

MY STORY 6-11-17

Psalm 145:1-7 *I will extol You, my God, O King, and I will bless Your name forever and ever. 2 Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever. 3 Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable. 4 One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of Your majesty and on Your wonderful works, I will meditate. 6 Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome acts, and I will tell of Your greatness. 7 They shall eagerly utter the memory of Your abundant goodness and will shout joyfully of Your righteousness.* I believe that it is God's sacred trust to me as a teacher in His church, to explain and apply the Scriptures for the edification of the saints and the calling of the lost. I am committed to that purpose for this pulpit ministry and so it is with some reluctance that I deviate from that course for even one Sunday. But it seems to me that one occasion it is most fitting and most helpful for the people of God to remember and learn from the work of God even as we also do from the word of God. 5 *On the glorious splendor of Your majesty and on Your wonderful works, I will meditate.* Psalm 77:12 *I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds.* So, what I am going to do today, instead of teaching you from the word is to share with you my testimony, the story of how the matchless grace of God has been working in me and for me. The month of June is one of milestones for me, and especially is that true this year. June 8 marked the 35th anniversary of my ordination to the gospel ministry. Today I celebrate my 60th birthday. Times like these give opportunity to reflect, to ponder, to go on a diet and to share the story of God's wonderful grace.

I was born and raised in Ocala, Florida, the son of Frank and Martha, the youngest of five children. I have three sisters and one brother, the youngest of those siblings being five years my senior. My family is now scattered afar geographically, religiously, and relationally. Both parents are now deceased. My mother died here in Pittsburgh two years ago. My father, who was not a believing man, took his own life before I turned thirty.

Let me tell you about Sundays in my family growing up. On Sunday I woke up to pancakes and bacon on the griddle. Every Sunday, pancakes and bacon for breakfast, roast beef, potatoes and carrots for lunch. How my mom did it I don't know because she would get us all up and out to the First Baptist Church while Dad stayed home with the paper. It was in that church that I was taught God's law and God's gospel. Jesus was an understood and welcomed reality as far back as I can

remember. Easter Sunday 1967 stands out as an important day in my life. It was on that morning in my tenth year that I made a tearful walk down the aisle to publicly confess my sin and my trust in the Savior. What took place exactly in my soul that day I am not sure. I remember two dominant emotions. One was a sense of sorrow over sin. The visiting preacher who addressed my Sunday School class on that occasion preached to the kids a simple message based on the acrostic HONOR. I don't remember all the points but I do recall he talked to us about honoring our parents and I knew that I didn't treat my dear mother like I should. Furthermore, God was convicting me over the hatred I had for my fourth grade teacher, the first person I recall hating. I knew that was wrong and I think I came to see in a much deeper way that I was a sinner in need of the forgiveness I had heard about for so long. Interestingly, when in high-school, I dated the daughter of my fourth grade teacher. I always wanted to tell her that she was instrumental in my becoming a Christian but I was afraid she might ask questions.

I am so very grateful that I came to faith as a child and for the relationship with my heavenly Father that I had as far back as I can remember. I talked with Him. I wanted to serve Him. I had a sensitive conscience and never went thru a period of serious rebellion. Parents, kids, such a stage is not inevitable. The teen years do not have to be full of drama and parent-child discord. You know, great is the grace of God to save an adult from a life of practiced sin - but just as great is the grace of God to save a child and keep him from the scars and hurts that sin will leave on your soul. God did this for me even though I was not some model Christian kid who was feeding the hungry and saving the lost. The predominant element in my life as a youngster was sports. I played and loved baseball, football, and basketball each in its season. I read the daily sports page and Sports Illustrated from the time I was eight. I lived and died with the Florida Gators and I knew that one day I would be a star, especially a star quarterback. And as a youngster I was because nobody worked at it like I did and I could make a ball go where I wanted it to go. My mother drilled into me from early youth that I could do anything if I wanted to badly enough and would pay the price of success. But even then, in that time from 9-13, my desire was to serve God as an athlete. What Tim Tebow did a decade ago as quarterback of the Florida Gators was exactly what I dreamed of doing.

