

“In Case You Missed It”

Scripture: Romans 8:28-30

As do most preachers, I thought about my final sermon, ever since I preached my first one at Jonesboro Baptist Church, 36 years ago this month. What would I say for the last time? I thought my opportunity had passed. But Jana called me last week and asked if I would write a sermon that she would deliver today. With my health problems, I can't preach it myself. I am grateful to Jana for creating this opportunity. *(As she is the WVU fan on staff, I've created a test sentence to make sure that she is repeating my sermon verbatim: "Is everyone aware that this Saturday, the No. 3 team in the country plays a team who is not?" If she read that, she is reading correctly!)*

I am uncomfortable talking about myself, particularly my health; but many of you have asked. I developed a blood clot in my leg three years ago. Since I did not have the typical symptoms, I was unaware that I had a problem until God stepped in to make me aware.

Laurie was in Nicaragua, preparing for the arrival of a medical team from Fifth Avenue Baptist. Once the team arrived, she planned to remain with them for a few days. Soon after her return home, she and I were leaving for the Mediterranean to celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary, a trip that we had delayed for several years until our kids graduated college. Laurie decided to come home a few days earlier than scheduled, because Hurricane Ernesto was churning toward the Caribbean. With our anniversary trip at the end of the week, she could not risk experiencing flight delays.

In retrospect, Laurie was listening to God's voice. I am alive today because of her sensitivity to God. Actually, I have been blessed for 35 years, because my precious wife has always been an unwavering follower of God, always seeking God in all things. Laurie has a more aware sense of God than anyone I have ever known. I may have the

title of Pastor Emeritus, but Laurie is the one you should have gotten to know over these 15 years.

When Laurie arrived home from Nicaragua three years ago, I told her that I thought I had pulled a muscle in my leg. With the big anniversary trip in just a few days, she convinced me to see a doctor. Testing revealed that I had deep vein thrombosis, a blood clot, basically the full length of my right leg. It was also discovered that the clot had broken off, passed through my heart, and lodged in numerous places in my lungs. We had gone from planning to see the Parthenon to hoping to see the next day.

Thanks to the care, expertise, and persistence of some medical professionals, people for whom I will always be grateful, I am still here. God is good. Some members of my medical team have suggested that I was only 48 hours from dying when the clot was discovered. If Laurie had not discerned God's nudge in the storm to come home early, I probably would not have survived. Several members of my medical team have told us that I am unexpectedly lucky to have survived. God exceeds luck.

The clots did their long-term damage. In addition to the continuing clot in my leg, I am left with very little stamina, a great deal of pain, the inability to breathe well, and a weak voice, along with other complications. On Sunday, June 14th of this year, they all caught up with me. Many of you were aware of how much I was struggling that day. I remained outside of worship during part of the chapel service, trying to get my breath and strength. I completed the sermons in both services, but I think more of you were wagering on whether or not I would finish than you were listening to what I was saying!

I went into the office the next day; but by the time I returned home that night, I knew that I could not continue. I called our disability insurance company the next day. After explaining my situation to the insurance rep, I will never forget her words on the other end of the line: "You're done." She explained that if I could not work, then I had

no choice but to step down immediately. Someone else would have to take care of those things. She was right.

Many trusted advisors had been urging me to step down for quite a while. They insisted that, in my condition, to try to keep going was not fair to you as a church, not fair to me as a person, and certainly not fair to my family. I would later learn that some of my medical team thought I should have stepped down when I was first diagnosed with such a severe condition, but they recognized my resistance to the idea. (*The son of a coach **always** finishes the game.*) But in June, I had pushed myself to the point that I could not go on. In fact, when the next Sunday morning rolled around, I told Laurie that there was no way I could have preached. The decision to step down immediately was the right one. It was all I could do. I have even told that lady at the insurance company that she probably saved my life when she explained that disability meant I could not go back to work.

Personally, my greatest struggle was that God had called me to do this. How does a person decide that he or she is no longer being called? Remember the text for today: ***“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28, NIV).*** For me, the only way to be set free from that purpose was to have no other choice. I knew that I had reached the end of my work when I got there, not one day earlier.

In the Baptist tradition, when a minister steps down, many insist that he or she step away completely to allow the church to move forward. I have honored that request. Not being with you during these days, even for worship, has been the hardest thing I have ever done. My heart, my mind, and my prayers – and my tithe, by the way! – have been here. I just have been away physically. I wish that things were different. I wish that I had the health to continue sharing the journey of faith and life with you as

your pastor. But now, you need to move on to be the church that God is calling you to be in this next season of life. I pray that you are finding God's way.

