddie table. On top of that it's just petty and petulant. If I were to tell ya' how I really feel, it's a pretty stupid game you're playing."

Apparently Jesus feels as if he hasn't already done enough to make everyone there hate him, and so now he insults all the guests again for good measure. A complete hush has fallen over the table, the only sound being that of the grinding teeth of those around Jesus as they think about how much they want to do something not nice to him right about now.

The Host

And so at this point everything has gone downhill pretty fast. This dinner party is bombing, and you've got to feel for...the host...and wonder what he's thinking. How's he gonna save this? "No more grape juice for Jesus." But just when you think this train-wreck can't get any worse, Jesus now turns to the host and says this:

~~When~~ you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Jesus criticizes the guest list. And the thing that jumps out is that Jesus tells him not to invite those people he would most naturally invite: don't invite your friends. Now in Jesus' time to eat with someone was to be their friend. You didn't just eat with anybody. You ate with your friends. Hmm.

And then the reason Jesus gives for not inviting these people is equally strange: because they might return the favor. Don't invite them because they might invite you back.

Here Jesus criticizes something we might call the reciprocity principle. You see in Jesus' day, the most important factor in determining friendship was reciprocity: you were friends with people of a similar social status, those who could do for you what you could do for them. When looking for friends you looked level or up...to those who can help you, get you somewhere, do something for you.

And so how you chose who you invited to dinner mirrored how you chose your friends. And so who was sitting at your table was a statement, a statement that certain people belong and certain people don't, a statement about who you identify with, how you look at others, and how you structure the world.

High School Cafeterias

Now if your high school cafeteria was anything like mine, then there were certain tables reserved for certain groups. No, there were no signs but something far more powerful: the unspoken social pecking order. We had the first class tables where the "elite" sat...athletes, class favorites, those with wealthy parents, with pretty faces, who had lots going for them, who could get what they wanted. Then we had the second class tables, designated primarily for the average people...those who were average in the things that counted...looks, money, clothes, status. Then we had the coach tables, reserved for whatever was left...their appearance was unimpressive. They couldn't really do anything most of us considered valuable. They were frequently in the way. No one really knew who they were.

These were the tables, and there was no mixing of the tables. You'd be more likely to see Pat Robertson and Barak Obama in a tickle fight than see a mixing of the tables.

Now if you're like me, I look back on that and am quite ashamed, and I would like to think I've grown up since then, that I'm better than that. *But* I can't help but notice that most of my meals are still with people who are a lot like me. Most of the time I eat, I'm sitting across from people I'm comfortable with, people who can do things for me, people who make my life better...people who would have been sitting at my table in high school.

And I'd like to think the church is better than that, but when I look out on Sunday mornings, when I see our get-togethers, our small groups, our services...I see a striking resemblance to my high school cafeteria. I see a lot of people who could return our invitation to dinner.

But When You Host a Meal...

And finally, after all this painful deconstruction, Jesus offers a word of construction. Here's who you should invite to dinner: *the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.*

Ah yea...we know these people...it's those who get in the way, who inconvenience our lives with their problems and issues, who could never do anything for us, who have nothing to offer, who could never do for us what we could do for them. Yes, we know them.

Hold the Social Justice Trumpet

And while it is quite tempting at this point to blow the social justice trumpet and label this a social justice story (the church is all messed up and if we would just take care of the needy then we could fix the church), I think this

is a huge mistake because it's not nearly as radical as what Jesus is actually saying.

Jesus is not asking us to help out the poor, to practice charity to the lowly, to feel sorry for them, to meet their needs. What Jesus is asking is this: invite them to dinner with you. Don't send them food or give them money for groceries, don't have a canned food drive or go work at a soup kitchen, but invite them to come eat dinner at the table with you. Which of course in Jesus' context is to say: make them your friends. Embrace them as equals, not projects, not charity cases, but friends...friends.

That Guy

Around a year ago, last Christmas break, I had an opportunity to speak at a new church that my grandparents attended. After church all these people were coming up to me and telling me how wonderful a job I did. There was a line of people waiting to talk to me, stroking the ego (if they don't think you're good, no one will), but about half-way through the line I got tapped on the shoulder. There behind me was a man who had clearly come in off the street. I had seen him come in earlier, and he wanted to talk to me.

And so I look back to the line of people waiting to tell me how great I was, look back at him, and I know what I need to do...so I pick up my cross and go over to talk to him. It takes a while for him to talk, but eventually he opens up about how he just got out of jail, how he would like to get things right with God, how he felt like God led him to hear me that morning. I listen and at the end ask him if I can pray for him. He begins to tear up a little bit, and because he is not the type of dude who looks like he would tear up, it makes me tear up.

He then he asks me for a ride. I tell my family to go ahead to lunch, that I would meet them after I gave him a ride. I drive him to where he wants to go, and as he's getting out I feel compelled to give him some money. So I give him the \$50 my grandpa had given to me earlier. At this point he just sits down on the curb as his eyes fill with water. He tells me he loves me, and then he gets up and walks off.

I start driving towards lunch, and, needless to say, I'm on cloud nine. I just sacrificed all these compliments, all this money. I made the time to help this poor man out. And then I get to the restaurant and sit down, surrounded by friends and family, by people I love, by ~~my~~ people...little brother to my left, girlfriend to my right, my mom across from me, my grandparents beside my mom, my best friend across from my brother, and a steaming bowl of fettuccini alfredo looking up at me.

And as I'm about to dig in, these haunting words come creeping into my head: ~~When~~ you have a dinner invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind...that man did not need your charity...he needed your friendship."

Who's Missing?

Next time we find ourselves sitting at a table, surrounded by friends and family, surrounded by people we love, surrounded by ~~our~~ people, having a great time, perhaps we should consider what Jesus would say if he pulled up a chair at our table. Perhaps we should look around and ask ourselves: ~~Who's~~ missing?"

Grateful?
Philippians 4:10-20
Todd D. Still
Professor of Christian Scriptures

—Now what do you have that you did not receive? And if also you received, why are you boasting as not receiving?” These arresting questions, which I have rendered woodenly and inelegantly for effect, are put to the Corinthians by Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:7. In Paul’s perception, at least some of the Corinthians were struggling in developing and displaying, as they say, an —attitude of gratitude.” If 2 Corinthians 8–9 is any indication, then it appears as if though certain Achaian Christians continued to lag behind in being grateful and in giving. They were at the head of the pack —in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in apostolic affection,” according to 2 Corinthians 8:7. Paul wanted them, however, to excel in giving borne out of gratitude.

The Corinthians are not alone in being less than grateful, I fear. All too frequently, I confess, I join the ranks of the ingrates. Never mind I have so much for which to be grateful. Never mind —all I have needed Thy hand hath provided.” The malady of ingratitude infects and afflicts us personally and collectively. As our own Dr. W. Hulitt Gloer remarked recently to Houston Chronicle reporter Tara Dooley, —Gratitude is the basis of a joyful life.... Failure to pause and to reflect and to express gratitude...is the cause of much of our unhappiness.”¹

It is no small irony that in Philippians, the so-called —joyful epistle,” the Apostle Paul is frequently thought to be ungrateful for the gift that the church in Philippi had sent to him in captivity through Epaphroditus. When at long last he does directly address the subject of their gift in 4:10-20, not a few

interpreters have suggested that Paul lays an egg. In fact, some one hundred and thirty-five years ago now a certain C. Holsten described this passage as a *danklose Danke*, that is, a ~~thankless~~ thanks.”ⁱⁱ A fair number of commentators have concurred with Holsten’s description.

Indeed, exegetes of Philippians have been hard pressed to explain both the placement and contents of 4:10-20. Why does Paul wait so long and appear so reticent to say ~~thank you~~? How can Paul counsel his congregations to be grateful if he himself lacks gratitude? In his encyclopedic commentary on Philippians, John Reumann catalogs eight academic explanations for the location and substance of this passage: 1. Cultural contrasts between antiquity and (post-)modernity; 2. Paul’s embarrassment about the gift; 3. Paul’s disappointment in the church for having sent gifts against his stated missionary principle of independence; 4. Paul’s focus upon the assembly’s involvement in the gospel, not their gift; 5. Paul had sent an earlier (now lost) letter of thanks; 6. Paul does express thanks in so many words and waits until the end to do so in order to highlight his gratitude; 7. Paul had entered into a business relationship with (some of) the Philippians; therefore, no statement of thanks was necessary; and 8. Paul and the Philippians were friends, and in a Greco-Roman milieu, friends did not expect a ~~thank you~~.ⁱⁱⁱ

Time constraints and homiletical concerns force me to place my interpretive cards on the table prematurely and without adequate argumentation. (If you really are interested in a more protracted discussion on this passage, then you should consult the commentaries.) In my own commentary on the letter, I offer the following remarks on the matter: ~~Paul~~ is seeking [in these verses] to walk a fine line between partnership and patronage, dependence on God and appreciation for the Philippians, gratitude and ingratiating.”^{iv} Again, I state, ~~[The Philippians’]~~ generosity was not lost

on Paul; nor did he presume upon it. That being said, Paul does not focus upon or seek after their gifts (cf. 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:7-9); rather, he concerns himself with the spiritual and eschatological fruit that abounds to their credit through the offering of their resources to him, and by way of connection and extension, to God and the gospel (4:17; cf. 1:9-11).”^v Suffer me one more quote from my work on Phil 4:10 and the following:

In this passage, Paul rather obliquely and somewhat awkwardly addresses the subject of the Philippians’ most recent gift to him. Greco-Roman patron-client relations and gift conventions explain, at least in part, his reluctance to pour it on thick. ‘ Paul is grateful, but he does not think it necessary or fitting to grovel. Furthermore, the apostle views the Philippians as his partners in the gospel, and not as his paymasters. ‘ He wants to express his heartfelt appreciation to the church while simultaneously holding to the conviction that he can be content in any and all circumstances through divine empowerment.^{vi}

If this interpretive trajectory is anywhere close to being on target, then we find in Philippians 4:10-20 an unexpected resource for thinking through gratitude. —Who would have thunk it?” To be sure, Paul does not offer here or elsewhere for that matter, simple steps for being or becoming grateful. Neither does he offer a 1-2-3, easy as A-B-C recipe for gratitude. What he does provide in this passage is theological, pastoral, and autobiographical insights on the subject. We recognize that we ought to be grateful even when we are not. In the words of James, —Anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin” (4:17). How may we, then, grow in gratitude?

Philippians 4:11-12 suggests that a way to grow in gratitude is to *cultivate contentment*. Having expressed his great joy in 4:10 that the Philippians’ concern for him had bloomed again as desire and opportunity met,

Paul clarifies in 4:11 that he was not rejoicing in their gift to him because of need or lack on his part. On the contrary, Paul contends that he had learned to be content. If for the Stoics contentment was tantamount to self-sufficiency and was made possible by resigning to one's circumstances, Paul thought and taught that contentment was enabled by an ongoing commitment to an all-sufficient, ever-present Christ and to fellow believers. Paul's instruction in and initiation into contentment allowed him to flourish whether he was living ~~—igh~~ on the hog" or was ~~—ast~~ at the trough." Whether well fed or unfed, abounding or abased, Paul could live above the fray. If apart from Jesus one can do nothing, in Christ one can do everything necessary to carry out faithfully one's life and calling.

Contentment is hard to cultivate, and most of us would prefer, I figure, to put the learning of contentment on perpetual hold. If only I had fill-in-the-blank, then I would be content. When I get my degree, my first church, my own house filled with furniture, a salary increase, a book contract, a break, then I will be content. This ~~—if~~ only," ~~—once~~ I" approach to contentment will always bring us up short of contentment. We would be wiser and better off to join Spafford's chorus and exclaim, ~~—Whatever~~ my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul. ^{“”vii} Contentment is concomitant with gratitude. In addition, it retards murmuring and complaining and set us free to be ~~—blameless~~ and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom we are to shine like stars in the world" (Philippians 2:15). As my friend Doug Dickens puts it, ~~—Whining~~ is not a spiritual gift."

We grow in gratitude by cultivating contentment. We grow in gratitude by *articulating confidence*. Not to be confused with or used as an excuse for arrogance, the confidence in view here is a conviction that Christ

enables and that God is able. This sense of confidence oozes through the lines of the letter. Philippians 1:6: ~~I~~am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” Philippians 2:12b-13: ~~w~~ork out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Philippians 3:20: ~~B~~ut our commonwealth is in heaven, from where we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Then, of course, Philippians 4:19, —~~A~~d my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” ~~F~~rusting as the moments fly, trusting as the days go by, trusting him what’er befalls, trusting Jesus that is all.”^{viii}

This kind of confidence is undergirded by conviction and is grounded in humility. This kind of confidence is inculcated through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. This kind of confidence rescues us from the prison of practical atheism. This kind of confidence releases us to be less of what we use to be and more of what we ought to be. This kind of confidence allows us to ~~e~~ome as thankful people, come, and raise the song of harvest home.”^{ix}

We grow in gratitude by cultivating contentment, by articulating confidence, and by *demonstrating care*. Paul rejoices that over the years and the miles he and the Philippians shared *koinōnia*, partnership in Christ and the gospel. Such mutuality and reciprocity was unusual for the apostle, but no less appreciated. Indeed, other-regard is the aim of life together. We are to serve one another even as Christ served us. On a tangible, concrete level it meant that Paul purposed to press on in his ministry for the spiritual progress of the Philippians. It also meant that the church in Philippi sent gifts to the apostle

through Epaphroditus and gave liberally to the collection for impoverished saints in Jerusalem (see 2 Corinthians 8–9).