God had other plans. But our calling, regardless of what we do vocationally, is always to know the Lord. During my early years as a follower of Jesus I can remember particular periods when God was teaching me and showing me more of Himself. Church camps and youth events

were often such times. I remember an experience in my 13th year. It was a Sunday night at First Baptist Church and we were holding a goodbye party for Larry our youth director. He was headed to seminary and this was his last night with us. I remember that in the midst of that crowd Larry and his wife took me aside and told me that they deeply believed that God was going to do great things in and by my life. You know, there is power in our words. Bill Glass the former pro football player turned evangelist tells of a meeting he had in a large prison. He had invited Roger Staubach, the great Cowboys quarterback to share his testimony at the meeting, but before Staubach spoke Glass asked the audience of prisoners how many of them had fathers who told them they would likely end up in prison someday. Over 90% of the men raised their hands. Glass sat down next to Staubach who leaned over to him and said, "That's amazing! My dad always told me that one day I would be a great quarterback." Words, especially a father's words, do have power.

Now, I thought I was going to be a great quarterback and I would have been except for one little problem - lack of ability. When I was 14 my football career took a huge tumble and my family life also began to fall apart. By then I was the only child left at home and found myself in the middle of my parent's growing hostilities. Just before my sophomore year my mother and I left the farm for an apartment downtown, next door to our church. The move into town placed me close to church, close to my friends, and close to the school gym which became my second home for the next three years. I played as much basketball as I could. I was very determined to become something special in that sport, but my dreams of stardom were eventually crushed by a series of events I won't go into and in my junior year God, my Father, my Shepherd, my Lord began to kill my athletic dream so that He could build a greater one in the ashes of the old. Looking back, I see that God was preparing me for leadership in His church. I was elected president of our student body and the summer before my senior year, while at a student government workshop at a nearby college I encountered an acquaintance named David Poole. David was there for a Baptist workshop in evangelism and the two of us started sharing about the Lord and became the best of friends. He was the only serious Christian peer that I knew. When we were seniors David and I both became deejays at a local radio station and we both preached in our respective Baptist churches on what was our grad Sunday. That was my first experience in the pulpit, and it went fairly well. I had had enough experience public speaking that I could do it without falling apart and so many told me how nice it was and some even suggested that I become a preacher. I thought, "No way." I did not like

the traditional religious image and I couldn't imagine coming up with a new sermon every week. A preacher was about the last thing I'd be. So, I thought.

Well, I'm finally out of high-school and now things start to get really exciting. I stayed in my home-town for a year of junior college and it was in that year that God really got me moving. My friend, David, invited me to this Sunday night youth group he had gotten into. I go and find 8 or 9 very nice kids and meet the leader of this group, a young pastor named Jimmy Young. Jimmy had come to Ocala in 1975 to start a Presbyterian church. My friend David had some contacts in the core group of that new church and he brought me in. Gradually I shifted my church allegiance to Grace Presbyterian. Why? Because for the first time in my life I was hearing the Bible taught with any serious degree of depth. Furthermore, I was being challenged intellectually and morally. I was learning what was expected of me as a disciple of Jesus. For years I'd been a straight kid but I was taught very little about discipleship, about the law of God, about obedience to King Jesus. I got involved in this little church of committed people and was discipled by Jimmy Young and I was being transformed. Then one day that Spring I went to Jimmy to talk over a doctrinal issue. I will spare you the details but for me it was very important. My brother and I sat there for 2 and half hours looking at Scripture after Scripture, after Scripture. The first hour I argued but by the second I was feeling queasy and shaky. Finally, my pastor and brother said, "I need to go, let's pray." My response was, "I'm sorry. I can't pray with anybody who believes what you believe." I walked out of his office, down to my car, stuck the key in the ignition and then cried my guts out. I mean, I was heaving. I was in utter turmoil because for the first time in my life God and I disagreed. What I heard in that office was convincing. I knew what the Bible said, but I fought it. My stomach was in knots for about 20 hours. I couldn't sleep until finally I said, "Lord, one of us is wrong, and I think I know who it is." As I relinquished my intellectual pride and surrendered to God's rule I was granted peace. Understanding came later, but immediately I had peace. Well, that event was very significant for me because it revolutionized my attitude toward the Scriptures. Before that experience I had always believed the Bible was the word of God because I agreed with it. Now I agreed with it because I believed it was the word of God, and I wanted to know more. I became an eager beaver for the word. Studying the Bible became my great love because by that book I was learning about reality, I was learning about God and about my Savior and He was greater and more wonderful than I had ever understood.

