

The First Baptist Church, Midland  
September 25, 2011  
Philippians 4:4-9; 2 Corinthians 13:13

***If I Only Had One Sermon to Preach... Reflections***

A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

Final Thoughts Upon the Occasion of Retirement

I don't know about you, but I've never seen a summer pass so quickly. Part of what sustained me after I shared the announcement of my retirement was the fact that it was still four months away and we'd have a lot of time before the end of September. But that time was fleeting and now here we stand. And I have to tell you, there's a part of me that feels kind of inadequate for this moment. In fact, I feel a little like the old farmer named John.

This John had a unique reputation throughout his little village. You see, he had a horrible temper and whenever something went wrong the profanities would fly. In fact, some said when you saw the blue cloud in the sky you knew that John was at it again.

Well, it happened in the fall of the year. The apple crops were abundant and John was taking his to market. The wagon was filled to overflowing and this farmer knew the check he was about to receive would be significant. However, what he didn't realize was that the dirt roads softened from the hard rain the night before were serving to dampen the sound of the apples slowly falling one by one from the back of the wagon onto the ground. Evidently when he had hit one of those huge bumps, the latch gave way and the gate flipped down. And not until he pulled into the market did he see the catastrophe that had struck.

Now it happened that the folks who were gathered were shocked... and a bit frightened. They knew John and were now waiting for the explosion. But to their surprise, the farmer just stood there slowly shaking his head. Finally when the manager of the co-op had garnered the courage he went up to his friend and said, "What's the matter John? Don't you have any words for this?"

"Oh," John sadly said, "I've got plenty of words, but I just can't do it justice."

Well on this special morning, I have to confess that I feel a lot like that farmer. For what do you say at a time such as this? I understand there is a book that was published back in 1928 entitled *If I Had Only One Sermon To Preach*. (New York, London, Harper & Brothers) At the time, 20 pastors were asked to address the theme and as you might imagine, their thoughts were quite diverse.

Now I'm going to be honest and admit I don't have that book. Nor have I ever read it. But the title is so intriguing and it has captured my imagination. So in my struggle to try to do justice to this moment, to find an appropriate word, and to embrace with you the sacredness of our last chance to share together in this significant way, I'm going to pursue this thought.

*If I Had Only One Sermon to Preach...* what would I say? Let us pray...

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts,  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, Our rock and our redeemer. Amen!*

Psalm 19:14

If I had only one sermon to preach, I think I'd build it upon the passage of scripture that has framed my ministry for 41 years. Outside of the gospels which, of course, rehearse the story of Jesus, I've always been drawn to the two Corinthian letters. They could have been written today because in essence they are designed to help the church be the church. They define for us the nature of our message to the world. *Proclaim Christ Crucified... Understand that it is God who gives the growth... Know that your body is a temple and the Holy Spirit is within... Do everything you do to the glory of God... Do this in remembrance of me... You are one body with many members... Now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love... If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation... Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation... God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance... My grace is sufficient for you...*

Every one of these instructions for living faithfully comes from the pen of the apostle Paul in these two Corinthian letters. However, as Paul rehearses this litany of expectations for those early believers, he culminates his thinking in the last verse of the last chapter in his second letter. In other words, it's his final word to his friends in Corinth.

When you hear these words you are going to recognize them immediately because you have heard them hundreds of times. And over the course of my ministry, I've repeated them thousands of times. Perhaps you have occasionally wondered why I say them so often. And now you know... I have lifted them at the close of every worship celebration, of every wedding and of every funeral I've been privileged to be part of... not because I can't think of anything else to say but because for me, they are the words that capture the essence of my understanding of who God is... the very God whom we invite to walk with us when we leave this sanctuary every week.