The care that believers are to offer to one another is meant to be an extension of the ~~—~~grace of our Lord Jesus, who though he was rich, for our sakes become poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). It is this gift that elicits Paul’s purest praise. It is this gift that ~~—~~demands our soul, our life, our all.”^x ~~—~~What can I give him, poor that I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. What can I give him? Give my heart.”^{xi}

Since confession is good for the soul, I have a confession to make. When it comes to gratitude, I fear that I am more like a Corinthian than a Philippian. What is more, would that I were more like the Samaritan leper that Jesus healed. There were nine other lepers who couldn’t be bothered to return to the one who had mercy upon them and thank him for making them whole. When the Samaritan was made clean, however, he ~~—~~turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.”^{xii}

Thomas Erskine is meant to have said, ~~—~~In the New Testament, religion is grace, and ethics is gratitude.”^{xiii} Of all people we ought be grateful. So, even if there remains some question as to how grateful the apostle might or might not have been for the Philippians’ gift, let there be no question that we are a grateful people. Gratitude is foundational for Christian communion and is the well-spring of Christian worship. So, come ye thankful people. Come let us adore him with our lips and with our lives. Amen.

ⁱ See <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/life/main/7310295.html>, accessed Wed Jul 20 2011.

- ⁱⁱ So John Reumann, *Philippians* (Anchor Bible 33B; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2008), 685.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Reumann, *Philippians*, 685-88.
- ^{iv} Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary 27B; Macon, Geo.: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 125.
- ^v Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, 127.
- ^{vi} Still, *Philippians & Philemon*, 127.
- ^{vii} Haratio G. Spafford, —~~H~~ Is Well with My Soul.”
- ^{viii} Edgar P. Stites, —~~T~~rusting Jesus.”
- ^{ix} Henry Alford, —~~C~~me, Ye Thankful People, Come.”
- ^x Isaac Watts, —~~W~~hen I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”
- ^{xi} Christina Rossetti, —~~I~~n the Bleak Midwinter.”
- ^{xii} See Luke 17:11-19.
- ^{xiii} Thomas Erskine, 1-Famous-Quotes.com, Gledhill Enterprises, 2011, <http://www.1-famous-quotes.com/quote/88479>, accessed Wed Jul 20 2011.
- ^{xiv} Phil Lineberger, —The Terror of Depression” Trinity Baptist Church, Kerrville Texas, February 15, 2011 (Unpublished Manuscript).
- ^{xv} *ibid.*
- ^{xvi} Paul E. Sangster, *Doctor Sangster*, as quoted by Charles E. Poole, *Don't Cry Past Tuesday* (Macon GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1991), 58.
- ^{xvii} Joel C. Gregory, —~~W~~hen God's Servant Is Depressed,” *Southern Baptist Preaching Today* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1987, 126.
- ^{xviii} *op. cit.*, Poole, 28.
- ^{xix} Paul Scherer, *The Word God Sent* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), 203.

Hymns, Hymnals, and Heritage
Colossians 3: 15-16
By Terry W. York
Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music
Spring 2011 Convocation

Grace and peace to you, Dean Garland and Associate Dean Tucker.
Grace and peace, also, to you, my esteemed faculty colleagues and to the friends of Truett Seminary who are here this morning. And finally, grace and peace to you, dearly beloved students, in whom we see great promise and from whom we take great hope.

In a place I love, amongst people I love, I have the opportunity to speak on a subject I love. As heavy as it feels, I thank Dr. Tucker, nonetheless, for placing the burden of this moment upon my shoulders.

Hymns

Sisters and brothers, to speak of hymnody *simply* as one of several congregational song options is to clip its wings and cage it in a conversation too small. Hymnody can sing there, but confined there, it cannot soar to its magnificent potential. In simplest definition, *hymns* are songs of praise to God. *Hymnals* are collections of selected hymns. *Heritage* might be defined as the only visible segment of the arch of our life's trajectory.

“Hymn” has a wide and welcoming definition. Over the years, poets and practice have come to agree that a hymn is a strophic poem of uniform meter and rhyme scheme, directed to or about God. But there is an innate flexibility in this definition that has served the genre well over the centuries. In recent history this has meant that the *best* of Gospel songs, praise choruses, and modern worship songs (each a reaction and challenge to hymns) have, over time, *become* —hymns.” Interestingly, the genre “scripture songs” came

on the scene at approximately the same time as praise choruses, yet they were never really a challenge to hymns in congregational worship. It's as if the general movement of hymnody ignored scripture songs because it basically only absorbed one of its repertoire: *—Seek Ye First*,” a direct quote of Matthew 6:33 and 7:7 linked together by Karen Lafferty's memorable tune (*Celebrating Grace*, 2010, number 436).

Hymns might be thought of as notes left along the way by Christ-followers who have walked the path before us. We pick up one of these notes, and it says, in this particular struggle, here is how God helped us. In this difficulty, here is how we were healed. In this time of great rejoicing, here is the song we sang. Another note might say, here is a bit of light for this particularly dark segment of the path. Hymns are notes left along the way by Christ-followers who have gone before us, and each scrap sings a prayer, or adulation, or proclamation, worthy to be called a song of praise to God. No one hymn sings all of anyone's theology. Hymns are bits and pieces of theology, doctrine, and commentary.

One of the most interesting characteristics of a long-lasting hymn is the universality of its message among Christian traditions. *Holy, Holy, Holy*: is it Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian? They all stand up and say, *—Yes, it's ours.*” *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound*, is it Congregationalist, Lutheran, Catholic, Pentecostal? They all stand up and say, *—Yes, it is ours.*” And in the chorus of claims we hear a prelude to an answer to Jesus' prayer, *—Make my followers one.*” (John 17:20ff). Common songs of confession and rejoicing await the day of such unity. Hymns, these little sermons and testimonies, these little prayers and bursts of praise, as one song in one heart are quiet, personal treasures. But let them be collected by the hundreds into

one life or one congregation or one hymnal, and you have a powerful, synergistic dogma that pulses and glows.

Hymnals

There are tens of thousands of hymns to which we have access today. Hymnals are collections of *selected* hymns; selected with particular criteria and intent in mind. A hymnal makes a statement that will last for anywhere from 15-300 years. Great care is taken in formulating such a statement. In the free-church a hymnal is very much a book of common prayer (all letters in the lower case). A hymnal is a book of pre-composed expressions of praise and testimony and prayer, pre-composed and agreed upon by a committee representing a vast array of voices, clergy and laity alike. A hymnal is a book of common prayer in its inclusion of hymns from across the spectrum of Christian traditions. Expressions from non-Baptist Christians make it into a Baptist book because of their poetic craft and quality as they declare Jesus is Lord and because of their theological veracity as they sing of life and death and life again and as they gather us around water, bread, and wine. Hymnals are books of common prayer that serve to give us words as we walk, speechless, past manger, cross, and tomb.

It is as we sing of the table's food and meaning, as we sing of the pool's breadth and depth that our hymns begin to be Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, or Catholic. It is as we sing of salvation that different hymnbook covers emerge to house our common songs. Even in the free-church, doctrine and theology eventually matter.

Heritage

Life's twists and turns produce hymnody's texts and tunes, and, in so doing, our heritage becomes something we can see and say, something we can

sing and hear. Our heritage becomes something we can offer to God in worship.

A hymnal, the book of common prayer in the free-church, also serves as a banner; a banner unfurled by the wind of controversy. Here, at Truett Seminary, we have a hymnal. The presence of a hymnal signals a prevailing, though not prescribed, worship style. We have *a* Baptist hymnal. The presence of this particular hymnal speaks of our understanding of what it means to be Baptist, and with a bit more specificity and clarity than in the case of style. Young students may look at the hymnal and see nothing more than a new old book in the pew rack. Others, however, will look in the pew rack and see a waving banner.

Admittedly, —~~h~~ymn” and —~~h~~ymnal” are flexible words in definition and function. But, this flexibility serves us well in terms of our Baptist heritage. Selected hymns and the hymnals they constitute (entities greater than the sum of their contents) are documented doctrine and theology. In the case of Baptists, there *is* a *breadth* to our doctrine and theology, if not a *flexibility*. Baptist Calvinism for example covers a gamut that could be described as stretching from end to end and beyond in both directions on a scale from 0-5. Indeed, there are some Baptists searching for number 6 on the right hand side of that scale and some are hovering somewhere around 2 below zero on the left-hand side, and this Baptist hymnal acknowledges in acceptable —Baptist” hymns, the whole gamut.

Look at the green book with gold lettering in the pew rack in front of you. This book is *a* Baptist hymnal; it is not *the* Baptist hymnal. That hymnal is within reach in a pew rack, and it is in the pew rack of *a* Baptist seminary, which is not one of *the* Southern Baptist seminaries. *There* is your heritage in a hymnological nutshell.

The Baptist hymnal in our pew racks was compiled by representatives of Baptists of nearly every stripe in North America. But, it must be said, the committee was largely made up of former Southern Baptists. Its copyright date and place are 2010, Macon, Georgia. The hymnal that was in these pew racks previously was indeed, *The Baptist Hymnal* in its 1991 Nashville, Tennessee version. The 1991 book was a worship book, it was also, one might say, a final reminder and link: a final reminder of what and a link to what? ...the Southern Baptist Convention. In 2008, the Southern Baptists' LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, produced and published a new *Baptist Hymnal*. Technically it is the book that follows in the line of the *Broadman Hymnal*, 1940, the *Baptist Hymnal*, 1956, the *Baptist Hymnal*, 1975, and *The Baptist Hymnal*, 1991.

If the 1940, '56, '75, and '91 Baptist hymnals led to the 2008 Baptist hymnal, why did another bunch of Baptists, also of the tribe of Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon, publish a hymnal in 2010? Why two books, published within two years of each other for those who speak in abbreviations such as BSSB, WMU, FMB, HMB, IMB, NAMB, BSU, for those who know what the real attraction was in Ridgecrest's and Glorieta's prayer gardens, and who salivate a bit as they say "program," "pioneer work," and "missions"? Why two books? They (we) would be quick to say it is because of differences in the contents of the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* and the 2010 *Celebrating Grace*. Indeed, there are some significant differences, largely in the area of "contemporary music" and mainstream hymnody of the past 20 years, but one can also say that the books have obvious similarities. There are two books because a hymnal is much more than a collection of songs. There are two hymnals for these folks of *the* Book and of "like faith and order" because hymns *also* speak of priesthood of the believer, church (big C and little c), the

Trinity, and the Bible. This time, differing covers are needed because of the nuanced significance of different theo-political attachments to the contents of the Baptists' ~~book(s)~~ of common prayer." Once again we see the hymnal functioning as a banner: we are *this* kind of Baptist. Two hymnals signal a split in a way traditional and contemporary never did, never could.

With our book covers and tweaked contents firmly in place we declare what we *also* believe, how we *also* interpret. I can almost hear the thoughts out there: why not do away with hymnals and thus do away with division? The frustrated suggestion sounds good, but a hymnal is not just a sad monument to division within a dysfunctional family.

Hymnals, help us carry out our biblical mandate to teach and even admonish one another. What shall we teach and upon what shall we base our admonition? Our hymns, based on scripture, say ~~remember?~~" and ~~remember!~~" This can and should be accomplished in acts of authentic worship, says Paul. This isn't worship *and* teaching or worship *and* admonishing. That would cause our teaching, admonition, and worship to become idolatry. This is biblical and theological teaching and admonition that happens as by-products of authentic worship—worship grounded in this life and stretching toward the next, all the while focused on God. Good hymns, like all good poetry, *remind* us. Writers of hymns and editors who compile hymnals comprise an accountability group that is patient, portable, and ever present. They teach us and remind us of our identity in the context of what we believe to be correct theology and doctrine. The hymnal is a written record of what shapes us and how that shaping takes place in life. We may be able to be self-taught, but it's much more difficult to be self-admonished.

Songs that tell the truth about God and life become ~~—hymns~~" in the ever-expanding definition of that word and in the everlasting function of that

word. It's a big deal when a song, whatever its worship genre of origin, makes it into a hymnal. Did Christian recording artist Chris Tomlin set out to write a hymn? I would dare say no, but when his modern worship songs —“Forever” and “How Great is Our God” were seen to carry the message and reckoned to do so in a timeless way, they were included in this book (*Celebrating Grace*) as numbers 53 and 322. —“Poof,” they were hymns, and Christ Tomlin was a hymn-writer. Sorry Chris. But I don't think he's sorry.

A few years ago I interviewed local Modern Worship leader and recording artist David Crowder for an article I was writing for *The Hymn: Journal of the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada*. In that conversation David told me he would love for at least one of his songs to make it into a hymnal. Why? Is it because he is surrendering in the worship wars? No. Is it because he's getting older? No. It's because he has learned how this book and its contents function. He has put hymns and hymnals in the proper conversation. By the way, he is not included in the *Celebrating Grace* hymnal, even though his modern worship song, —“A This for a King,” was submitted to the committee. I am convinced that it will someday become a hymn and that we will see Crowder deemed a hymn writer. He is creating what will surely be seen as part of our heritage because he is creatively writing solid theology and doctrine to be sung in a free church setting.

My dear brothers and sisters, if hymns are not your musical preference, let me assure you that it is not surrender to know the contents and the location of a hymnal or to find a hymnal somewhere in the confines of your worship center. To have a hymnal nearby is to keep the proven doctrine and theology of a free church book of common prayer close at hand. Don't worry about banners or ill winds that blow them. We need the contents of this book (hymnal) within reach, if not within memory, lest our musical

explorations and worship developments stray too far and our reforming become unintended rejection of the orthodoxy that is our heritage and responsibility. In like manner, the hymn enthusiast should not count the inclusion of songs by Chris Tomlin or Tim Hughes in our Baptist hymnal as either surrender or victory.

