

“CLOSING WORDS...”

Nov. 11, 2018

I Thessalonians 5:12-19

Let me tell you a story this morning, a story about a pastor who was pretty discouraged in his life. He had a very good and loving family, and there was much to be thankful for, but things at the church he was serving at were not going well and in response to that, he had a tendency to push himself to exhaustion in his work and in his life. And he would brood on everything going wrong, which meant that his spiritual life was also weak. His prayers were dry and lifeless, and there was a great deal of sadness and brokenness in his life. So on the advice of some good friends, he decided to seek help, and sought out a spiritual director, someone that he could be completely honest with. He shared his situation with her over months and years, and they prayed together. And he began to realize that his call from God to that church had come to an end. He wondered as he realized this whether his call to being a pastor as a whole had come to an end, or whether there was another door that God wanted him to walk through.

So as a way of finding out the answer to that question, he did apply to other churches with pastoral openings, and got turned down several times, and did begin to seriously wonder whether he should be seeking to do something else with his life. And then he met this very special search committee, and there seemed to be such good chemistry between them from the very beginning. They ended up calling him to be the pastor of their church, which brought a new sense of joy and hope to his life. He was so happy that God still did have a purpose for him, and it began to occur to him that God did want good for my life, that God loved him so much that God wanted him to know joy in his life. Do you believe that, that God loves you so much, that God wants you to lead a joyful life? And so he resolved that when he started his ministry at that church, he would try to live in a new way. He would not focus on things that would bring him down, but focus on things that would fill him with joy. He would not push himself to exhaustion in his work and in his life, but seek to let others in the church lead, take frequent breaks for rest and enjoyment, and try to listen to what God wanted to say to that church through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Well, as you may have guessed by now, this is actually a story about me and a story about you, and so I arrived at our church, and you immediately surrounded me and my family with love. I sensed in my conversations with people that just like I was a broken pastor in some ways, you were a broken church in some ways, a church that had known some pain in your recent past, and so it felt like we were a good match. I so enjoyed my first conversation with Rev. Elaine, and how we were on basically the same page in how we saw our mission and purpose as pastors, and it has been such a gift to share in ministry with you, Elaine.

Doug Wales came to me early on in my second week here and urged that we as a church needed to become an Open and Affirming Church, and I knew that the timing for that was right for me as well. And so we set out my first year going through the process of thinking and talking about what it would mean for us to be truly welcoming to everyone, and we then took a vote on that to become Open and Affirming, and that felt good and right. You as a church gave me the chance to take a Sunday off in my second year to go to the March on Climate Change in New York City with Suzanne Arpante, and your willingness to let me do that meant a lot to me.

I so appreciated your support of the various small group ministries we have done as a church over my years here. So many of you were a part of Alpha and other types of small groups in their various different settings, and I could see the way the Holy Spirit worked through people's lives, including my own.

We have had such a wonderful group of seminarians and people considering ordained ministry in our church over the years. Pedro Silva served with us for 4 years, and then Linda Hartley for three. Serena Leiser, Doug Uhlman, Mike Jaworski, and Clif Newton have all preached and led in our church in various ways. Matt Carriker received our backing to start the new church of Agape in Waltham, and has continued to be part of our life together, and now we are so blessed as a church to have the ministry of Peter Graham among us, and I am so grateful for all that he and his wife Rachel bring to our worship and to our life together-what a blessing they have been!

And then there were our Missions as a church, and the mission trips I got to take with you. I had the chance in my first year to go on a Workcamp trip, and that was so great for getting to know our youth better and for seeing what a great group of youth we have in this church, something I know is true to this day! I had the opportunity to go to Haiti with Art Sharkey and Mike Lawler, and that was such a spiritually moving experience to be part of the life of the church there. I will be forever grateful to the two of you and the rest of the church for the support we were able to give to the maternity clinic in Haiti. And finally, there was the youth trip to the island of St. Vincent that we as a church took last summer that Wendy organized. Wendy was hired by our church after my first few months here, and it has been a gift to see her ministry among our children and youth over the years.

And what a joy to work with our missions team! I would come home so energized after so many of our meetings, so excited by what God was using us for in our area and world, so many great projects over the years we have worked on together. I am grateful for our Trustees have done so much to help get our church in a good place financially, and Properties have done so much to keep our church beautiful. And the Deacons have been wonderful companions as we have walked together in faith, along with our moderators, Steve Swets and Rich Lord. And did I mention Bonnie and Lisa in the office? How they saved my bacon so many times!

Finally, I am grateful for both the continuity and the changes we have seen happen in our music ministry. The choir is such a gift to all of us, and I have looked forward to hearing their music in so many of our services. Irene has always said and I agree with her that our bell choir is the best we have ever heard, and I am grateful for you. And Joyspring has become a wonderful addition to our blended style of music, giving new musical expression to our faith and walk together. I am so grateful to Joe Stillitano and Sue Menzel for the ways that they bring all of this music together in such life giving ways!

So as I say these closing words, I am aware that St. Paul in our Scripture reading today also said his closing words to the church in Thessalonica, Greece that he had founded. He encourages them first of all to respect and hold in highest regard their pastor. As I have said, I am so grateful for the way you have done that for me, and know that you will continue to do so in the future. He then talks about the ways that we in the church should treat one another, encouraging each other, being patient, helping the weak, showing kindness.

And then he speaks to how each of us should seek to live our lives. This verse has been my personal favorite the past few years, as you have already heard me say. He tells us to be cheerful no matter

what, pray all the time and thank God, no matter what happens, for this is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live. I have tried to live by these words in my years here as your pastor. We as Christians do put emphasis on sacrificing for others, as we should-we follow in the example of our Lord Jesus who sacrificed so much for us. But at the same time, we are called to live joyful lives, as best as we can. The question I always ask people is "Can you be happy with the life that God has given you?" If the answer is yes, then seek to rejoice in the Lord, everyday! If the answer truly is no, then it sounds like it is time to change something in your life.

And finally, Paul encourages the Thessalonian church to not put out the Spirit's fire. I hope too that this is something you will take from my ministry here, the importance of prayer and the emphasis on the Holy Spirit. I am so grateful for the way the Spirit in Jesus' name was and is at work in so many of your lives, and for the way the Spirit has moved through our church during all of these years. Please continue to be open to the Spirit's leading among you, and please continue to pray and ask for it! Praise be to the living God, Amen