Have you figured it out yet? Say them with me... ***And now, dear friends, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion or the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever... AMEN!*** II Corinthians 13:13

Grace... love... and fellowship. If I had only one sermon to preach, this would be it. Consider first of all *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The fact is you and I would not be here were it not for this grace. And then there's another fact... I would not be here were it not for your graceful acceptance of me, for you have allowed me the privilege of being your pastor. I have sought to earn my way into your life by being the best pastor I know how to be, but the truth is I could never earn what you have given to me and what we have enjoyed together. Our relationship has been strong because you have opened your life to me and invited me in. You didn't have to do that but you did. And that is what grace is all about.

Many will recall a Sunday School class we enjoyed together a number of years ago. I believe Linda A-O led the class and it was focused upon Philip Yancey's book entitled What's So Amazing About Grace? (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997, pg. 45) In the book, Yancey spoke about a conference on comparative religions. Experts from around the world were debating the unique beliefs of the Christian faith. They began by eliminating possibilities. Is it the incarnation that makes Christianity unique? No, other religions have different versions of gods' appearing in human form. Was it the resurrection? Again, other religions have accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge is unique. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law -- each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.

It's hard to really understand this thing called grace because it's so counter-intuitive to our humanity. We're just not built this way. And that's probably why Jesus talked about it so often. He saw grace everywhere because he was looking with God's eyes. Yet he never analyzed or defined it. He simply lived it.

Together we have been privileged to experience this grace, haven't we, as we have learned how to accept one another without condition. And because of this ability to open ourselves to each other, our church has thrived and our lives have been enriched. And that is a gift from God that no one can ever take away because this is the essence of God. I pray that the grace you have shown to me will find its expression once again as your next pastor comes to sojourn with you. For you see, that's one more reality about the grace of the Lord Jesus. It never runs out... there's always enough to be sure that everyone is included in its mighty embrace.

Next, consider the love of God. Is there anywhere we can go to flee beyond God's love? Of course not. God's love travels with us anywhere and everywhere we may roam and his everlasting arms surround us always.

The gospels are filled with these wonderful stories called parables where time and again Jesus speaks to the intimacy of this love. We see it in the return of the prodigal son and in the good Samaritan... over and over again, Jesus himself speaks to the prevailing love of God.

Just two weeks ago, our family had an experience that helped us feel the depth of this love. We were at the Wheatland Music Festival on Saturday night and it grew very dark. There we were with thousands of people stretching in all directions. But it was so dark that you couldn't see anything away from the main stage where the musicians were performing. Suddenly our little girl, Julia, was missing. We looked around quickly but didn't see her. Paula got up confident that she was in the immediate area but came back with a concerned look. She was nowhere to be found. Needless to say, in a moment we were all searching with increasing

anxiety settling in. I stayed back in case she returned but that didn't happen. Using our cell phones, we kept checking with each other but our little girl was nowhere to be found.

After a bit, Paula returned and took my place while I took a turn searching. She'd now been gone about ½ an hour and our anxiety had changed to full blown fear. And a little panic was starting to settle in, too. I remember the horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach as I walked through the woods making my way through all those people. I wanted nothing more than to see my little granddaughter and pick her up and hug her and know that she was okay. But it wasn't happening and every minute produced even greater apprehension. At long last my cell phone rang and it was Paula calling to let me know she was found. The fact is, Julia didn't even know she was lost because she had wandered away and was playing contentedly with a couple other little girls. I can't put into words the overwhelming wave of relief that washed over all of us in that moment when we learned that all was well.

This, I dare say, is an illustration of the love of God. As I understand these stories from Jesus, our God is constantly searching for every one of his children and it pains him deeply when we are wandering and wondering about life. More often than not, we're lost and we don't even know it. But God does and because he loves us so much he gives us our freedom to pursue life on our terms while watching over us sometimes with tears, sometimes with smiles, sometimes with worry, sometimes with joy... but always with compassion. And nothing in this world pleases him more than when his love is reciprocated by one of his children finding their way home to his warm embrace. The love of God is a gift beyond all worth...