Doctrine and theology are our heritage. The freed church is our heritage. Maintaining a flexible lower case book of common praise and prayer is our heritage and our responsibility. We must teach it to our children and all children of God. Give them a reliable hymnal. I've seen the hymnal unused in the pew racks, or the hymnal used only as a door stop. I could wish for more, but I'm a patient man. At least those congregations know where the hymnal is.

I freely admit my congregational song preference, even my prejudice since —hymn” has such a flexible definition. But I have seen much that has reinforced my stance. I watched on TV as Dodger pitcher Orel Hershisier sat in the dugout between innings with his head tilted back while pitching a World Series game. When asked later by a reporter if he was praying, Hershisier said, “No, I was singing hymns.” When American prisoners of war returned home at the end of the Vietnam War, they told stories of tapping out in Morse Code bits of scripture and hymns on Sunday mornings: tapping on the walls between their cells. Why take such risk?

Hymns, in the proper conversation, properly understood, welcome—even encourage—new congregational song forms and genres. But, those forms and genres must do their best poetically, musically, and theologically, because to be included in a hymnal is to have a mantle placed upon the song's shoulders. We are to teach and admonish each other with songs of gratitude to God. We are to sing each other back into right thinking.

This hymnal is my story; this Bible is my song. The more we know the story in these two books, the more we can praise our Savior all the day long. Angels know the hymnal's songs of praise, but only the redeemed know the hymnal's songs of forgiveness. See the songs soar? This [hymnal] is **our** story; this [Bible] is **our** song, praising **our** savior all the day long. Amen.

Audience of One
John 2:1-11
Angela Reed
Assistant Professor of Practical Theology and
Director of Spiritual Formation

Think of a time when you felt truly embarrassed. Even better...if you can, think of a time when you felt embarrassed in ministry. Not a time when you felt intentionally shamed by someone else. No, just the usual, run-of-the-mill, embarrassment. You forgot to show up to an important event on time or you called someone by the wrong name at an awkward moment. Your spouse is sitting beside you at a formal brunch with people from your new congregation, you are eating raspberry filled crepes, suddenly your spouse's knife slips off his fork and he flicks great gobs of raspberry preserves all over your off-white sweater. Oh, that hasn't happened to you? Be thankful. Whatever it was, remember that experience. Oh yes, I'm going to give you some time to enjoy remembering.

How did you feel? Embarrassment is very unpleasant – we want to forget but usually can't.

According to that guide of all guides, Wikipedia, embarrassment increases greatly when it involves official duties or workplace facilities. Oh yes, think about the worship service, the minister's workplace. Embarrassment increases there tenfold.

This sermon is about living out of our true selves and honestly sharing who we are. I don't think I can give this sermon with integrity without sharing a bit about myself. I'm going to get things started by talking about my most embarrassing moment in ministry which is by far the most embarrassing thing I've experienced in the context of worship.

About 9 years ago, when our son was less than a year old, my husband David was a pastor and I was focusing primarily on caring for our baby. I got a call from an acquaintance who knew I was interested in spirituality and asked me to preach at her church on the Holy Spirit. I enjoyed the opportunity to get out and stay connected with ministry, and I was happy to say —~~gs~~.” A day or two before the service, I started to feel a bad cold coming on. It was nothing I hadn’t managed before and I was really excited to preach this sermon. I went to the store to get some cold medication and decided not to call it off. That morning, my nose was a faucet, but I felt I could get through the sermon all right with a full does of daytime cold medicine and some breakfast.

I arrived at the church and the service began. I was feeling good, at first. The medicine was going strong but I was starting to feel a bit hungry and suddenly a little nauseous. At that moment, I was called forward and I got up with my notes, praying for help. I made it through the first few minutes when my heart started going wild and my stomach had a mind of its own. I knew I needed to sit down or I would be sharing something *not* in my notes.

I stopped speaking and looked down to the woman who had invited me. I apologized and found my way to the nearest chair. Now you need to know that this is a very orderly church and this little interlude was not in the bulletin. The poor worship leader got up and frantically began calling out random songs from the hymnal. He was trying to get the people singing, but I knew they were all looking at me. I was just trying to take some deep breaths and figure out what to do next. After a few minutes, I realized I was feeling so much better sitting down. For some unknown reason I figured I could preach the rest of the sermon from my seat. I got up again and apologized, stating

that I hadn't been feeling well, but didn't want to leave them without a preacher that morning, and I felt that I could finish my sermon sitting down.

I made it through the rest from my chair on stage, all the while wondering what I could possibly be thinking to continue on like this; and whether anything I was saying could even be sinking in after my dramatic activities. Following the service, I returned to the front pew. Several people came forward to greet me and check on how I was doing. I sat on that pew, wishing I could crawl under it. They were kind. I was utterly mortified. On the way home, I thought about how I had so obviously failed to deliver a message that God could use. I had been weak in front of countless people I didn't even know. I did not ever want to preach again!

By God's grace I got over that and laughed about it. But I did wonder about one thing: What caused me to feel so terribly embarrassed over the incident? It wasn't the illness. If I'd gotten sick at home, it would have been no big deal. It was getting sick in front of others, at a moment when everyone was focused on me, at a time when they were *expecting* something from me.

Embarrassment is one example of how we as human beings have a natural concern about how others perceive us. We also have a natural desire to please others. It is most obvious in very young children, but we maintain this desire more privately into adulthood. Yes, even teenagers really do want their parents to be pleased with them. All of us have expectations placed upon us by others. Here at the seminary we expect you to do your reading for class, the government expects us to pay our taxes, our families expect us to take time for them.

Leaders of congregations live in a world of expectations, sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle. We can feel the pressure to live up to the

expectations of those who look up to us as models of the Christian life. I spent an afternoon with our Doctor of Ministry students last fall talking about what it meant to live up to their congregations' expectations. Some noted that they feel a certain kind of pressure to have it all together; to be at peace with big questions of faith; to be faithful in personal prayer and Bible study; to have loving relationships with family members; to have their own temptations well under control. They need to worship with feeling and teach with passion, not revealing that they may feel distant from God. On a Sunday morning they need to come into church and greet everyone with a smile. Pastors always have good days on Sundays. Don't they?

Pastors learn to wear masks – to cover up what they really think and feel when those thoughts and feelings don't match what others expect of them.

We see the damage of living behind the mask when the shadow sides of well-known religious leaders are found out. How embarrassing! We are shocked. These people seemed like they had great wisdom and maturity in the faith! What we don't see are the honest struggles and the debilitating effort to live a double life and to meet expectations.

We all wear masks, at least to some degree. In my research for the Faithful Practices Project, I met with one pastor who has become a spiritual director of several other pastors. He is a pastor's pastor. This is how he puts it...

I see a lot of pastors burning out. I see a lot of pastors just succumbing to and yielding to the pressures ... pastors who feel like they're the lone dog, the lone ranger; that they can't reveal their cracks or their warts, their shortcomings. I just can't handle that. I get ready for work the same way everyone else does and I'm subject to the same temptations they are. I like to shake pastors sometimes – allow them to tell me where they're at and how

they're feeling, and in some way I can salvage or help shake their souls to allow them to say, „no, God really is at work here, and I just haven't taken the time to see it.”Some of them need a reality check that they are not God.

This is a gut-wrenching response from one pastor who has seen colleagues slowly take upon themselves a persona of perfection, something that was described by another young pastor as the responsibility of being the God guy, ‘ the one who represents Christ before others. When we take on this persona, it is hard to accept our own weaknesses and fallibility. But the truth is **we are not God.**

Parker Palmer writes about wearing a mask in the teaching profession. He notes that teaching is always done at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life. As we try to connect ourselves and our subjects with our students, we make ourselves vulnerable to indifference, to ridicule. When we teach, we talk about things we care about but what if our students doze off or surf the web while we're talking. (That doesn't happen here, of course.) What does that say about us? Our teaching and our personhood are so closely connected.

Pastoral ministry also happens at the intersection of the personal and private life. If we put our true selves out there, warts and all, in our preaching, in our programs, in our pastoral care, will we be accepted or ridiculed? If we go even further and give those we serve a glimpse of our weakness or struggle, will they still accept us? Palmer says that we can become so used to living a ~~divided~~ “divided life” – living out of the false self instead of the true self – that we actually forget that the mask isn't even real. Like the child who acts disruptively or plays the class clown because it gets the desired attention; we learn how to get the approval and support we are looking for from our parents, our friends, our bosses, our teachers, and our congregational members.

Ultimately, we risk losing touch with the true self that God designed and brought to life.

The Doctor of Ministry students tell me that there is a good bit of pressure to conform to expectations. This leaves me to wonder, what kinds of expectations does GOD have? This is the question I hope we will hold together as we explore the Scriptures. What does *God* expect of you as a current or future leader?

We have the great gift of stories of Jesus' own life and leadership. We will glance through a few moments in his life in John's Gospel to consider how he handled expectations. We cannot expect our journeys to be exactly the same – we are not God – nor is our call the same; yet as Christ's followers, there are things we can learn from his approach to leadership and living out of the true self.

One of the lectionary passages for this time of year comes from John chapter 2. We find Jesus attending a wedding with his family. Scriptures give the impression that Jesus was a dutiful son, yet there is some tension. Even as a child at the temple we wonder, whose son is he? Whose expectations take priority in his life? Here in John chapter 2, Jesus is now a young man, perhaps at the same stage of life as some of you. The Gospel suggests Jesus is concerned with timing. He is not yet fully into his career but he is clearly moving in that direction.

Mary is involved in the wedding somehow and is concerned about the embarrassment of the hosts because the wine has run out. Mary wants to save them discomfort and she approaches her son who is quite resourceful.

His response is rather shocking to our ears, —Woman what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” I don't know about you but, as a mother, I would like to hear Mary respond firmly, —Excuse me, young

man? Two things here: 1. I am still your mother, and 2. I raised you better than that. There is a need here and we've got to do something." Now, calling Mary, —woman," was not the same impersonal put-down in Jesus' day that it is today. Yet his response does create some distance from her. He is making his own decisions about the timing of the signs he is destined to accomplish. He loves and cares about her. That is clear especially later at the cross, but Jesus will not be pressured. His relationship with his heavenly father overrides all else. Mary doesn't understand that what he does here goes far beyond this simple wedding feast. Ultimately she tells the servants, —Do whatever he tells you."

Jesus is in a bind. His mother clearly has expectations but he has a timetable to keep. What to do? In this case, Jesus decides to quietly do as his mother asks. He faces his dilemma, and makes a decision. He helps a family to save face and meets the expectations of his mother.

We jump ahead to John 6, a time when the life of ministry has become intense. Word of Jesus' signs is spreading far and fast. In the ordering of the Gospel, Jesus has just fed a crowd in a truly miraculous way. In v.14 we read, —When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, —This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself."

Now there is more pressure than ever, from every side. Not just from family, but from his followers, the people he's been helping. The numbers of people who have an opinion about what he ought to do is climbing dramatically. The pressure to be named a king is not just an option for his consideration; people want to force it on him! But Jesus shows again and again that he is aware of who he is and who he is not. He is not a political

king. The only way to avoid this situation is to get out of town. Time for solitude in the mountains, a place of prayer with his Father, is the only choice.

Our next vignette comes toward the end of his ministry career. He is less popular with some. In fact, life has become rather dangerous. Again, Jesus faces expectations that he must address. In John 11, Jesus receives word his dear friend Lazarus is dying. There are plenty of people with expectations here, and Jesus is heavily invested in his love for these people. The disciples don't want him to go anywhere near Judea – his life is in danger! Who doesn't want to protect their leader? In our time we provide security details and strict policies about where our leaders go and when. It's for their own good. At the same time Mary and Martha are desperate. He is the only one who can save Lazarus. As the story progresses, it appears that Jesus pleases no one, not the sisters (he waits too long) and not the disciples (he ends up going anyway.) Yet he is once again about a different purpose all together. He knows who he is (ironically Martha does too.) He is the Son of God and his work is to bring resurrection and new life. For Lazarus, he takes care of both.

When we look at these stories and many others throughout the Gospels, we see that Jesus knew his true self without a shadow of a doubt and he knew what he had to do. Every action flowed out of his union with the Father. We can learn something from this, about seeking God's approval above all and yet still meeting the genuine needs of other relationships. Note that I said ~~—~~needs," and not ~~—~~expectations." Jesus seemed to know the difference. As ministers, we have to meet some expectations to keep our jobs. We have to work with people and hopefully much of the time this fits well with how God seems to be leading us. In the midst of this, we have to center ourselves in our identity as children of God. There is only one parent whose applause we seek, like the child on stage at a concert looking around for the face of a proud parent, we

hone in on the expectations of the one who made us and loves us just as we are.

Whatever your role in ministry today or in the future, I leave you with these insights for your own self-care as you live out of the true self God has made...

1. Learn to be in community; learn to be alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us of this in —Ife Together.” For some of us, community is easier, for others, solitude is more natural. We need both to be healthy. It is especially important when expectations in ministry begin to cloud our judgment that we must learn to get alone and set aside the clamoring voices. I am amazed how Jesus knew the need to do this at just the right times. We need to be with God, sometimes in silence to make space for God to speak. We also need to attend to ourselves, asking ourselves key questions. Why do I feel anxious about this church decision? Why am I concerned about that relationship? Sometime we need to find a mountain. We need get away to reflect and pray.
2. Find a group that you can trust. If you can’t find one, start one. Jesus had a group that he shared life with. These are a few people who will tell you the truth about who you really are and hold you accountable to that truth. If you practice being your true selves with each other, it will be easier to do that beyond your circle. It is always my prayer that seminary covenant groups will become communities of trust. We are working to set things up for greater attention to accountability this semester. But if not there, seek it somewhere else. Ask each other honest questions about how God is moving in your lives. Listen to each other without giving advice.