What God was building into me He soon gave me a chance to share with others as Jimmy Young took a few college students like me and launched a youth ministry in Ocala that was greatly blessed. In fact, over the next few years we saw a work of God that was worthy of the word "Revival." By the end of that first summer we had 50 kids a week coming out and I felt honored to be a teacher and a leader for that group. It was a thrilling, thrilling time, but come Fall I was off to the University of Florida in Gainesville to pursue a degree in broadcasting. That didn't last long however as I soon decided that seminary was in my future and studying philosophy would better prepare me for that. The decision to pursue seminary was easy for me. I still didn't know what I would be after seminary - pastor, professor, missionary, time would tell but the next five years were set. After I made this decision I went to tell my unbelieving father, and all I said was, "Dad, I've got something I need to tell you." That's all I said, honest. His response was, "Don't tell me you're going to be a preacher." My dad had been soured on a vocation in ministry by my older brother's involvement in a cult, but he didn't disown me or anything, he just said that if I was going to preach I needed to at least be better than that Billy Graham fella he had heard on TV.

Well, I had two years in Gainesville at the UF and wow! What a fantastic two years they were. How God worked in my life! There were three very distinct things the Lord instilled in me during those years. #1 was a love for people. Now I am naturally an achiever more than a relater. I grew up with very good friends but they weren't what my life was all about. But as I got involved with a precious group of believers in Ocala and then another group in Gainesville my heart melted and I fell in love with the saints. I learned what being in a church meant, not just attending one, but being part of a family where there was a unity of faith and love. I also learned what it meant to lay aside my pride in order to love people who didn't like my joking, teasing and sarcasm. But oh, did I ever get loved back. When I left Gainesville some friends of mine gave me an album of photos, poems, and personal words and on the front page was calligraphied a favorite verse from Psalm 16:3 *As for the saints who are in the earth, they are the majestic ones in whom is all My delight.*

The second gift God gave me while in college was growth in discipline. I saw how important it was to steward my money and my time. The Holy Spirit worked into me habits of daily Bible study and prayer. I developed exercise habits, eating habits, spending priorities that have together served to restrain the influence of my flesh over my will. I discovered way back then, the tape ministry of RC Sproul and wherever I went I was learning by audio-cassette. I wanted my life to count for eternity, to make a difference in time and to please the Savior who had lavished upon

me an indescribable love. I was surely blown away by the grace of God and wanted to respond to that grace with a life of daily, detailed, disciplined obedience and I've been learning what that means ever since.

The third thing which the Lord instilled in me in those years was a love for the church. I was so excited about Grace Church in Ocala. I saw what that group meant to my life and what it was beginning to do to advance the kingdom. When I left for college I figured I wouldn't find anything like that in Gainesville, but, you know, God was alive in Gainesville too and for the 18 months I lived there I was involved in the Community Evangelical Free Church, now called Creekside, and there, developed among other things a greater appreciation for public worship and for expository Bible teaching. When I left for seminary I was young, only 21, but I had experienced in two places what most of my fellow students had never seen - a growing, dynamic church. I praise God for those churches where I got a vision for what the church can and should be.

Well, in August of 1978 I drove my new Toyota Corolla to Jackson, Mississippi and Reformed Theological Seminary where I studied hard and worked hard and looked hard for a wife, only to find that all the girls I met paled in comparison to a lady I'd known at UF named Beth Proctor. Through the kind providence of God I wound up spending Christmas at her family home and from there we courted mostly by mail until we were together that summer when we planned our wedding for November 17, 1979. King Lemuel said it in Proverbs 31:**10** *An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels.* And in this way as well, God has made me rich. Beth moved with me to Jackson for 7 months before we returned to Ocala for a 15 month internship on staff of our home church. There we saw God continue to prosper the youth ministry which drew up to 200 per week during the summer. This was an extremely helpful and instructive period of my life, but I gladly returned to Jackson for my final year of school with my then pregnant wife; and later that year we got to meet a boy named Andrew. Now, seminary seniors often think about what comes next and I figured that for me the near future held a staff position as a youth pastor. I knew that my background qualified me for that, I enjoyed that and truly didn't think myself ready for anything else. But, in the Fall I told God that if there was a pure, young church in our little denomination out there that for some reason wanted me as pastor, that I was available. I thought nothing of it - fat chance of that. But it happened! Again, the providence of God, which is His directing of all history, brought me together with an unusual pulpit committee in Melbourne, Florida, to a church that seemed remarkably suited to me - a young church of committed people