Finally, in addition to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, we have the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And what a fellowship it has been. We have laughed together and cried together... we have played together and prayed together and worked together... we have celebrated together and struggled together... we have said good-bye to many of the old saints and we have baptized many new saints into the Kingdom, together. And through it all our friendship has grown stronger because we are a community bonded through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

From day one, as we have sorted through the core values of this great congregation we claimed relationships as our first priority, didn't we, and this has stood the test of time. And mark my words... as long as we continue to live in this grace of Jesus Christ and this love of God, this fellowship will thrive. We must never allow theology to get in the way of those relationships. Live together with respect for your different views and beliefs. For the day we fail to do this the unity of the church will quickly come undone. Rather build your life together upon the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God and your fellowship will be strong.

One of my greatest joys in the ministry has been the opportunity to be part of congregations where this value of community has been treasured and honored. In every church I have been privileged to serve, we have broken racial and cultural and sexual barriers to create welcoming environments for all of God's people. It's so exciting to be in a fellowship with people who don't think alike and look alike and talk alike, but who respect and value each other and the differences we bring to the table. I really believe that when we all get to heaven it will be a place marked by every difference one can imagine. This will be the face of his fellowship.

And, may we pray together, that it will ever be the face of the First Baptist Church in Midland, too. Don't ever forget that dear friends. You are a child of God and you are loved by your Creator and we are always called to love each other. This is the fellowship Paul is referring to in his closing words to those friends in Corinth. And if I only had one sermon to preach, this would be it... *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ... the love of God... and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit...*

Dear friends... thank you for allowing me the privilege of taking this journey with you over the past 11 years. You along with the countless people I have known and served and walked with through all the years have blessed me in more ways than I could ever begin to deserve. No person has even been as blessed as I have been. And no one could be more grateful. I will always remember you with nothing but gratitude and love.

Well, I guess it's time (probably past time) to wrap this sermon up and send you on your way. So I'm going to end the only way I know... with a story. It's one of those cherished moments I will always remember.

Our son, Jamie, was about thirteen years old and a lover of the game of golf. I mean, he was passionate about the game. In the summer time, I would drop him off at the course about 8:00 in the morning on my way to the office and most days he'd stay until dark. We never worried because we knew he was in a good place. And we knew he was surrounded by good people.

However, one night when I went by to pick him up he was not at his usual spot. It was a bit later than usual and nearly dark. The club house was closed. There was no one around... including Jamie. I called Paula to see if he had gotten a ride home but she hadn't seen him. I have to tell you that I was a little worried. So I went out and began looking around. And there he was... walking all by himself carrying his clubs down the fairway of the seventh hole. He was just a silhouette against the ever darkening sky.

My inclination was to yell for him to come in immediately and to give him a bit of a lecture. But am I ever glad I didn't follow my inclination. Instead, I walked up and in my relief put my arm around him and asked, "How's it going?"

"It's been an incredible day, Dad," he said with excitement completely oblivious to my anxiety about him being all alone in the darkening night. "I've never hit the ball like this. It's like everything just started to click. It feels so good out here. I don't want to stop, Dad."

"Tomorrow is another day, Jamie..." I said. "It's time to come home".

"I know," he said, "but it won't be like this."

"No, Jamie," I said. "You're probably right. It won't be like this but that's what makes these moments so special. The trick is to hold on to them and to remember..."

My dear friends, I really believe this. Life moves along and things change. God provides new opportunities and walks with us into each new day. But he also blesses us with the ability to take our special moments and to remember them and cherish them. And that's what Paula and I are going to do. I pray that you will too.

So, allow me to close now with the precious words of Paul as he writes in another of his letters... this time to his friends in Philippi... Remember... **“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...** And what might those things be? Well, if I had only one sermon to preach they would be *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship born out of the power of the Holy Spirit.* Embrace this trinity and the peace that surpasses even our greatest understanding will be with you forever... Amen and AMEN!!!