3. Beyond the group, find a soul friend. There is an ancient Celtic proverb: A person without a soul friend is like a body without a head. Jesus brought his small group of soul friends with him in the greatest high at the transfiguration and the lowest low in the garden. If Jesus needed a soul friend, so do we. One of the saddest things I've heard from pastors came out of a pastors' conference some years ago. The speaker asked participants to raise their hands if they had a best friend they could confide in. Only a few raised their hands. I'm shocked by this. Trying to be the lone dog who doesn't share your struggles with anyone is very risky. If there is one thing I hope you take from this message it is this: PASTORS NEED FRIENDS. Pastors often feel they can't make genuine friends within a congregation. They can't let their hair down and they have little relational energy left for people outside of the church. Develop life-long friendships now!
4. Be with people who know and love you not as pastor – particularly your family. Our families can often tell us the truth. My sister is one of those people for me. I know I can depend on her through thick and thin. If you are married or have kids, let them be who they are. They will sense enough pressure being the pastor's spouse or child. Reassure them that they weren't hired by the church. One of the best examples of this for me was the pastor's wife of our New Jersey church. She showed up to worship in jeans every Sunday alongside her husband who wore a suit. They were a radiant couple, giving each other space to be themselves.
5. Find opportunities to tell the truth about yourself to the people you serve. We see Jesus doing that discreetly, time and again. I'm sure you won't go on and tell your most difficult temptations at the first

opportunity, but let people know about your challenges a little at a time. Give it a try. Perhaps in small groups first. God willing, it will give them courage to share honestly with you too.

6. Finally, when you engage in worship keep in mind the audience of One.

The first time I entered the sanctuary as a very young pastor, I stood behind the pulpit and I was humbled by the awesome responsibility to speak to God's people. What would they think of what I had to say? As I looked out, I could imagine the people filling the seats, but then I also noticed something else; the empty space up to ceiling. I imagined that the Spirit of God filled that space. In fact, there is a lot more space filled with God than with people. On that morning, I knew that I had an audience of One. I have come to believe that pastors need to find ways to genuinely worship even when they lead and to remember the One who is easy to please, who looks on as a proud parent as we share who we are.

What does God expect of you? I've heard the overworked seminary student say —“very little.” Try to separate out the voices of parents, teachers, friends, and people in your church. What does Jesus expect of you? Know that you are loved and cherished by the One who made you just as you are. Amen.

Shall We Pray?
Exodus 17:8-16 & James 5:13-18
Dr. Brian C. Brewer
Assistant Professor of Christian Theology

*I have a few questions
to ask about prayer:
Can I talk to God
Anytime, anywhere?*

*Are there special words
I should use when I pray?
Should I pray at nighttime
or during the day?*

*Does God hear the prayers
that I don't even speak?
How many times
may I pray in one week?*

*When I say my prayers,
should I bow down my head
And kneel on my knees
by the side of my bed?*

*When I first begin,
do I call God by name?
Should all of my prayers
be exactly the same?*

*Does God keep a list
of my prayers from before?
Will God give me all
that I ask for and more?*

*Can I pray to God
when I'm angry inside?
Or would it be better
to go off and hide?*

*Can I pray for things
like a toy or a bike?
Should I pray for people
I don't even like?*

*Can I pray for something
and then pray again?
Why do we have to
end up with "amen"?*⁶

So begins Kathleen Long Bostrom in her questions of children from her book, *What is Prayer?* What is amazing to me is that these questions are questions not reserved simply for the child. As pastors and future ministers, we will be asked these questions over and over. And many of us resonate with at least some of these basic, simple, honest wonderings about the meaning of prayer.

As Christians we know that the Bible is replete with passages where believers either descriptively portray or proscriptively outline the importance of prayer and how God often blessed those who prayed in faith. One might even say that the story of the Old Testament and the New is a story of those who prayed and received God's answers:

⁶ Kathleen Long Bostrom, *What Is Prayer?* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002), 3-16.

~ We find Moses reminding the people of God of their blessings before they entered the promise land as he said: *What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?* (Deut. 4:7)

~ There was the picture of Hannah praying for a child and dedicating Samuel to the Lord's service (I Samuel 1).

~ There was Solomon in I Kings praying to God as he dedicated the temple: *Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive* (8:30).

~ And then we read about the Lord saying to Solomon in 2 Chronicles: *if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

~ We have the fervent prayers of Elijah, the excruciating prayers of pain from Job, the poetic prayers of the psalmist, Jeremiah's admonition to the exiles to pray, the thankfulness of God's answered prayers in Ezra, the wise sayings about prayer in Proverbs, and God's acceptance of our prayers in Isaiah. The Old Testament is a story of the people's praying, of the people needing to pray, and of a God who answered.

And in the New, we find Christ teaching the disciples how to pray and telling the people parables about genuine and persistent praying.

~ He told us to pray even for those who persecute us, and he went off by himself so often to pray for us who persecuted him.

~ He told his disciples that in some cases demon possession only comes out by prayer.

~ He reminded us of the promise of God's answer in prayer, to pray for others but also to pray for our own lives, and, in a painful scene, he knelt in a garden, sweating drops of blood, praying for *his* own life.

~ And when his life was not spared, we hear of how he prayed for us and our forgiveness even on the cross.

But the story of prayer continued. There were the apostles in Acts who prayed to know who should become the twelfth apostle. The early church prayed as they gathered. Paul and Silas prayed in prison, Paul then urged the churches to pray continually as he prayed for the churches, telling the Romans to be patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. The Bible urges and exemplifies a life of prayer from its cover to the maps. Christians are called to be people of prayer.

In our New Testament passage for the day, for example, we find James showing examples of when we should pray and for what reasons we, as Christians, should pray:

—Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, James urges, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you will be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

Luther called it the ~~sweat~~ “sweat of the soul,” and Ralph Herring said it was ~~a~~ “a summit meeting in the throne room of the universe.” Billy Graham called it the ~~rope~~ “rope that pulls God and man together,” while N.T. Wright said it was

–God being God in me being me.” But I like the simple definition from Clement of Alexandria, who said that prayer was simply our –conversation with God.”

We believe that prayer is a great, divine gift that we all, who believe, possess. We understand that while our God is above us, beyond our comprehension, he chooses to hear from us and work in our lives often because of prayer. And so God beckons us to come to him, to have –conversation with him.”

The problem is, amazingly, that most Christians don’t regularly exercise this great gift – pastors and professors included. If we are honest with ourselves, we acknowledge that we do not exercise it as often as we should individually, and tragically we hardly ever practice it corporately, especially in our worship.

Since I left the pastorate and became a seminary professor, I have been given the great honor to preach at churches around this region of the country. And what I have observed as overall trends in the way we Baptists worship has been very disturbing to me. It has had good intentions, I think, but what I have observed in our Baptist worship is a very sad state. I don’t mean to give you a great list of all the things wrong with what we do, but since I only get the Truett pulpit once a year, tops, let me name just a few:

~ First, I am disturbed at how many churches, who claim to be biblical churches, actually do not read the Bible in their worship services.

~ I am disturbed that we have gotten into the bad habit of calling the chancel of the church a –stage” and the sanctuary of God an –auditorium,” as if we have come to be entertained.

~ I am disturbed that the Lord’s Supper Table has been removed from most sanctuaries – as if it is merely a practical piece of furniture.

~ I am disgusted at how many churches end the service thanking the people for coming rather than thanking God for showing up. It is the people's job to come to worship, it is a miracle of God that he wishes to be there, too.

~ But probably the most disturbing trend I have observed in my unscientific, anecdotal observations is that Baptists have stopped praying in worship.

And all of this begs the question: why we don't pray? What are we afraid of?

Now, as someone who has been a pastor and has tried to incorporate serious prayer in the worship, I found that I had an awfully hard time even finding volunteers to pray in our worship services, especially among laypeople. Folks were intimidated at the prospects of praying, thinking that what they were to say must be in nearly Shakespearian English or that they would somehow stumble or pray something inappropriate. Some people think only a "holy person" merits praying in church, and a holy person is anyone but them. And so we don't pray.

What may be reassuring to us is that this fear of praying is not new to Christianity. In fact five centuries ago Martin Luther wrote about it. Those of you who have had me in class I'm sure are shocked, shocked that I would work Luther into my sermon! But listen to Luther's words here:

–Some say, I would feel better about God hearing my prayer if I were more worthy and lived a better life.' I simply answer: If you don't want to pray before you feel that you are worthy and qualified, then you will never pray again. Prayer must not be based on or depend on your personal worthiness or the quality of the prayer itself; rather, it must be based on the unchanging truth of God's promise. If the prayer is based on itself or on anything else besides

God's promise, then it's a false prayer that deceives you – even if your heart is breaking with intense devotion and you are weeping drops of blood.”

Now listen to Luther's main point here. He goes on to say:

—We pray because we are unworthy to pray. Our prayers are heard precisely because we believe that we are unworthy. We become worthy to pray when we risk everything on God's faithfulness alone.

So go ahead and feel unworthy, he says. But know in your heart that it's a thousand times more important to honor God's truthfulness. Yes, everything depends on this alone. Don't turn his faithful promise into a lie by your doubts. For your worthiness doesn't help you, and neither does your unworthiness hinder you. A lack of faith is what condemns you, but confidence in God is what makes you worthy.”⁷

And so we readily think of those who prayed with this attitude in Scripture. The tax collector in Jesus' parable comes to mind. He who stood *μαχαν*, at a distance, and prayed genuinely from his heart -- he went down to his house justified as opposed to the righteous man, the Pharisee, who did not pray to God with an attitude of humility.

If you know you are a sinner and you are ashamed of it, then that is the very starting point for prayer. It is also, by the way, the very starting point

⁷ Here reworded from Luther's Church Postil, *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 178. See also Luther, “Sermon XII – On Prayer,” in *Thirty-Four Sermons on the Most Interesting Doctrines of the Gospel by that Eminently Great Divine and Reformer, Martin Luther* (London: Cale and Fenner, 1816).

for corporate prayer. I think it is always important for Christians to begin their worship praising God while confessing their sins. It is our way of acknowledging that God is God and we are not. Only through confession can we rightly approach God's throne and continue in our worship.

Now some people say we should be sensitive to non-Christians and seekers in our worship. And if prayer is something they find strange and makes them uncomfortable, perhaps we should forgo doing it. And so I think this is another big reason we have stopped praying – as well as stopped reading Scripture and stopped having Communion and all these other strange things in worship. Now worship is typically comprised of thirty minutes of music and thirty minutes of preaching. And while I strongly believe in both the power of music and preaching as effective and appropriate parts of worship, they are not, by any means, the whole of worship. Which is, by the way, why I wholly reject the term “worship pastor” or “worship leader” for the music minister. That is one trend that has disturbed me more than many others. My goodness, worship is more than music! Your pastor is also assisting with worship through preaching, your laypeople or other staff members who read Scripture, who lead a responsive reading, who sing in the choir or praise band, and who pray are assisting in worship. And the real worship leader, my dear friends, is no one person in the chancel of the church sanctuary. The real worship leader is none other than the Holy Spirit.

As Marva Dawn, in her marvelous book, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, has repeatedly told the church: God is both the subject and the object of our worship.⁸ And so what we can learn is that we need not

⁸ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 80.

worry so much about seekers, about sensitivity, about the non-Christians, and about our comfort. But, as Dr. Angela Reed so articulately preached last week, we need worry only about the applause of One.

Please understand, for the sake of the future of whatever church you currently serve or may serve later, for the sake of the future of the Church in general: Worship must be more than this! And this message is not some kind of sermon in the battle over worship wars. This is not a sermon about the style in which we worship, the kind of music we employ, and so on. It is about the actual elements and substance of worship itself, because worship is never about us. It is always about God. And if we, as worshippers, never directly address this God, how, pray tell, is it worship? Prayer goes to the very heart of the worship of God, both in our own lives and as we gather together as Christians.

If this is not stated clearly enough already, we need only to revisit the second chapter of the Book of Acts where Christian worship was first described. And there, starting in verse 42, it says: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

And what happened when they did this? What happened when they did not see worship as a strategy for church growth but simply worshipped God with genuine hearts? The passage goes on to say: *And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

What this tells us is that the apostles did not water down their worship for the purpose of reaching out to be seeker sensitive. I mean, the apostles didn't gather up and say, "You know, prayer is kind of a strange thing and it doesn't really show well on television. And the longer a prayer goes, the more fidgety the people become."

Ironically, like the other elements of worship, the stranger it is to the general public, the more attractive it becomes. People are not impressed with how well Christians have conformed to society through their worship. What would impress them, counter-intuitively, is how Christians are unabashedly different. We are different because we don't care about what the world thinks. We simply gather to worship the risen Lord. This is our focus.

And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved, because the church devoted itself to the preaching and teaching of God's Word, to fellowship, to Communion, and to prayer.

But once we have overcome the hurdles of feeling undeserving and of prayer being counter-cultural, once we are ready to pray, Christians, even leaders of Christians, have to learn or re-learn how to pray.

Listen again to James in our passage this morning:

—Are any among you suffering? They should pray.
Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.
Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray. . . .”

What James here wants to drive home to you and to me is that prayer is essential in the Christian life, no matter where we are in our individual lives and in our corporate lives as a church.