I chose "A Mighty Fortress" as our opening hymn today because it reminds us that God is our strength, no matter what happens. Martin Luther's rendition of the 46th Psalm is not only my favorite hymn, but it has also served me well during these days.

But enough about my health. Over the years, I imagined all the profound things I would offer in this last sermon. (*Now that it's here, I'll leave the profound for those who think they are.*) Instead, I will reiterate the ideas that I have shared with you numerous times. In case you missed it, these are the primary subjects I preached over the years. I hope they help the church find her way.

1. In case you missed it, I preached about loving God.

Loving God is the primary basis for life.

The world is riveted to the recent prospect of discovering water on Mars because they think water is the basis for life. They are wrong. (*I don't have any idea if there is water on Mars, nor am I really concerned if there are Martians on Mars.*) They are wrong about the basis for life. It is not water, although we need that to live. We also need food to live and oxygen to live. You could argue that we need money to live. But real living requires a love for God. We are not living unless we love God.

Jesus said that we must love God so deeply that when compared to our love for other things, it looks like we hate them. I preached a Mother's Day sermon one year based on Jesus's words: ***"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate father and mother ... such a person cannot be My disciple"*** (Luke 14:26, NIV). (*I'm not sure that the mothers in worship that day appreciated my choice of text!*) They missed the point. As deep as our other loves may be, they should not even compare to our love for God.

A great number of loves entered this sanctuary every week. My concern was not so much about the other things we loved, but rather about their place in the value system of our lives. In case you missed it, loving God is the primary basis for life.

2. In case you missed it, I preached about loving each other.

Loving each other is proof that we love God.

When I was a youth minister decades ago, I printed the following words of Jesus on my letterhead: *"By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35, NIV)*. If church people don't love church people, then why would anyone else want to become one of the church people? No two people in this room completely agree on everything. *(Boy, do I know that! I think some people do not even agree with themselves!)* The Christian evidence is to love in spite of those differences. God hurts when His children allow anything to diminish our love for each other. When we don't love each other, we hurt God. If we love God, then we must love each other.

Fifth Avenue Baptist has always been a group in which a variety of opinions, perspectives, and interpretations have found a home. That is part of being Baptist. *(Pastoring Baptists all my ministry gave me a sense of how difficult it must have been for Noah to convince all those animals to enter through the same door.)*

I chose "Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)" as another hymn for today, because it merges one of everyone's old favorites with new words of celebration of grace. Everyone should be able to appreciate this song. I was always sad when means of worship or any personal preferences kept people from loving each other.

In case you missed it, I preached that our differences are only a problem when they interfere with our loving each other.

(In case you missed it, have you heard that I have a grandson?)

3. In case you missed it, I preached about inreach.

Inreach gives credibility to claiming that we love each other.

Inreach is about taking care of each other. "I love you" is just a string of words unless we do something with them. Inreach is about timing and presence. When I was a pastor in central Texas, I started my tradition of praying with people before surgery. It was easier in those days because people usually went into the hospital the day before surgery. Now, we report to the hospital the day of surgery, before anyone should be awake! *(I never could understand how FAB members **always** seemed to have the first surgery of the day!)* Until my health prohibited me, I maintained the practice of seeing people before surgery. It was not because I thought I was integral to the success of the surgery. It was because caring is about timing and presence.

It is the same with everything. One of the greatest hints that I can give couples for a successful marriage is timing and presence. *(If you don't know what I mean about timing, try showing up with an apology a day late. Then, you will understand!)* Regarding presence, be there even when you don't know what to say. You heard me say at the beginning of every funeral sermon how important it was to be present at a funeral. Sometimes, you can't. But when possible, be there. That is how you care.

In case you missed it, loving each other is more than a feeling or phrase.

[4. In case you missed it, I preached about outreach.](#)

Outreach is sharing the good news of Christ with others to bring them into the family of faith. Unbelievers include our family, our friends, our coworkers, our neighbors, and our casual acquaintances. God may have led them across your path for one reason only: for you to share Christ with them. Outreach is everyone's job, not a task solely for the ministers. Actually, it is more meaningful when someone besides the minister shares the Gospel, because ministers are paid to do it and are therefore suspect! We all must share the Gospel with those we know.

The last words of Jesus on earth were that we must share His story *“in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NIV)*. The people to whom Jesus was talking were not seminarians or professional preachers. They were fishermen, government workers, family members, and business people. He was talking to every believer.

