

Sermon for October 13, 2019

“The First Letter to Westwood: Foundational Faithfulness”

Texts: Jeremiah 29:10a, 11-14; Genesis 12:1-8, 17:1-8, 15-19, 22, 21:1-7

From Jeffrey, a servant of Jesus Christ called to be a disciple, a teaching elder, a minister of word and sacrament – Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy for all of you, because of the good work which we have already begun together, from the first day until now and for the work together that we will yet do.

I am confident of this: that the good work we have begun will be brought to completion by the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you because you hold me in your heart, as I hold you in mine. For all of you share in God’s grace with me as I study and seek ways to better serve you.

And this is my prayer: that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us to determine what is best; so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. It is the harvest of a sound, robust, buoyant faith, a resilient mature faith, able to withstand the trials and temptations of the prince of this world, its principalities and powers, even to our graying years.

Beloved, I write from a place that has become dear to me, which is the seminary in Louisville, to let you know that what is happening to me is, in truth, helping me to minister to you when I return to you. As you know, I have been led by God’s Spirit to this place and have undertaken studies in the Doctor of Ministry program. I have completed all of the class work and now begin the project in ministry.

The words “in ministry,” are key here, because the project is focused on the practice of ministry and is intended to be designed and implemented in one’s particular ministry setting. In my case, the project emerges from the recognition of an issue or situation in the life of a congregation that pose important questions for the life and practice of faith within that congregation.

They require critical reflection on tradition, scripture and contemporary circumstances in order to understand them and find a creative, imaginative response to address them in the light of the gospel.

It is no secret that our congregation is aging. It has been said that we are in “survival mode.” This means that we are aware of our decline in practically every sense of the word. We are finding it difficult to reach out to potential new members. We struggle to fill leadership positions. And the number of volunteers, and the energy of those volunteers, continues to dwindle. We have been forced to make do with less time, talent and treasure than ever.

So, what do we do? How, then, are we to live? Many suggestions have been discussed and debated. And, in the process, many have waxed nostalgic for the past and long for the days of old. Times when we had enough people and money to do the ministry to which God calls us in an appropriate fashion.

Should we go back to doing things as we have done them in the past? By no means! If nostalgia is the rust of memory, the past is seldom as great or as trouble free as we are inclined to remember. **That** was then. **This** is now. And while there are many who recall the past with fondness there are just as many who do not. In Scripture, the Teacher tells us to not ask **“Why were the former days better than these? For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. Wisdom is as good as an inheritance.”**

For that reason, rather than simply focus on growth for its own sake, or so that we may simply survive; we must concentrate on growth **beyond** mere numbers. We must focus on **personal** growth. We must concentrate on being faithful. We must work together to discern God’s will for our congregation. If we have any hope for growth or survival we must do this. Unfortunately, there are no short cuts to doing so. Discernment is difficult to define and even harder to do, especially when any measure of anxiety exists. So, the question that I think will be central to us all will be: What does faithfulness look like? More to the point, in our particular context – the question is: what does faithfulness look like as we grow older?

I will admit that much of this is personal for me.

Working on my degree has given me the opportunity to reflect on the fact that I am – myself – growing older. Even more, as I search for meaning in dealing with my own challenges and the realization that I can no longer do the things I was able to do when I was younger, both as a man and as a pastor. I have been given an opportunity to critically examine different theological and theoretical viewpoints from which to construct theological understandings of aging. As I work on the project my goal is to continue to do so and to bring that to bear on the mission and ministry of our church.

When I speak of the personal aspect here, I am referring to my experiences of the last fifteen years. In that period, I went to seminary, graduated and became ordained, serving several congregations in the process. I found that they, like most mainline denomination churches, are all dealing with many of the issues that we face here in Westwood. My greatest frustration was that I often felt unable to offer anything that might help them.

During that time, I watched my father battle dementia which necessitated moving him from the comfort and familiarity of the home, where he had lived for over forty years, into a nursing home several states away, near where my sister lives. He died in that nursing home in 2011 at the age of eighty-four. In that same period, after my father died, my mother, who had been my father’s sole caregiver, moved into my sister’s home. This coincided with my move to Cincinnati in October 2014 to begin my ministry with you. It is no exaggeration to say that I struggled to make sense of everything that was happening. This culminated with my mother’s sudden death from a heart attack in December 2015 – a week before Christmas.

I was blessed to have had the opportunity to spend some time with her before she died. We spent several days together, not realizing that this would be the last time I would see her. We shared stories and talked about a number of things, including some of the recent experiences of my new call. Some of them involved helping older members deal with transitions they were facing. This prompted discussion of the similar difficulties that my mother had experienced in the last few years. I believed my mother could help shed light on things.

What we talked about was life changing.

She spoke of the challenges of caring for my father, to whom she had been married for over fifty-five years, moving from their beloved home to a new city and into my sister's home. She spoke about her own health issues and decline. They were, in many ways, revelations and helped provide me with answers to many questions. At the same time, they raised a great many more.