When I was a pastor, I would occasionally have church members ask me about prayer, about how to do it. And they often say things like: —Well, I just don't know what to pray about.” Or people will go and buy prayer books so they can have some flowery words to say to God. I know that I have sometimes used prayers books when I didn't know what to pray. But while prayer books might be helpful and aidful for our individual and corporate prayers, understand that God doesn't really care about how flowery our words

are; He's not grading our poetry, for goodness sakes! God's concern is about our relationship with him. God is concerned with our openness and honesty as we simply converse with him.

So when we might lead the congregation in prayer, we simply pray about where we are as a church. Prayer is moving from monologue to dialogue with God. What is on your mind? *Are you suffering? You should pray*, says James. Pray then for those who are suffering in your church. *Are you cheerful? Then sing your prayers in praise to God!*

Prayer is simply a recognition that we are weak, that we are helpless and we need God to take control. And this is something we can pattern for church members. We pray to open our hearts to Christ Jesus and acknowledge in so doing that there is nothing more that we need in life as sinners for now or for eternity than him. So when we are happy, we share that joy with God, for he is the source of Joy. When we are distraught, we share our burdens with God, and he promises to lift that burden, or at least give us the grace to endure that burden with him – because he is the source of company and comfort. When we are in need of spiritual, psychological, emotional, or physical healing, God is the great Physician and Counselor who puts our lives back into perspective and who lifts our spirits.

Prayer is not a solitary journey with us and God. Our prayers during the week are joined in the great chorus of the saints of God as we learn to pray together in the temple, in our churches. We must pray what we feel together, through crises and pain, through happiness and prosperity. And through this experience of sharing our hopes and fears of all the years, we find God's answer and God's peace by God's Spirit in God's timing. But if we do this seriously, we have to understand that prayer is not something shallow. It takes effort on our part and on the part of our whole church.

Sometimes Christians are tempted to skip praying to get to the bottom of things. Let's roll up our sleeves and deal with this issue in the church committee meeting, then, if there's time left-over, we might say a few words of prayer. Let's get to the sermon and the meat of our worship. Then maybe we'll close in prayer. But the real work of the church, either in committee meetings or in worship, is our prayers.

The great Norwegian pastor, O. Hallesby, equates this with what he observed in watching miners, digging into the heart of a mountain. With care, the engineers would have holes bored into the side of the hill. It was a task that tried one's patience. Then another crew would finally come in and light the fuse and fire the shot.

The second group, Hallesby observed, no question, not only had the easier job but also much more interesting work. And one sees "results" from such efforts. But, Hallesby points out, "it took the trained workers to do the boring. Anybody can light a fuse."⁹

I think what Hallesby was trying to tell us is that anyone can roll up his sleeves and begin to work on a project. But the real work, the work that truly sees the results, takes the patience of prayer. And in the church, in our lives, if we want to see real results, we must cover our work and our efforts with prayer. For it is God's Spirit who will guide us.

Most of you are at least familiar with the name Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon was called the "prince of preachers" and was the leading Baptist preacher in the world in the nineteenth century. He pastored a massive church in England, and only God knows how many were saved because of how God used Spurgeon and his preaching.

⁹ O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 77.

But Spurgeon knew it was not his preaching alone that would save souls. In addition, Spurgeon always had a group of people praying in another room while he was preaching in a worship service and even while the entire worship service was going on. Because Spurgeon knew that the real work that sees results is in prayer.

Do you remember our other passage this morning from Exodus 17? The Israelites are at war, this time with the Amalekites. Joshua takes to the battlefield with the Hebrew warriors while Moses goes to the top of the hill. And as Moses lifted his hands to the heavens, the Israelites were winning. But when Moses lowered his hands, the tables turned, and the Amalekites took the upper hand.

So Aaron and Hur stood on either side of old Moses and held up his arms, as Scripture says, —“that his hands remained steady till sunset.” And now, I ask you, where was the real work taking place: out on the battlefield, or up on the mountain?

Prayer is not a magic formula, but Scripture teaches us here that prayers made in authentic faith in Jesus Christ are vehicles through which God releases his healing power in the lives of many people.

Prayer, of course starts in our own lives, as leaders and future leaders in worship. But prayer informs corporate worship. And our corporate worship will in turn affect our and our congregants’ individual prayers. And so, I want, like James, to encourage you to develop your prayer life. Make prayer your first priority.

But some of you may be saying to yourselves, —“ok, I’m no Charles Spurgeon, or I’m no great saint. I’m hardly an example for how to pray for my future church.”

Well, guess what? James anticipated your objection. Because in verse 17 he gives the example of the prophet Elijah, reminding us that Elijah was a human being just like us. He had the same human weaknesses we have. He was the one who ran away from Jezebel in fear. Elijah, you see, was just as weak and vacillating as the rest of us. Yet, James reminds us, he was a man who was used by God to speak spiritual words to King Ahab and bring judgment upon a Kingdom. So God answered this ordinary man's prayers.

The point of the biblical witness is not to tell us stories about extraordinary people but to tell us about ordinary people used by an extraordinary God. And you, too, are called to this purpose.

James is encouraging us to be women and men of prayer. We are not, of course, to be women and men of presumption, who get some idea in our heads and then baptize it by prayer, saying, "This is what God is going to do," when God has promised nothing of the sort. We are to be those who seek God's will and pray for it, and thus become agents of the blessings God brings.

But as Luther reminded us, "Your worthiness doesn't help you, and neither does your unworthiness hinder you. A lack of faith is what condemns you, but confidence in God is what makes you worthy."

What we are called to do as leaders of worship is to help give our churches confidence in the invisible, everlasting God – that he is with us in our worship and in our lives as we pray to him.

Leslie Weatherhead tells the story of an old Scotsman who was quite ill, and the family called for their minister. As he entered the sick room and sat down, he noticed another chair on the opposite side of the bed, a chair which had also been drawn close. The pastor said, "Well, Donald, I see I'm not your first visitor for the day."

The old man looked up, was puzzled for a moment, then recognized from the nod of the head that the pastor had noticed the empty chair. “Well, Pastor, I’ll tell you about that chair. Many years ago I found it quite difficult to pray, so one day I shared this problem with my pastor then. He told me not to worry about kneeling or about placing myself in some pious posture. Instead, he said, “Just sit down, put a chair opposite you, and imagine Jesus sitting in it. Then talk with him as you would a friend.”’ The old Scot then added, “I’ve been doing that ever since.”

A short time later the daughter of the Scot called the pastor. When he answered, she informed him that her father had died very suddenly and she was quite shaken, for she had no idea death was so near. Then she continued, “I had just gone to lie down for an hour or two, for he seemed to be sleeping so comfortably. When I went back, he was dead.” Then she added thoughtfully, “Except now his hand was on the empty chair at the side of the bed. Isn’t that strange?”

And the minister said, “No. No it’s not strange at all.”¹⁰

Prayer is to let Jesus come into our hearts, to have him come into our lives, to make him the Lord and the friend that he should be. God is not only ruling up on his throne, God is here with us, sitting among us. And he sits in our sanctuaries, awaiting our praise, our confession, and our simply conversation. *For the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective.*

Shall we, as the people of God, pray again to him? Shall we pray? Let’s start that conversation even now. Pray with me:

¹⁰ This illustration was originally attributed to F. W. Boreham but is here cited from Leslie Weatherhead, *The Transforming Friendship: A Book about Jesus and Ourselves* (New York: Abingdon Classics, 1990), 46-7.

Gracious God,

Inspire us now by your Spirit not to be confident in ourselves as we pray to you but confident instead in you who hears and answers our prayers. Lord, give us the faith we need to lead your Church into a life of prayer and to learn to trust you each day because of your faithfulness to us. This we ask in the name of Christ, your Son and our Lord. Amen.

Community: The Impossible Possibility
Philippians 2:1-4
By Roger E. Olson
Professor of Christian Theology

*To dwell above with saints we love,
That will be grace and glory.
To live below with saints we know;
Now, that's another story!*

Why do I say that community is an impossible possibility? Simply because community is what we're created for, and yet we never quite achieve it. At least not in this world. Community is something almost everyone longs for and seeks, and yet everything we call "community" falls short of our hopes. But few of us ever give up entirely on community; to find it is in our psychological and spiritual DNA.

In recent years, at least in American culture, "community" has become a buzz word. And like most good words used too much it's lost a lot of meaning. A prime time network television sitcom called simply "Community" makes a joke out of it. At the other end of the spectrum some people make an idol of it. In between are all kinds of trivializations of it such as, well, "Frat Community," "Gay lovers community," and, believe it or not, "Marsicism community."

Of course, as Christians we know that the original community is God himself. Or should I say, "Themselves?" Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the perfect community in whose image we are created. Jesus prayed that the church would be a reflection of that divine community. In John 17 he asked the Father to make his disciples one even as he and the Father are one.

But we know from church history how, for the most part, the church has failed miserably in that calling.

And yet, here and there throughout history, real community has appeared. People have for a few brief hours, days, weeks, months, and maybe even years experienced the beauty of true community—at least in part, imperfectly, but truly and sweetly nevertheless.

If you've attended chapel a lot this year you've heard many deep biblical and theological insights about community. I doubt anything I could say now would add anything significant to what has already been said.

But, I should give it a try. Not to supersede what has already been said—that would be impossible—but perhaps to uncover another dimension of community and then share from my heart a few examples of that elusive impossible possibility.

One reason community is an impossible possibility is that community is a *costly gift*. Community isn't something we can program—as much as we Baptists love to program things. And therein lies one of the problems in our failed experiences of community. We think it, like everything else, is something we do. Rather, real community is something only God can do. True community appears among us when we let God do his work. Illusory community appears when we try to do it ourselves.

True community is the harmony of the individual and the group. Illusory community is either a bunch of individuals pretending to have harmony or a collective pretending to allow individuality. That's all we're really capable of—one of those two mirages of community. And too often we settle for one of them because we don't know how or don't really want to receive the gift of true community.

You see, real community is a gift; it isn't an achievement. That's why there's something paradoxical about the term ~~intentional~~ community." We can intend community all day and all month, but we'll never have it just by intending it. We have to receive it. But that's not as easy as it sounds.

Although real community is a gift from above, it won't be given without our paying the price for it. But, you say, if we have to pay a price, if it's costly, then it's not a gift. But wait a moment. Don't we say that salvation is free but costly? Didn't Paul say it in Philippians 2? ~~Work~~ "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for God is at work in you..." The paradox of grace is also the paradox of community.

So what is the ~~price~~" of community? In what way is the gift ~~costly~~?" We already know, but often we don't want to talk about it because it's too high a price for most of us. We'd rather settle for illusory community than pay the high price of receiving the gift of community.

The price, you see, is Self—not self as ~~this~~ person God created in his image and gave to the world to glorify him and enjoy him forever." Not that self. Rather, Self as ~~my~~ privacy, my rights, my esteem, my satisfaction." Individualism is so deeply ingrained in our culture that we hardly even know what giving that up means. From our earliest days on earth we're taught that ~~being~~ "true to yourself" is the highest value. Unbrainwashing ourselves about that is painful and almost impossible.

So how can we receive the gift of community? Well, I don't think we can receive it here, in this life, within history, in this world ~~blow~~, in its fullness. We're too sinful for that. But I'm confident we can taste it.

How? We simply have to pray every single day ~~Father~~, show me how to bless someone else today. Show me how to meet someone else's need. Show me a way to put someone else before me." But first, many of us will

have to pray —Father, give me the desire to put others first.” You see, we often want the gift of community without paying the price.

So when and where and how have I experienced at least a taste of real community?

When I was two my mother died. My father and brother and I became homeless. I’m not sure why. But we did. A poor family in our poor church took us in. At least they took in my brother and me. I don’t remember much about my father for those two years before he remarried. Oh, I’m sure he paid them something, but I’m also sure he didn’t have enough to pay them what it cost to house and feed and take care of two little boys in addition to their six children. Our church was like that; people had very little in terms of material prosperity, but they had each other and took care of each other. Later, after my father remarried, we took in children. One of my earliest memories is of a cold Sunday night after church—sitting in the backseat of our car watching my dad go into a house that was little more than a shack with no lights, bringing out two little children, putting them in the backseat with me and my brother, and taking them home with us. We kept them for a few days, and then they went somewhere else. I remember my mom burning their clothes because they had lice. Someone in the church who had more room than we did took them in; we had only two bedrooms for the four of us.

Years later, another church. When I was eleven my dad took a church in another city, and it grew quickly over a few years when I was a teenager. Ours was the only church in town that would allow hippies and drug addicts and Jesus freaks to attend without —cleaning up” first. It was an adjustment for some of the older folks in the church. But God’s Spirit was alive there. Numerous people who came to visit and see what God was doing testified that they —felt something” the minute they walked in the door. That

—something” is symbolized for me by a vivid memory of a little old German widow lady in her long dress and hair wrapped up in a bun hugging a one-legged, long-haired hippie college student in the church foyer after Sunday evening service. That wasn’t unusual; differences didn’t matter; everybody loved each other. People flocked to that church just to see and taste the love.

More years later. My first teaching position was at a well-known Christian university that was having tremendous financial difficulties. My salary didn’t pay our bills. I don’t know how many people my age remember their first full time salary. Mine—as a university instructor—was \$14,000 a year. Even then it was almost slave labor. But I loved what I was doing; it was a dream come true. But one day an event happened that I greatly feared. Our little Ford Escort broke down, and we didn’t have money to get it fixed. The next day one of my new colleagues whom I hardly knew called me into his office and said —“Roger, God told me to give you this.” He handed me a check for \$500 that just covered the repairs. He didn’t want my thanks because he said it was from God. He was just paying it forward, and he asked that I do the same someday. By God’s grace I’ve been able to.

