

Grateful Remembering
Deuteronomy 8:11-18, 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3
First Presbyterian Church
May 22, 2022

Bible Readings

Deuteronomy 8:11-18

¹¹ Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹² When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵ who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶ and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷ Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' ¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

Some of us here this morning, live in a future-oriented time. Hardly do we finish one thing before we rush on to the next thing... we're always looking ahead. And yet, others of us here this morning occupy a more past-oriented space – we're not rushing into the future, instead we're looking back on our lives and remembering.

Well, this particular time in my life finds me doing a little of both – and I think that is probably true of our church as well – you're definitely looking to the future... the Pastoral Nominating Committee is CERTAINLY looking to the future. But you're also looking back, aren't you? This is a very Scriptural thing to do, by the way... a prominent theme in Scripture – and a crucial activity for God's people – is the act of remembering. "Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God..." said Moses to the Israelites... "But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power..."

Now, I am VERY clear that looking back on the past 10 years must begin with remembering this congregation's previous 139 years of worship and teaching and mission and caring and leading in the Hickory community... it must begin with the more than 30 pastors; associate pastors, and interim pastors; along with the children's and youth ministers and directors of music who have led this congregation... and it must begin with the literally hundreds of elders, deacons, and other members (including many of you!) on whose broad shoulders I have been able to stand. Though I do confess a degree of "holy pride" (if there IS there such a thing) in what, with God's help, we accomplished together over the past 10 years... I am also very aware of how fortunate I have been to have played even a small part in the long, rich history of this congregation... and how so many of the best qualities and priorities of this church were already here when I arrived. Folks in my pastor's world are fond of saying that "all ministry is transitional ministry." And they mean two things by that. First, they mean that the world around us is changing so quickly that pastors and congregations are always in transition... not just when a pastor leaves. And second, "all ministry is transitional ministry" means that every pastor who comes will eventually go. This church knows well the changes taking place in the world around us... and you have transitioned in many faithful ways. And now, we again know the second kind of transition.

Having said that, I do want to remember my time with you and to lift up several significant accomplishments in our ministry together over the past 10 years. Let's begin with a very mundane accomplishment. I speak, of course, of bringing good coffee to the Sunday morning church experience. When I arrived, you guys were drinking really BAD coffee – it came from those big round percolators that make like 60 cups... and which by the time you got to church on Sunday had been cooking for nearly two hours. It was awful! Well, one day I was in the kitchen, and I noticed that you actually had a very nice "coffee brewing system." that nobody had used for years. And wanting to have some kind of early and tangible success, I chose good coffee on Sunday mornings. Now, moving on.

The **first accomplishment** we can celebrate together relates back to the three-year period between Wallace Johnson's retirement in 2009 and my arrival late in 2011. Many of you were here, so you know what I am talking about. Our church faced power struggles and conflict... relationships among members were strained and sometimes broken... folks grew really tired of the disagreement and division... and there was just a lot of anxiety about the future. Well, it took a while... three or four years... but together we were able to get back on course... to restore trust in our staff and leaders and members... to begin to heal from the past... and even to look to the future with excitement and hope. And here's the important thing to me – I think it says a lot about this congregation, that as painful as that period was in its history, you learned from it... you learned what CAN happen and how quickly... you learned something about handling disagreement and conflict if it ever happens in the future... and perhaps most important, you learned just how much you value one another and what you have together in this church. So, that's the first accomplishment.

The **second accomplishment** was also not without struggle and grief and bumps in the road. I'm speaking of the process of creating our Kairos worship service almost 8 years ago. Returning to the interim time for a moment, part of what was going on during that time was a growing desire among some members of our church for a different style of worship. Well, as we know, church members are passionate about their preferred worship style. As we also know, human beings aren't so fond of change. And one thing the previous Pastoral Nominating Committee (who, like your present PNC, was absolutely fantastic) one thing they were clear about was that they wanted me to help our congregation navigate these treacherous waters. Some folks even call them the "worship wars." Well, once the session decided to create another service, it took a while to figure out what kind of more contemporary worship was a good fit for this congregation. There was also the difficult work of deciding how to fit that service in to our existing Sunday morning schedule. That discussion continues, by the way. And finally, there was the palpable grief of those who thought we were "dividing this one church into two churches." I know this was a particularly hard time for those of you who prefer traditional sanctuary worship... it was hard to see the empty pews as many of our youth and young families gravitated to the Kairos service. That was hard for me as well. Yet, one thing this whole process showed me about YOU is that though you don't much like change... and that you would prefer NOT to change if that were an option... still, YOU CAN CHANGE if you are offered a reasonable explanation about why change is needed and how it benefits the body - the entire church. I really appreciate that about you.