who were very forgiving and patient. I felt that God was challenging me, stretching me, but I knew that is where I was supposed to be. So, in June of 1982 we graduated from seminary, packed up our six month-old son, and moved back to Florida to labor in God's church there.

We had a glorious 24 years at Covenant Presbyterian Church which moved from Melbourne to Palm Bay, Florida. God has His people there in central Florida and we were privileged to live and work among them. When Beth and I arrived on the space coast, middle of the state, Atlantic side, Covenant had 35 members. The church did not grow rapidly, but it did grow steadily so that, after six years of triple services in the early 90s we had built a 1000-seat worship center, had started a daughter church, a Christian school, and the largest home-school group in the county. To our wonder and amazement, the vision for our church, which the Lord had given us in 1984 came to be a reality. The changes we saw were stunning, and the experience of serving the Lord there was a pure delight. This was the work in which we invested our lives, and God prospered it. Lots of people came to know the Lord. Several were called into ministry. And the treasure of relationships we still have there and here as well is beyond measure.

But, it was in 2006 that I became convinced that the Lord was calling me to lay down my position at Covenant, which felt to me very-much like dying and led to a difficult and emotional season in which Beth and I learned a great deal about ourselves and our Lord. After months of asking God for new direction in our lives, we eventually decided that pastoral ministry was still the right place for us to be. The passion for the church that the Lord gave me as a young man was still burning in my heart. After more than two years of waiting on the Lord, He finally opened up to us the opportunity to join you here in the North Hills of Pittsburgh. Our good Father went way beyond what we should have needed to make sure we knew that He was leading us here – for which we are so thankful. We are delighted to be Pittsburghers and thrilled to be at North Park Church.

I find myself, to be one of those unusually blessed individuals who is able to do vocationally precisely what I desire and what is the passion of my heart. I honestly can say that I know of nothing I would rather be doing than pastoring in the Lord's church. I can relate to the exclamation of Paul in Ephesians **3:8** *To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.* The Lord has been so gracious and so gentle toward me. It is an incredible privilege to be a child of God, to be called as a teacher and an elder in the church, and it is a privilege to be here in this church, not building a career but serving the Master and watching His kingdom come. I feel so deeply those words of David in II

Samuel.7:18 *Then David the king went in and sat before the LORD, and he said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that You have brought me this far? It is by grace we are saved. It is by grace we are preserved.*

Two more thoughts and I'll be done. The eight years that I have been here have not been easy. Challenging years. Difficult years. Some of you know why. But I have learned that contentment is usually about focus. And the Lord has given us plenty of good things and great people upon which to focus. It has been such a joy to see the Lord raising up young families in this place, parents who are raising their children to serve the Lord in their generation. And now, with the terrific additions to our staff over the last year, I feel better about our future than I ever have.

My final reflection of my first sixty years is this: I have known God (R). No matter where I look in my life, no matter what stage - this is the central reality for me - I know God. He is my friend, my shepherd, my father. As wonderful as my wife and my children are the preeminent relationship of my life is with Him and He has been there through it all and He will be there forever. John 17:3 *This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.* Jesus Christ had to die to make that possible and why He did, why He chose to be involved in my poor life, to be my Savior and Lord and Friend I cannot say but because He has I am a very, very rich and happy man. Life with God is abundant and it is forever. I desire that for you, for these college-bound young people. For the 8 year olds and the eighty year olds. That eternal life is offered to any who believe John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.* Life, life real life . Of this I bear witness to the praise of God's glorious grace.