A few years later I took my second teaching position at slightly higher salary at another Christian university. Again, just when I arrived the university was going through terrible financial problems, and the administration was ordering cutbacks and downsizing all departments. The Department of Sociology and Anthropology had just hired a young scholar, and, as he was newest, they were told he had to go. Instead, everyone in the department voluntarily gave up part of their salary to make up his so that he could stay.

What I want to say to you is that real community isn’t a static state of affairs. It isn’t just ~~there~~.” True community, or something approximating it,

is an event. It doesn't ~~be~~." It happens. But it doesn't happen according to a plan. We can't create it by following a formula. We have to want it to happen among us. And it will happen whenever and to the extent that we create space for it and expectantly receive it by letting go of the God-like, independent, autonomous —Self with all its rights, privileges, esteem, and satisfaction and pray, ~~—~~Make me a blessing, make me a blessing; out of my life, let Jesus shine. Make me a blessing O Savior I pray; make me a blessing to someone today."

"The Pulpit and The Table"
Acts 2:42 & Acts 6:1-5.
Matt Snowden
Pastor, First Baptist Church of Waco, TX

Dr. Garland, it's great to see you and it was wonderful to be invited by Dr. Tucker to come and preach here today. I have nothing but gratitude in my heart for this wonderful place. Truett Seminary changed my life. I came here because of David Garland. I met him over a decade ago in Jackson Mississippi and I said, "I want to go to the school where he works." And I got a lot more from Truett Seminary than a piece of paper and some free coffee cups. Do you have some free coffee cups? Cherish them. I got some mentors for life and some friends for life. And I got a theological base camp for my ministry. And so I come here today to say thank you. Thank you for being who you are and thank you for doing what you do.

The students that are here, I love you as a group. I love what you symbolize. I love what you mean to the world. The ones of you I know, I like. I believe in you, and I'm proud of you. I sort of view myself as your big brother. I'm not old enough to be your father, but I'm old enough still to be a big brother to you. So, to people that I'm grateful for and to people that I look at as sisters and brothers, I come today to talk about worship, because that's what I've been invited to talk about. So, for a few moments, I want to talk about the importance of the pulpit and the table.

If you look in that window up there, you see the third one, you see the pulpit? I lay my bible on that pulpit every Sunday morning. That pulpit is called the B.H. Carroll Pulpit. Now, this is the first pulpit I've ever been associated with that's had a name. That's sort of a weird deal, I'm not going to lie to you about that. One thing it means is that the church I'm privileged to serve at is very, very old. It has some history and some history that's mingled

with the history of this place. But that's the pulpit I work from every week. It's positioned in that window between a prophet and the Pentecostal occurrence. And that's where it ought to be. The pulpit deserves a central place in worship and ministry. You don't have to place a pulpit in the center of your room to know intuitively that the pulpit is important.

My friend Chuck Treadwill is the rector of St. Pauls' Episcopal Church. I was down there with him on Ash Wednesday, we were drinking Dr. Peppers in his office talking about life and ministry. Chuck said something to me that I think is important.

He said, ~~—~~Matt, on Sunday morning, you better be ready to bring it!"

Now that sounds Anglican, doesn't it? ~~—~~You better be ready to bring it!" It's important. But preaching has fallen on hard times. Not long ago I was having breakfast with a man in this room, and we were talking about preaching.

He said, ~~—~~When I was in seminary, we had three professors of pastoral care and one professor of preaching."

I said, ~~—~~Well, that was the era," meaning, the season of time.

And without flinching he said, ~~—~~Ad it was the error," as in the baseball deflected off of my glove trickling into the outfield and the guy got on first when he didn't deserve to be there.

And it *was* the error. In the generation that preceded me, preaching was sick and dying to death. But there's been a little bit of a revival of that! And I'm proud! In this school there are wonderful professors of preaching. In my prayers I thank God for them and the work they are doing with you. In our church, we are creating some space for seminarians to have an opportunity to preach, sometimes their first sermons outside of a classroom setting. I sit there week after week with a heart that's filled with gratitude. And as I sit

there I am also convicted and stirred and challenged and encouraged. Broken and put back together. Because, what you guys and girls are doing, is preaching the word of God. And that's what it does; it breaks us down and builds us up.

So there is a renewing of preaching in our time, but there is still a gulf between where we are and where we can be. And there is still some room to work on the pulpit. I think a lot about this and I wonder, what are the reasons? I think there are two reasons why preaching is not where it needs to be.

Number one is its foolishness. It's foolishness! I mean you really don't sound cool when you tell people you're a preacher. Think about it, those of you who preach. When people say, "What do you do, Sir?" You might say, "I'm a pastor, or I'm a minister, or I'm a this or I'm a that. Rarely does anyone say, "I'm a preacher." Those of you who are professors and preach, you've got a little advantage here because, you say, I'm a professor, which means, I spend my life doing important things like studying loom weights at Timna and stuff like that.

But I'm a preacher. We want to load our pipes smoke them and drink good coffee and read good books and maybe write a few, but preaching? That's foolishness! But it's God's foolishness. It's worthy of our time. It's worthy of our lives.

Another reason and this one is probably more important, is that the results of preaching are seldom seen quickly. Now some of you are so green to this you don't believe me because after your sermon is through, you get lots of affirmation. I used to think that meant they got it, and they cared if I did a good job. I became a pastor when I was twenty-two years old and for the first couple of months I thought I was the greatest thing the world had ever seen! Because week after week after week, these wonderful people would file out of

our little sanctuary, and they would say to me, things like, —~~P~~stor, you really nailed it today!” They would say, —~~P~~astor, you stepped on my toes today. They’d call me Brother Matt and say —~~Y~~ou stepped on my toes!” I learned all of the preacher gibberish, and I’d say, —~~W~~ell I must have missed because I was aiming at your heart!” For a while there I thought that they were telling the truth. But after a little while, I began to discover, I could have stood in that box and I could have read from the *Communist Manifesto* or the *Book of Mormon* and I could have talked about how orangutans eat oranges and they still would have said, —~~B~~rother Matt, you stepped on my toes today.” Am I lying? No, I’m telling you the truth.

So, I said, I can’t count on this anymore, so what are my other barometers of change? What do I look at? What do I see? And then there’s stuff all in front of your eyes as a preacher that just breaks your heart. Because people come to church, and they’re tired and many of them are elderly, and half of them are medicated. And so after the music is over they start to swirl and they fall asleep a lot. I’ve seen a lot of people fall asleep as I’ve preached.

In that little church in Monticello, Mississippi we were on the banks of the Pearl River, and the Fair River and the Bear Creek. When you are surrounded by water like that, you’re in a swamp. And we were in this little swamp church. And right there, (points) right where you’re sitting, a woman named Alice sat every single week. And Alice was a big woman, she was girthy. Every week she sat next to her thirteen year old grandson whom she brought to church. And I saw her do that head thing one day. And I knew what was gonna happen. She just fell across him and onto the floor. Boom! These were the days of the Toronto Blessing. I thought we should try to play it off as some kind of revival phenomenon and try to get the crowds up. But I

knew that wouldn't work. Everyone was so kind they just went on with worship like nothing ever happened.

In that same church, there was little girl who sat back where Robert Creech is sitting. She had problems with her adenoids and she was narcoleptic. She was nine years old. This little girl, this is how country we were, when she was nine years old, she drove a Ford 150 pick-up truck to Bible School, by herself. [She] got out, came in, and nobody raised an eyebrow. This little girl, because she had narcolepsy and adenoid problems, would fall asleep in church and she would do it regularly. She had this high-pitched whistling snore. One day she was doing that and Odel, who sits right back there where Lindsey is, he started diggin' in his ear. He thought his hearing aid had malfunctioned. He kept diggin' and he pulled it out and, started diggin' in it with a nickel and it didn't work and so finally he just yelled out a profanity, dropped it on the pew and walked out. Again, they were kind people and they didn't bat an eye.

So you see stuff like this. I preach and our sermons are broadcast on television so periodically I get some hate mail. One came, signed from Bell County. Like Francis of Assisi, this man was ~~—this~~ "guy" from Bell County. He gave six months of reasons why I was the worst preacher God had ever made. He said, —~~Ad~~ look at the people when they pan with the camera! They look like they're asleep and they look like they're ready to leave the room!" I wanted to write back and say, —They're on drugs and they're old and they're tired! Cut me some slack!" But I've developed and Abner McCall sort of posture about these types of people and I just say stuff like, —You may be right." But you see things that discourage you as a preacher and rarely do you see immediate results and we live in a world that loves immediate results. We

are microwave people. Preaching is not a microwave thing. So we put it down on the list of things that are important as a minister.

But my encouragement to you, young emerging preachers, is swing the hammer.

I'm a Brave's fan. On my desk there's a biography of Hank Aaron, one of my favorite baseball players. The title of his biography is *I Had a Hammer*. My father is a carpenter and he grew up singing this little hippie diddy, "If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning." Well, you have a hammer as preachers. You should swing it. B.H. Carroll said, "Smite with God's Word and hard hearts will break! Fountains of Living water will flow forth from the granite bosom. Kindle the fire, heat up that furnace! Smite the ore! Melt the soul!"

Where did he get this crazy idea that the Word of God proclaimed was a hammer? He stole it from Jeremiah who swiped it from God who says, "Is not my word like fire?" And like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" Many of you have a fire that's shut up in your bones and you have a hammer, so swing.

First thing they did after Pentecost, is they preached. This foolish, crazy thing! Pentecostal grace invaded the earth and they went about preaching. Worship needs a renewed pulpit. We need preachers that will swing the hammer. We need people that will break us down and build us back up in the image of the Trinity. So pay attention to your professors, they're good here! Listen to them. They have much to say. I would add to what they have to say about preaching, this; I think the most important thing about preaching is: Have something to say.

Bill Austin is a member of our church. For a while he was the chaplain at Baylor. He pastored Baptist and Methodist churches for about a

thousand years. I enjoy talking to Bill. He said when he was a young pastor in Texas, it was a time when you had to have two revivals a year or they would send you to another place. He was obligated to nurture these revivals and he had Carlisle Marney come up from Austin. The first day of the revival, Carlisle Marney said to him, —~~Hi~~, I'd like to have some tapes of your sermons.”

And so this young pastor gave a handful of tapes to Carlisle Marney, who I envisioned listened to them drinking Scotch after those worship services were over because that's how he rolled. And so he preached all week long and at the end of the week after he preached, he listened to those cassette tape sermons and he went into Bill Austin's office and said to him,

—Young man, you have a wonderful voice. You have a great delivery. The structure is sound but you don't have a _beeeeeeep‘ thing to say.” Now I'd have gone ahead and said that word, I've heard Will Willimon cuss in this pulpit. But the difference between Will Willimon and me is Sherri Snowden, my mother. If she heard I cussed in the pulpit she'd come and slap me in the back of the head. She's a wonderful woman. She'd probably do it to the good bishop from Alabama as well.

But Marney had a point! You've got to have something to say! Where do you get something to say? In the prayer closet. In the study. Friends around the table as you share life and you lead God's people. The pulpit matters. But so does the table.

That pulpit (pointing to the B.H. Carroll Pulpit) came as a two piece set. It came with a little communion table about this big. That little table was lost to our church for over three decades. Somewhere along the line, someone said, —We need a bigger communion table. We need a flashier communion table.” So a bigger one was purchased. And the table that went with that

pulpit was placed in a basement room. You know, down there next to the musical things and the buckets of paint and those Roman robes people bring out at Easter, and the fake palm fronds and all that. It went into one of those basement rooms. And one day someone said, we've got all this junk cluttering the upstairs and we got all that old junk down there. We need to put our new junk down there and throw our old junk away, so let's go clean out that basement.

So they gathered up a group of guys and a few pickup trucks and they went down into that basement and started throwing the old junk away to make room for the new junk. One of the men who was part of that cleanup was named Bill. And Bill, as he was throwing things out came upon this old table, weathered and worn and discarded. But he recognized underneath all of that decay something beautiful. Bill by trade is a woodworker, he has a shop on LaSalle.

He said, "I can't throw this out, I can't in good conscience throw this away. I'll take it to my shop and I'll put it in my shop for safe keeping." And he took that little communion table to his shop. And Bill, during a season of church crisis and personal crisis, left the church. He walked away for twenty-five years. Not long after we got there, Bill and his wife began to visit again. They were just sniffing around to see if it was safe and to see if it was ok because they had this hunger to worship again. And they had some old friends up there. After awhile, Bill and his wife rejoined our church. It wasn't long after that he called me and said, "Man, I've got this piece of furniture in my shop that I want you to see, come down and see it."

And I went down there and there was the table that matched that pulpit and it looked terrible. He said, "I work with wood every day of my life. I want to restore this table for the church. Would you be interested?"

I said, ~~Let~~ me pray about it, Bill.”

[No,] I said, ~~Yeah!~~ How wonderful would that be!” So he went to work and he put that table back together. And now we rest the cup and the bread on that restored table.

Friends, in our churches, not only do we need to renew the pulpit, but we need to renew the table; to rediscover a place where we meet with God and with one another. It’s a place that God calls us to service and to leadership. There are really only two options when it comes to church life. We can feed one another or we can eat one another.

This is what Paul said. ~~We~~ are called to freedom brothers and sisters only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love, become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. If however, you bite and devour one another take care that you are not consumed by one another.” Galatians 5:13-15.

Only two options: We feed one another or we devour one another. No third opportunity. The church needs a renewed table. The table sits in the middle of our rooms and it calls us to remember Jesus and his sacrifice and it screams at us to follow him in a cruciform life. The table says do this, do everything in remembrance of me.