Arriving back in Cincinnati, I spoke with a colleague – a chaplain – who helped me to begin to make some sense of things and see this from a spiritual perspective. As she witnessed the transitions that many residents went through and challenges they faced daily, she had come to believe that the major issue of aging is one of faithfulness. And by faithfulness, she meant the way in which we live out our faith. Thus the question: What does faithfulness look like as we grow older? How do we live out our faith as we grow older; unable to serve as we did in the past?

This is the framework, both for my work with you, brothers and sisters and my doctor of ministry project. For me, they are inseparable – they are one and the same. I have begun to understand that my task is helping each of you and your families to meet the challenges of aging and to navigate the difficult transitions that are a part of growing older. Even more, I believe that I am called to help you grow even more spiritually mature and to develop a more resilient faith.

A faith that is not compartmentalized; not reserved for Sunday alone. A faith that can withstand the challenges and changes that occur as part of the natural transitions of life. A faith open to whatever God might have in store for us. A faith that will empower and embolden us to work together to be the people and thus the church that God calls us to be. A church where its members are willing to help bear one another's burdens, sharing the load as a community of God's people and so, as our brother Paul reminds us, fulfill the law of Christ.

The task, therefore, is to be **faithful** in the way in which we live our lives. Faithful in the midst of the transitions of life that inevitably challenge us. Transitions that include retirement, serious long-term, or even terminal, illness. Downsizing. Moving to a care facility. Dealing with grown children who have moved away, or have become estranged. And dealing, of course, with death; our own and those closest to us.

It has been said that all change leads to loss and that all loss leads to grief. So far, in my experience as a pastor I have found this to be true. With all that we have lost, is it a wonder that we are so anxious? So fearful? Is it a wonder that we lament what many believe might be the demise of the church? That which has been the one stable source of peace, comfort and meaning in our lives? With so much changing around us, including ourselves, must the church that we love change too? Is the church really dying? How can we resurrect it again to its former glory? Therein lies the problem.

Beloved, it is not up to us whether the church lives or dies. In fact, our biggest threat is in assuming that we can save ourselves, or that our traditions and our building are enough to save us. No, our salvation is up to God and God alone! Have we roles to play – most certainly! But there is only so much any of us can do. And are we not, after all, according to our Book of Order, a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life? Indeed we are. We cannot escape that.

With that in mind, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that we **are** dying. Let us say that death is imminent. Let us say that the church, part of the larger Body of Christ in the world, is indeed about to die. What do we know about Christ's body? It has died before. It was raised again – resurrected.

Resurrection. That's the whole message of Easter and I have repeatedly said that Jesus Christ is **still** risen. Christianity itself is a "resurrection movement." Death occurs but does not have the final word. Death does not win. Love wins. The body rises. Stronger. More resilient. And we, who are Easter people, above all should know that and not fear death in **any** form.

But I must ask – are we truly dying? Some think so. It may appear that way. If this **is** the case, then we may need to discuss what a "good death" looks like. Maybe that is less true than we think. Overall, fewer people are attending church. Fewer still are becoming members. This is definitely true of our church. Some churches, though fewer than there might be and with very limited success, are combining with other churches in decline. Some are closing. The church's influence in society is waning and nowhere near what it used to be. And churches themselves may have – on some level – contributed to that. But does that really mean we are dying?

Could it mean, instead, that the church is entering a new phase of life, as it has before and will again? Do we dare believe that it might, in fact, be a **better** phase? Perhaps a kind of "reformation," similar to the one that took place over 500 years ago?

As I am fond of saying, when I am with you: Here's the thing...

There is a difference between death and change. Just because the church is different from the way it was when you or your parents or grandparents remember it growing up, does not necessarily mean that we are dying. Just because you do not see what you used to see in the past; what you **want** or what you **like** when you look at the church and just because we do not do things the way we've always done them in the past does not mean that death is imminent.

This is because, as much as we may like to believe otherwise, the church is not dependent upon our comfort or approval for its life. As I said earlier, our biggest threat is in assuming that we can save ourselves and that our traditions and our building are enough to save us.

One thing is clear, though we often find this difficult to accept: our thinking must change. Our life and our church depends on it. We must move from thinking in terms of success – whether it be the number of members, or in budget numbers – to thinking in terms of significance with regard to how we look at those around us and their worth. When in our lives have we ever truly been independent? When have we ever **not** needed help from anyone or anything?

As human beings, we are creatures who are wholly dependent on God. There is nothing that any of us has that has not been given to us. To live humanly is to recognize the practical and theological significance of our natural state as contingent, dependent, relational creatures. We must come to recognize that **inter**-dependence, dependence on **one another**, is higher than **independence**. Thus, do we continue to mourn or bemoan our situation, thrashing about in search of a cure-all, searching for something or someone to save us as those without hope? Or do we, as Easter people desire to remain faithful and be about continuing our mission and ministry **together**, supporting one another, placing our trust in God; the Father of our Lord and only Savior, Christ Jesus? Do we remain faithful and trust in God, knowing, as the prophet did, **that God has a plan for us; plans for our welfare and not for harm; to give us a future with hope.**

I will say more in my next letter, beloved, which I hope to send to you a weeks hence. Until then, I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling: One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father of all; who is above all and through all and in all. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.