He was not giving us a burden. This is the best news that we could ever tell someone. A child can't wait to tell his parents about getting an “A.” A parent can't wait to announce an achievement of her child. Businesses love to promote their successes. People love to share good news. *(If you don't believe me, get on Facebook. People share the great news that their cat can play the piano, and everyone celebrates with them!)* The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest news in the history of the world.

If you know someone in your life who does not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you should contact that person as soon as you get home. God may have wanted his or her contact information in your phone just for this afternoon's call.

In case you missed it, I preached about sharing the Gospel, in one way or another, in every sermon. We may live in a city of churches, but so many people in Huntington have such an undervalued relationship with Christ that they do not even gather with others to celebrate Him on a weekly basis. Bring them in.

5. In case you missed it, I preached about spiritual growth.

None of us has arrived spiritually.

We all have room for growth. It's not good when we place the sole responsibility for our spiritual growth in one place. The largest room in our church building is used only one hour a week. This room houses the highest-attended event in the weekly life of the church: Sunday morning worship. That part is good, but worship cannot be everything.

Worship was always a holy struggle for me. Some of the hearers were very young and did not understand my words, while others were not so young (*and thought they had already heard everything*). Some were not believers, and others had accepted Christ as Savior many decades ago. Some skipped into the room with joy to be in the presence of God; others crawled into the room, overburdened by grief and pain.

At the same time, some in the room were more focused on earthly matters. They were concerned about the clothes they had on (*or the clothes that someone else had on!*). Some were bothered by the clapping during the service, while others were uncomfortable with the silence. Some were wondering if they had turned the stove off at home, and others were deciding who would go to the restaurant early to get a table. (*I know these things, because I texted my family about the same things sometimes!*) And my job was to present the voice of God to all these different people?!

That burden became lighter when I realized that the most important part of worship does not happen in this room. It occurs before we get here. Worship relies on our spiritual growth during the week. Prayers in worship should be the continuation of an open conversation that we have had with God every day of the week. Reading the Scripture should be another paragraph added to our many Bible readings during the week. The music should be a congregational version of how we have been praising God all week. The sermon should be a lesson that reinforces what we have studied in our own Bible studies, Sunday School classes, and small groups throughout the week. Spiritual growth during the week creates expectation for worship. Through our individual expectations, the preacher becomes the voice of God to wherever we are on our journeys. In case you missed it, I preached about the value of Bible study and personal faith, because spiritual growth cannot be accomplished only in worship.

[6. In case you missed it, I preached about missions.](#)

It is not about us.

The story of the Gospel is not about us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*You knew that he would appear somewhere!*) once wrote: "The church is the church only when it exists for others" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, New York: Touchstone, 1953, 1971, p. 382). FAB is here for the purpose of those who are not here. When we went to the poor in Mexico, we were church. When we went to the orphaned in Nicaragua, we were church. When we went to the hurting along the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina, we were church. When we went to the homeless at the Huntington City Mission, we were church. When we assisted flood-ravaged communities in West Virginia, we were church. When we went to the widows in our community, we were church. When we saw the sick in the hospital, we were church. When we raked leaves, built wheelchair ramps, and took food, we were church. When we shared the love of Jesus with anyone outside the columns of this building, we were church.

Why was missions so important to me? Because that is being church. Church is defined by her missions. A church who only focuses on herself, her own needs, and her personal preferences will implode within herself. I talked about missions because an organization of people without a heart for missions is not a church. In case you missed it, it is not about us.

As best as I remember, the commitment hymn on the Sunday that I declared publicly that God had called me to the ministry many years ago was "Wherever He Leads I'll Go." I chose that hymn as our final hymn today because I am glad that He led my family and me to you.

I have decided that the last words of my final sermon to you should come down to this concluding thought. It sums up my 15-plus years with you. It defines my calling, and it captures what I have been trying to say in the 1,697 sermons that I preached in my ministry. It is the only thing that really matters.

In case you missed it, you only have eternal life with God in heaven by accepting His Son Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. The Scripture says: *"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9, NIV)*. No one goes to heaven by going on a mission trip. No one spends forever in heaven by belonging to Fifth Avenue Baptist Church. No one meets God by being baptized. No one has a free pass to God's throne by being raised in a church. No one enters the Father's house by being a good church person. We go to heaven by accepting Jesus as Lord of our life and believing that His story of salvation is true. Commit your soul to God through Jesus Christ.

In case you missed it, that's what I was trying to say. Please don't miss it now.