For a short period of time, I was an associate pastor in a church in Mississippi, one of those old, downtown, white column churches. I went there for a number of reasons, one of the reasons was I wanted to experience church staff from a staff member’s perspective. I didn’t want to be in that position, looking at someone across the table and not knowing what it feels like. I knew too many pastors like that and they were far too hard to live with and I didn’t want to be one of them. But I tell you, it was hard to take a place in worship

after about a decade on the other side of the communion table. To listen to someone preach. What made it worse is that this guy retired at full pay about five years before I got there. And every sermon began by going to the filing cabinet and getting an old sermon. That's about the sermon equivalent of eating Raman noodles out of Styrofoam that had been microwaved. It was painful. He was a good man, but that was painful! I was on the other side of this table and I was miserable. And one day I looked at that table and I saw that word, —~~ra~~.” I'm no mystic, I'm the last person in this room who'd walk a labyrinth, I'm not that kind of person. But if I've ever had an impression from the Holy Spirit in my life it was at that moment when I saw the word —~~ra~~.” And this is basically it, this is the paraphrase of it, —Matt, you're an idiot.” Since it was coming from God, it also had —You are my loved son, in whom I am well pleased.” But also, —~~ou~~'re an idiot. This stuff is not about you, it's about me.”

And a new lightness entered my life, a new joy a new vitality for worship. We need to come to the table and worship and serve each other in Jesus' name and recognize that all of this is about Christ and Christ crucified. We get something to say here, when we handle the bread and wine here. When we feed and we're fed.

For me, the table also speaks to the importance of leadership. It's important to remember that the first real fight that happened in church happened around the table. People went from eating food to eating one another; biting and devouring one another. What brought healing to that situation? Godly leadership, which is also an act of worship. I often hear seminary students, some of them friends of mine, talk about leadership as if it's some unholy thing. Something you have to do, the price of the ticket in order to do all the stuff you like doing. But when we read the Bible we begin

to realize that leadership itself is an act of worship. It can free God's people to do the work of God on the earth when it's done humbly and with a servant's heart. The table is an occasion to lead because we love God and his people.

I was introduced to Mirslov Volf by this school. Many of you have read *Exclusion and Embrace* and some of his other books. My personal favorite is *After Our Likeness*. It's about church and being the body. And this is what he says to leaders,

—Commensurate with the measure to which the charismata are given to a person, no one is to be coerced into activity. These gifts are to be acknowledged, vivified and employed in service to the church and the world. The task of leaders is first to animate all the members of the church to engage in their pluriform charismatic activities and then to coordinate these activities. Second, leaders are responsible for a mature church that is called to test every manifestation of the Spirit.

They ran into a problem and they ate each other over it. And leadership came to play, and said, —Oh, among this group of people there's some gifts and abilities and passions. There's some experiences. There are good people full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith that can help us out! Hey, y'all figure out who those people are. Let's organize this thing. They began to lead. And it pleased the people of God and the mission of God went on.

Godly leadership brought them out and took them to a new place. That's what it'll do for us. So, don't be smug. Don't cast it aside as something that only pragmatic fundamentalists do. Just do it right.

You are leaders and you are worshipers of God. And as worship is renewed in our day for us as leaders it will be renewed around the table and around the pulpit, around preaching, around service and pastoral care, around leadership. I pray that God will stir your hearts and strengthen your spirits.

Suffering in Silence
Jeremiah 20:7-8; 13-18 & II Corinthians 1:8-11
Dr. Phil Christopher
Pastor, First Baptist Church, Abilene, TX
Pastor of the Day, Spring 2011

Introduction

I thank God for His gift of mercy and grace that called me to be a pastor. This past Sunday, I celebrated sixteen years as pastor of First Baptist Abilene. Children that I dedicated, I have baptized. Children that I baptized; I have watched graduate and have officiated at their weddings. A part of being a pastor is the remarkable ways one shares the journey with a congregation.

As a pastor, I have been invited into the sacred and holy moments of people's souls. As a pastor, I have been invited into their sorrows of "fragile losses" to their "God-forsaken" questions when prayer has not healed cancer. I want to "take off my shoes" when I am asked to walk with people through the valley of the shadow where often the best ministry is not with words or answers, but in one's presence as their Pastor.

As pastors we are present in those hard moments, especially when people in our congregations walk through the "dark night of the soul" called depression. Some think that faithful followers, pastors, and seminarians are immune, or inoculated, from the disease of depression. Yet, depression can devour the "strongest."

I am in a Thursday morning "small group" with some men in our church. I am not the leader only a member, which is nice. In the book we are studying, the author who is a pastor has a brief section directed to ministers about our work. He writes, "God loves a cheerful minister," Nice. What

makes a minister ~~cheerful~~” is the passage that ~~God~~ (and ministers) loves a cheerful giver.” The author goes on to say that ~~We~~ are to do our work not out of drudgery or duty, but delight.” I certainly agree. Yet, I confess that each Wednesday I do not necessarily go skipping to the hospital humming ~~How~~ Great is Our God.” I don’t sign my e-mails with a ~~smiley~~ face.” Yet I hope that my congregation sees me as a ~~cheerful~~ minister” as well as a ~~human~~ minister” that understands our common struggles.

There are times that ministers are not ~~cheerful~~.” Even ministers get depressed. What if we were always cheerful? If we are to know the deep sorrow of our congregation and the hurts the people bring to worship, we, like our Lord, are to be persons acquainted with grief. God can use our depression just as he used the journey of Jeremiah. Sometimes the ~~best~~ sermons” come from the bottom of the well and out of the weakness when our cup is empty.

Yet, depression is dangerous. Let me tell you a story, and perhaps some of you know this story about a Pastor friend that walked through the darkness of depression. His name is John Petty, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Kerrville. John seemed to have everything. He was a skilled biblical scholar with a degree in Greek and a minor in psychology from Baylor. He had a ~~Doctor~~ of Ministry” degree from Truett. He was the youngest chair of the ~~Executive~~ Committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.” He was the beloved pastor of that congregation in Kerrville for over nine years. He was married to Kelly Hamil, whom I had watched grow up. He was the father of two young children. On Wednesday, February 9, at the age of 42, John drove out to a remote part of the ranch where he often hunted, and took his life.

The Foreign Language of Depression

I said that John took his life, but it was the “high noon demon” of depression that took John’s life. We ask, “Why?” or how he could have become so despondent about life with all he had in life and in all that he had accomplished? Perhaps we need to be reminded that health and wholeness are not the result of what we accomplish. Phil Lineburger said at his service, “The one thing we know was that John was suffering from the disease of depression. What we cannot understand is that ‘depression’ speaks a language of its own only known to the depressed.”^{xiv} As much as John knew Greek, he knew the language of depression that is only understood by the depressed. Dr. Lineburger described the “*vocabulary of depression* that fills our minds with the language of persistent sadness; anxiety and emptiness; feelings of hopelessness and pessimism; feelings of shame and guilt; and worthlessness and helplessness.”^{xv}

Mental health professionals cite depression as the number one emotional problem in the country. It is no respecter of one’s status, position, or profession. When I preached on this topic in Abilene after John’s death, I was amazed at the people who felt they could come out of the closet about their depression. I was overwhelmed at the response from one of the most successful petroleum engineers and geologists in our community to faculty members at Hardin-Simmons.

A *New York Times* article in August 2010 entitled, “Congregations Gone Wild” examines the pressures on Pastors today to soothe and entertain their congregations. The article states: “When those fade under the fads of

churchgoers who don't want to be challenged, pastors become candidates for depression" and so many suffer in silence and isolation.

One of the most outstanding Methodist ministers of the last century was William Edwin Sangster. His ministry was filled with flourishing congregations as he reached thousands each Sunday. Upon his death, his son found an old journal that recorded ~~the~~ "silent suffering" of the successful minister. On September 18, 1930, Sangster wrote thirty years before his death:

~~I~~am a minister of God, and yet my private life is a failure in these ways... I have lost peace... I have lost joy... I have lost my taste for my work... I feel a failure."^{xvi}

The one, who brought peace and joy to so many others, walked through the valley of depression.

Depression from Disappointment

There are the physiological issues of clinical depression in which the darkness is being forced on the mind by a deficiency of serotonin in the neurotransmitters in the brain. Those medical considerations are crucial, but beyond this message. Attempting to be a ~~e~~heerful minister" is not enough here. You cannot walk this treacherous road by human willpower or positive thinking.

The inevitable pressures of life and the disappointments of ministry can precipitate the pessimism and discouragement of depression. I live in Abilene, Texas where you want to sing ~~H~~ome on the Range." You know the

song, “Where seldom is heard a discouraging word.” That line might be true about the ~~range~~,” but that’s not always true in West Texas churches.

The congregation has enormous expectations where only Superman could succeed, maybe. Yet, the source of our discouragement often comes when we think we should be able to leap steeples in a single bound. Those deadly self-imposed and unrealistic expectations become the deep well of discouragement from which we drink.

In the text from Jeremiah, we hear the angry words of depression. Yet, his words have the mournful sound of Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*. Listen now to the sorrow of the strings and the sadness of the soul in the music. Jeremiah composes his own lament for strings: *“O Lord you deceived me... I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me... Cursed be the day that I was born... Why did I ever come out of my mother’s womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame...”*

His ministry had not worked out as he had planned or expected. Jeremiah was not called to be just a ~~local~~ prophet,” but a prophet to the nations. He was to have an international ministry, CNN’s Man of the Year. He was God’s man. Yet his own people would not listen to him. He spent significant time in jail and was accused of being a traitor. He was the “Rodney Dangerfield” of prophets — ~~h~~ got no respect.” For two decades he had preached and nothing, nothing. I have this cartoon of a preacher hanging over the pulpit with this depressed look on his face. He says to the congregation, “How come this is my fourth sermon on transformation, and all of you look the same.” Been there?

In Dr. Joel Gregory's sermon, "When God's Servant Is Depressed" he attributes the source of Jeremiah's depression to a deep sense of disappointment in being deceived, seduced by God. Jeremiah is disappointed that God has been "big on promises," but short on delivering.^{xvii} Behind Jeremiah's anger, as always, is a deep sense of grief and loss. As ministers, we need to attend to our grief. Be warned—unresolved grief becomes the seedbed of depression.

Disappointment is devastating especially when you have such high expectations. In 1987 I was called to be Pastor of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. It was more than I could imagine since I had graduated from Southern Seminary, which was right up the road from the church. The Pastoral Search Committee had painted a picture of possibility. I went with such grand hopes.

I did not realize that I was following one of the most gifted preachers in Baptist life, Dr. Paul Duke. He is like an artist with words combining biblical insight with a fresh sense of humor. Paul has this pastoral voice that sounds like "a word from heaven." When Paul left to pastor in Missouri, a significant number of people and students left the church, because he was one of the primary reasons that they had joined or attended Highland.

I brought gifts that the church really needed in finding a mission and new identity. However the place where I was judged was in the pulpit. There were those that were disappointed. Some said they didn't like my voice – what can I do about that? I tried to talk deeper, but it was a joke. One doctoral student at Southern said he had heard worse preachers—thank you very much.

Out of my disappointment of wondering why God led me to such a wilderness, I found myself in the —alley of depression” and petrified at preaching. I found myself preparing all week, but unable to write – it had to be perfect like Paul – not the Apostle, but the previous pastor. The depression was blocking me. I developed a pattern of waiting till 12:00 midnight to commit word to paper. Sunday was coming – I had to have something. So I would finally force myself to write and finish about 5:00 a.m. Now that’s recipe for inspiration. I would get a few hours of sleep sometimes on the couch and then arrive at the church for the 8:30 service. This continued for months until I finally asked for help through the encouragement of my spouse, Mary. Asking for help included going to a counselor friend, and going to the deacons about the issues in the church. I finally told my story. I could no longer be a —silent sufferer.” And the healing started through sharing my pain. In God’s grace, I survived that first year. I went on to stay at Highland for seven years. I now look back on that experience with gratitude and count it in the words of Sheldon Vanauken, —a severe mercy.”

I am a different pastor today because of that sojourn through the wilderness of depression and disappointment. It is only years later that I can look back on —that time” and say in the words of the Apostle Paul,

—We were under such _pressure,‘ literally meaning
_burdened excessively‘ like a donkey that cannot move
beneath the load, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we
despaired of life... But this happened that we might not rely
on ourselves, but the God who raises the dead.”

And I am still learning that lesson.

The Journey of Healing and Hope

As the Apostle faced this “*hardship*” whether it was the thirty-nine lashes or the violent riot in Ephesus, he provides a road to walk through the —alley of depression.”

Chuck Poole in his book, Don’t Cry Past Tuesday tells us that first, Paul tells his story.^{xviii} He doesn’t try to hide his depression. He doesn’t attempt to be a spiritual —super star” like the —Super Apostles” of Corinth to which he was constantly compared and criticized. People had accused Paul of being —wack.” They contended, —His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing” (II Corinthians 10:10). I know such vulnerability has risks, but it also has the reward of genuine community. May our churches be safe places where we can be human, acknowledge our struggles, and tell our stories.

Secondly, Paul finds hope in the past and uses the gift of memory as a reminder of God’s guiding providence. He looks to the past, and even this experience of despair, and remembers the ways that God has provided a way through. God is the God that raises the dead. The old Apostle says, “*God has delivered us from deadly peril.*” We are here today in this chapel, which we can never take for granted. Perhaps you are wrestling with old disappointments, or walking through some hardship “*beyond your ability to endure,*” but God has brought you to this very moment. Remember the warm days of spring when God called you and that as Frederick Buechner responds, —You were not poorly advised nor this calling your own idea.” The past can be a great resource of hope and a reminder of God’s deliverance.