Our **third accomplishment** together was a successful capital campaign that funded a construction project that essentially linked together the four primary buildings on our campus in a way that makes them entirely accessible. Those four buildings were constructed at different times in our history and for different purposes... and as we know sometimes that creates challenges to "full access." So, we added handicap parking spaces... we created a "Porte cochere" and "front door" to the church... we found a way to have a small gathering space and built a cloister walk between the sanctuary and this building... and in addition to that, we completely renovated our preschool and built state-of-the-art playgrounds for our little ones. Whether you agreed with the various parts of this project or not... whether you now LIKE every part of this project or not, I think we can all be proud that our building is now very functional and completely accessible, in addition to being very beautiful.

Our **fourth accomplishment** together has to do with money... with the financing of the mission and ministry of our congregation. This, too, was a concern of the PNC 10 years ago... because at THAT time our church was blessed to have a handful of families who together gave north of 20% of our annual budget. Well, though that was awesome, it was not sustainable over the long term. So, over the past 10 years we've talked a lot about "passing the torch" when it comes to leadership in our church – BOTH session and committee leadership AND financial leadership. This "passing of the torch" continues, of course... and your Stewardship Committee and your next pastor will need to frequently remind you of this. Yet, looking back – the combination of careful fiscal management and the generosity of our members means that, financially speaking, our congregation is very strong. Your treasurers, Jay Crane, and John King, thank you all for that! Your staff thanks you for that! And so will your next senior pastor!

Our **fifth and sixth accomplishments** together bring us to our more recent past and certainly includes those of you who are newer members. The **fifth** is how together we approached, managed, struggled with, survived, and even thrived during a global pandemic. If you would have asked me what challenges I thought I would face in the final two years of my ministry, I would have said “how to improve my short game.” Not in my wildest dreams would I have predicted COVID-19 and Alpha and Delta and Omicron and Omicron BA.2. Not in my wildest dreams would I have predicted the challenges we would ALL face... the decisions we would have to make... the new skills we would have to learn quickly... and the new ways we would discover to express this call we all have to be the church of Jesus Christ. Looking back, I can now say there were some silver linings. Though we couldn’t gather together for worship, Heather and I fulfilled our dream to become TV preachers. And though, we couldn’t gather in-person for WNS, we CAN say that thanks to our incredible staff and volunteers, (you know who you are!) we had THE tastiest take-out meal in town. We can also say that the pandemic revealed that God has blessed us with a staff that is second to none... with church leaders that are dedicated and wise... and with a congregation that supported and appreciated its staff... and that financially and otherwise, made possible the ongoing ministry and mission of this church through such an unprecedented time.

Finally, I think our **sixth accomplishment** is the somewhat new way we are going about our pastoral transition. Back in December of 2020, about 18 months ago, I told our Personnel Committee that I was getting serious about retiring. And after they said, “Well, it’s about time!” I suggested that they... and the session... and eventually the congregation consider implementing a succession plan. This plan would allow Heather and me to continue to lead the congregation at the same time as you searched for your next pastor. You would do the needed transitional work – the looking in the mirror and out the window you would just do it while I was still here... with the hope of avoiding a long and drawn-out interim time. Now, I suggested this based on my assumption that FPC is a strong church... and is now a healthy church... a church that is not perfect but isn’t broken and doesn’t need serious “fixing.” And I believe this! No doubt – in part because of the last experience with pastoral transition – you all have been very supportive... and with the presbytery’s blessing, we have been working our “succession plan” for the past year and a half. So far, it has gone very smoothly. The Mission Study Task Force did excellent work... and now the PNC is doing the same. And it is my prayer that before too awful long, you will be greeting your new senior pastor with the even more love and enthusiasm as you greeted me 10 years ago. Please, please, my friends, give him or her the “FPC standing ovation welcome” that you gave me in late October of 2011. Promise?

Now, I am keenly aware that everything I have just shared is only one way to look back and to evaluate the past 10 years... and that it may not even be the best way to do this.

Because the truth is I have not even mentioned the more than 500 Sundays we have worshiped together (assuming you had perfect attendance)... the ways we have grown spiritually in Bible studies and Sunday school classes... the Wednesday nights we have spent enjoying good food and fellowship... the special times visiting in your homes or hospital rooms... the many, many times we gathered in our sanctuary to celebrate the resurrection and give thanks for the life of a loved one... or worked on a Habitat house... or retreated to Montreat... or walked along the Sea of Galilee... or sat together in session and committee meetings. Some might say that these things are the real accomplishments we should lift up... and they would not be wrong. So today I lift them ALL up... the measurable accomplishments AND the just "doing life together." I lift them ALL up with thanks to God and gratitude to you. I am blessed beyond words! And to take a bit of license with the words of the Apostle Paul, I will always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in my prayers, constantly REMEMBERING before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.