Conclusion

The miraculous ways that God has delivered us from past peril is a promise that He will deliver us in some form or fashion in the future. The Apostle Paul, says, “*On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us.*” It is not that we are delivered from troubles or trials—even tragedies. As Paul Scherer says, —**A** quickly as Paul got out of trouble, he went head long back into it with the Doxology on his lips.”^{xix} The promise is that God will find a way through and as pastors we have been called to proclaim with trembling lips there is a way through. Even more, we have been called to walk with them through the valley of loss. We are present so that those hurting will not suffer in silence. We have a God that raises the dead and where no situation is hopeless. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have the hope that God will continue to deliver us and no disappointment, circumstance, church problem, failure, or even death itself can take that hope away on which we set our heart—even broken hearts.

Access Granted
Luke 11:5-9
By Christopher Gordon
Robert Jackson Robinson Preaching Award Recipient
Spring 2011

They're called tropes. A trope is a literary or rhetorical device, like metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony that consists in the use of words in their figurative sense rather than their literal sense. One of my favorite tropes is the type of idiom that has hit mainstream films and novels, comic books, advertising, theater and even literature. People have become fascinated by this sort of ending to stories. They really build suspense for the audience and then always force one to retrace, reconsider, and reassess the entire story all over again. It's very common, and you may recognize it once you hear it. It usually begins with a huge conflict or problem to solve, and there's a character in the movie or novel who's been less than forthcoming with information. The character holds on to a vital piece of information and thereby holds the plot because he or she wasn't asked for it. It goes something like this:

Sargent: *You mean you could have turned the bomb off any time!? Why didn't you tell us?*

Response: *Well, You didn't ask.*

There's something ironic about stories of people who had vital, significant resources, available and within reach, but they never accessed it because they didn't ask. Jesus is aware of this irony in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 11. Jesus begins this chapter in a posture that he has become known

in. He begins in prayer. Repeatedly, all throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus prays. Jesus steps away from the crowd to pray, goes onto the mountain to pray, and even breaks away from the crowd to pray. However, this time Jesus is seen in a certain place praying with his disciples nearby. And after Jesus ends his prayer the disciples come to Jesus with a request? Lord, teach us to pray as John also taught his disciples. Seeing Jesus at prayer may have been an eventful sight to see. The disciples have been traveling along with Jesus for some time now. They've been given the power to cast out demons, even the power to heal diseases, and they've been sent out to preach to the Kingdom of GOD into the nearby cities, but, as good disciples are, they want to know everything. Lord, we haven't been taught how to pray. Teach us how to pray as John taught his disciples. Maybe they heard from Peter, James, and John about the last time Jesus was praying on a mountain top and how his countenance began to change and his clothes became glistening and white, but, whatever the reason, the disciples want Jesus to teach them how to pray. They may have noticed a difference between their prayers and Jesus' prayer, but nevertheless they ask. And Jesus teaches them. Jesus gives them what is known as the Lord's Prayer.

But immediately attached to this prayer is a lesson, a story, a parable, a question to his disciples, a hypothetical situation:

Which of you shall have a friend...

Suppose you have a friend. Think of someone that you really call a friend—not one of your relatives, not one of your neighbors, not someone that you simply live next door to, nor someone who stays on your block but someone you can call a friend. Not one of the 864 people on your Facebook friends list,

not someone you work with or go to school with, not someone that y'all see each other and say, —Hi, and are very cordial too—no I'm talking about your friend. Someone that you really consider a friend. Friendship was a high commodity during this time. There were a lot of expectations for a friend. Proverbs 17:17 says, —The person who is a friend loves at all times.” This was a society where there were little to no interactions between people of the opposite sex. It was still taboo for men to associate and be seen talking and carrying on with women, and relatives could be seen as rivals, like when your brother would be your foe and would compete with you for your family's inheritance. Now, which of you shall have a friend, a confidant, someone whom you can share your emotions with, someone whom you can be vulnerable with, who has proven trustworthy, one you can depend on...

...and shall go unto him at midnight...

You go to that friend at midnight—at midnight, when all daylight is gone, when the work day has ceased. You go to that friend at midnight, in the middle of the night. During the day is the time for work, but night is the time for rest, and you have to go to that one friend in the middle of the night. And when you get to that one friend, the one you can depend on...

...and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves...

Friend, I need three loaves of bread.

...For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him...

I have nothing. It is midnight now, and I am in need, I have no bread for food. Come with me now and see the predicament. The shops are all closed, and there is no 24 hour Wal-mart in Jerusalem. If any of you have ever been to Germany, where there are —~~sh~~op closing laws,” you know something about this. It is regulated when stores can be open to the public, when stores have to be closed on certain days and on some weekends, and if you haven’t got enough food after the stores are closed, you’re out of luck. So in situations like this, you go to people you can depend on. You go to a friend.

It is not because negligence, not from my not taking care of my responsibilities, not from my being lazy and careless that I have no food for myself, but it is because someone I consider a friend is on a journey, and maybe to avoid the heat of the day he traveled at night and has arrived at my home. He has been traveling on a journey, and for a while, and he has made it to my home seeking shelter, rest, and hospitality.

Ancient eastern patterns of hospitality would require very generous and even excessively generous provision for the guests’ needs. Ancient obligations of hospitality are in the background of this parable.

I have nothing to set before him. Lend me three loaves—just three, just some bread loaves so that I can give him something to eat to gain strength and not starve, just three loaves of bread to show him a little hospitality and be a good friend to him. So I ask you, —~~my~~ friend,” would you lend me three loaves to help another friend?

... And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee...

Leave me alone! Don't bother me, take your trouble elsewhere, just don't bring them to me! It's the middle of the night. Leave me alone. My children are in bed. I am in bed. My door is shut, and it's gonna stay shut. I cannot get up and give you anything!

Negation after negation after negation. The word used for trouble is also a word used for beating and causing grief. Don't make trouble for me. Do not cause intense labor with intense toiling to come upon me. After you've traveled to him at midnight, in the middle of the night he won't even get up and come to the door. He answers from within, on the inside he yells out, ~~–~~Trouble me not," ~~–~~The door is now shut," and, third, ~~–~~My children are with me in bed. I cannot rise and give thee." Harsh words to come from a friend. A request for three loaves of bread, and he yells at you from the inside and won't even come to the door. You ask for three loaves, and he gives you three reasons why he cannot rise and give it to you.

Notice : he doesn't say, ~~–~~don't have 3 loaves of bread." He doesn't say, ~~–~~too have run out of bread and cannot meet your request. I'm sorry, my friend, but I just ain't got it." But his response is, ~~–~~cannot, but in actuality it is, I will not! ' I could, but I'm unwilling. I can, but I won't." If he would have said, ~~–~~ain't got it," then cool, but to say, ~~–~~can, but I won't...." This friend is able but unwilling.

Jesus continues to narrate the story and says:

...I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth...

Importunity!? Some translations read, ~~p~~ersistence.” Because of persistence, he will get up and get him as many as he needs. Persistence is the word. We like persistence. Persistence is to persevere, to stick to, to be in continual pursuit. We like to persevere. Isn’t that what America grants all people: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? America is the land of opportunity, and if you work hard, stay at it, and never give up you can have it. You can achieve success, you can have the American dream, and you can get what you want, if you have persistence. Just work hard enough and persevere, and it will pay off after while. Isn’t that the message of every MTV story, or every success story of how an actress, singer, dancer, producer has made it? They had a dream, and they persisted. They kept at it. They kept on going, didn’t take no for answer, never gave up, were determined to make it happen, and one day it came true. Every closed door they encountered, they kept on at it. Every ~~no~~—do not accept it. Keep at it, stay strong, and, if you want it that bad, persist! Be disciplined, have some fortitude, never give up, and stay at it all night long if you want it that bad.

But since this is a parable, is this a parable which houses the mysteries of the kingdom of God? We’re seminarians, and we’ve taken Dr. Arterbury’s and Dr. Still’s New Testament classes and Dr. Gloer’s Text and Communications. Then I have one question: Does it really pay to pester God? Is God is a rewarder of those who stay on him, keep at him, who continually pester and remind and who work hard and keep on going, who don’t take ~~no~~ for an answer, who keep on at the door until the neighbor gets out of bed, until he wakes up and decides, —~~lie~~! I’m up. I’ll get up. What do you want? Three loaves? Here! Take it! Just take whatever, and leave me alone!” We all have friends like that, right? We know people like that—those who keep reminding you to do things, or those like a parent who has a child who has to

be reminded, “You said you’d take us here, you said you’d do this, are we there yet, are there yet, can I have it can I have it?” “No, no, no, fine: Take It!” Is this how you get God to answer your prayers?

...yet because of his importunity...

“Importunity” seems to carry the better sense of the word, which says continual harassment. Or some translate the word *anaideia* as the desire to avoid shame. Either way, whether it’s because of harassment or not wanting to feel shamed, he gives his friend the bread loaves.

This is how some have viewed God, as a sort of cosmic heavenly grouch that you have to pester and persist in order to get what you want. Jesus, right before he gave them the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6, talked about the surrounding culture that says your persistence will make God answer you. The pagan and the heathen thinks, like in Matthew 6:7, that because of their lengthy words and their time spent praying that God will hear them, so they babble on and on all day and night so that God will answer. Jesus says in Matthew, don’t be like them. And here in this passage he gives the final word on prayer in this parable.

...And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you...

I know what you have heard. I know how you’ve always done things. I know what you have thought. I understand what you have always believed. But listen up close: “I say unto you, for those who want it given to them, ask!

Those who want to find, seek! And those who want the door opened to them all you have to do is knock! If you were reading in Greek, it would look even simpler: ask and receive, seek and find, knock and it is opened. I know the culture around you says your persistence will make God answer you, but Jesus says, –Because of who I am and the ministry I am inaugurating on earth, because the Kingdom has come near you have ‘Access Granted!’ because I am bringing the world into right relation with God, because of my redemption on earth, because salvation has come, because the kingdom is now here, ‘Access granted.’”

I’m telling of a God who knows what you need before you ask it, who cares so much for you that he knows how many hair follicles are still on your head, a God who is waiting and longing for His children, a God who is the giver of all good gifts, who wants you to ask. Because of who I am, if you want something from the Lord I am bringing you so close to God that you can now call Him Father, Abba, and if you want to receive something from the Lord all you have to do is ask, and it shall be given unto you! If you are looking to find, seek! And if you want the door opened unto you, all you have to do is knock!

Childhood was the good old days. The time of being an adolescent boy—those were the good times. The pleasures of being a rough-little-bad-little boy running all around outside, causing trouble. Being hyped up on Power Rangers and Ninja Turtles made childhood seem like the best years. One of the movies that really made being a young boy seem so cool was *The Sandlot*. You remember *The Sandlot*, right? It’s about a boy named Scotty Smalls, whom they called –Smalls,” who moved to a new neighborhood, and he wants to make friends, desperately wanting to fit in with others. He meets a group of kids who play baseball. They lose their baseball so –Smalls,” eager

to make friends, gets a ball from his dad's room so his friends can play ball. The ball goes over the fence, and not just any fence but the fence with a 20 ft tall, 300 lb dog called, ~~—~~The Beast.” When balls go over that fence, they never come out. Smalls tells his friends, ~~—~~We’ve got to get that ball back,” because it was his dad’s, who got it from a lady named Ruth, who signed it, saying, ~~—~~Baby Ruthy.” The Ball was signed by Babe Ruth! They had to get that ball back. The movie is about these boys all trying to get the ball back from over the fence of the Beast. They build robots, create extra long sticks, drop one of their friends from a bungee cord, and make other rescue attempts—all that to get the ball from over the fence. I remember the lines still: ~~—~~Bbe Ruth,” ~~—~~The Sultan of Swat,” ~~—~~the King of Crap,” ~~—~~The Great Bambino!” And if you’ve seen it, then you remember the mother of all insults: ~~—~~You play ball like a giiiiirl.” Oh, that was the chief insult in that movie. I remember in that ending of the movie, when they finally almost got killed and got the ball back, they went to visit the man, mean old Mr. Mertle, whose yard it was and who was the owner of ~~—~~The Beast.” They knocked at his door. James Earl Jones comes out with dark shades on. ~~—~~Was that you making all that racket going on!?” and he says, ~~—~~Yes sir. See our ball flew over your fence, and it belonged to my dad, and it was signed by Babe Ruth, and we had to find a way to get it back.” And then James Earl Jones says, ~~—~~Why didn’t you just ask me? I’d’ve gotten it for ya!”

We treat God just like mean old Mr. Mertle, like we have to work hard, and persist, and have to go through all these other attempts from our human achievement in order to get what we want. It’s like we have to butter our Lord up and timidly approach in a hope not to anger or annoy God, as if God is some mean old man. All the while, He’s there, saying, ~~—~~Why didn’t you just ask!?”

You have access granted unto you that whenever or whatever you need to receive, just pray! Ask and it will be given unto you.

—O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pains we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.
Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield you; you will find a solace there.”

I've been with people in the hospital where I wish I could come over and over again and pray with them daily until their life would get better, but it didn't work out that way, and I've been with people with tubes down their noses and into their stomachs and with feeding tubes lodged in them, and I've been around people who can't be touched with human contact, or they'll spread an infectious disease, and I wish I could come and visit them week after week, but I can't. But what I do have is access. I'm able to pray to my Father who listens and who pays so much attention that He knows how many hair follicles I have. I have access to a Father to a Lord who tells me that, if I want something, all I have to do is ask! That if I just knock, He doesn't answer from the inside, but He opens the door!

—Blessed Savior, Thou hast promised Thou wilt all our burdens bear
May we ever, Lord, be bringing all to Thee in earnest prayer.”