

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Lord Christ, before we ever knew you or loved you, you loved us and chose us, not to be your slaves, but to be your friends. Grant now, by the power of your Word and Spirit, that we may abide in your love, just as you abide in your Father’s love. Thus may we do what you desire, and love what you command, that in you our joy may be complete. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Gospel Lesson: John 15:9-17

Over the years that I have been privileged to be your pastor, on the Sunday nearest the time I preached my first sermon here in May of 1991, I have done a kind of “state of the church” sermon to reflect on who we are as a congregation and where we are going. Our daughter Jean calls it “my shameless love letter to the congregation.” Nothing wrong with that, especially in light of our text this morning!

Still it doesn’t seem possible that I am beginning my 19th years as your pastor. Sometimes it seems like it was just the other day that I was unloading a U-Haul-It full of books and waking up in a strange bed in a new town. Other times it seems like I have been here most of my career—which isn’t far from true--45% of it to be exact.

For 18 years you and I have shared the joys and challenges of ministry. We have baptized some of the most beautiful babies I’ve ever seen, and watched them grow into fine young men and women. Last week’s Youth Sunday was particularly moving to me since this is the first group of graduating seniors that includes ones whom I have baptized here. Over the years we have welcomed a steady stream of new members into the life of the church, and said our final farewells to the saints who have blessed our lives in countless ways. We have called a series of remarkably gifted associate pastors, and then in due time sent them on to other forms of service to the Presbyterian Church. We have seen 11 of our members go seminary, and have watched as their careers unfolded. This congregation serves as a model for the whole Presbytery in terms of what it means to be a “**calling congregation.**” You’ll hear more about that from Buz in a little while.

Thanks to you and the life of this wonderful congregation, these past eighteen years have been the most joyful years of my ministry. Not every minister can say that. Some can’t say it at all. There are some churches that chew up and spit out one poor minister after another. In my position as chair of the Committee on Ministry I spend a lot more time that I would like talking to ministers who are being eaten alive by the churches they serve. I don’t know how they “hang in there,” seeking to bear witness to the gospel in the midst of such conflict.

I often wonder, and often wonder out-loud, what makes this congregation so different? How have we been able to avoid the deep, angry divisions that are tearing apart all too many churches of almost every denomination you can name? What has made and keeps this such a warm, supportive congregation?

I suppose the theologically correct answer is “**The grace of God in Jesus Christ.**” And that is far more than just a cliché. This church has a history of focusing more on the grace of Christ that unites us than on the hot-button issues that divide us. It is not that we are all of one opinion or that we all think alike or act alike. We certainly don’t. Not by any means. We are not as diverse as we could be, or should be, but we do have enough diversity to test from time to time whether we are really serious about keeping the life of the church centered in the grace and love of Christ alone. By and large, thus far, we have, and it shows.

It is not our similarity to one another, but our shared commitment to Jesus Christ, that joins us as friends in this part of the Body of Christ on earth. By God's grace, and by the commitment of your leaders and staff, we have sought to cultivate and deepen our friendships in the life of the church across the years.

But in the words we read this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus makes it clear that friendship in the church is not just a matter of warm feelings towards those we naturally like. Friendship in the church grows out of obedience to Christ's command that we **"love one another," as he has loved us.**

To say that immediately raises the question of whether love can be commanded. Love *as an emotion* cannot be commanded. We have little conscious control over our deepest feelings. But love, understood biblically, is not a feeling. It is not a fleeting emotion or passion. Love is a matter of seeking the well-being of the other, day in and day out, even when the other is being difficult, or is strange and threatening. The kind of love Christ demonstrates and commands does not come from some reservoir of good will deep in our own hearts. It comes by the work of Christ's Spirit in our lives, as he gives us new strength to love far beyond our own, and as he enables us to will and to do what God commands...to love one another even as he has first and always loved us. St. Augustine understood this dynamic well when he said that **"God gives what God commands."** God makes possible that which God requires of us. It is God's grace in Jesus Christ that enables us to love one another as friends in the life of Christ's Church. Thanks be to God!

Today we celebrate that friendship around tables in the Fellowship Hall. If you've ever wondered why we share so many meals around this place—the picnic today is the 7th church meal in the past 5 weeks with another picnic for the youth this afternoon—if you have ever wondered why we eat together so often, the answer is clear--friendships are best cultivated around shared meals. Lasting friendships don't just happen. They require tending and nourishing over time, as we abide joyfully in each other's company. "I do not call you servants, slaves," says Jesus, **"I have called you friends... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."** That is something this congregation does quite well.

A couple of weeks ago one of the women who was here for our Friday Prayer Time said to me that it seems to her that there is genuine "spiritual revival" going on in this church. I hope she is right. Partly in response to the illness of some dear and beautiful children in this church, there has been a deepening of the prayer life of a number of folks in this congregation. They have been dealing with some very difficult questions of faith, and doing so in a way that I find truly inspiring. We are a stronger community of faith because of their prayers and their witness.

All this is *not* to say that we have not had some stressful times in the past year, or that we do not have some challenging times ahead. We do, especially in terms of our finances. The hardest thing that your officers and pastors have had to deal with this past year has been the cuts we had to make in the budget. In January of this year, the Session reported to the annual meeting of the congregation a budget for 2009 that was the same as in 2008--**\$1,306,000**. But as the recession deepened, it quickly became clear to the Session that in order to be fiscally responsible, we had to go back and make significant cuts to the budget. At a congregational meeting in February we announced cuts totaling **\$306,000**. Among the things that we had to cut was the position of *Coordinator of Church Programs and Volunteer Resources* that Kitty Daniels had held. The position had been established to help us do a better job of scheduling church activities and increasing the number of people who share in the work of this congregation. Perhaps someday we may be able to restore a similar position, but for now other staff members have stepped up to the plate and have picked up the work Kitty was doing. I really appreciate the spirit

in which they have done so. (You will be glad to know that Kitty has been hired as the church administrator of the 1st United Methodist Church of Easley.)

A number of you have commented to me recently that we seem to have the best staff team in place you can remember. I agree wholeheartedly! This is the best staff I've ever been blessed to be a part of. One of things that has become clear over the past years is that this congregation **does transitions well**. Think of the anxiety when Ramon and Nancy retired, and Wain was called to Clinton, and David Coleman went to Memphis, and Charles retired. And look where we are now. This church does transitions well.

Speaking of transitions—I am thrilled with the work Tony Pepper is doing. It is a joy having him on staff. I told Tony last week how much I had enjoy the meals on Wednesday nights. He said, “If you thought last year was good, wait till next year.” I love that attitude, and I can hardly wait! We'll be eating Tony's fried chicken today.

And I've never seen the transition to a new associate pastor go more smoothly than it has with Buz Wilcoxon. It seems as if Buz has been here for years. Within a matter of months, he had become a beloved and vital member of our staff team. Buz is clearly one of the most gifted young ministers I have ever known, and he will be one of the outstanding leaders in the PC (USA) in years to come. And so, let me now invite Buz to tell you about a new initiative in the church that he has developed for the coming year. “**CALLED FOURTH**”

[Buz] In his 1st Letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul says, “Brothers and Sisters, consider your own **calling**...” As Allen has just said, all of us as Christians are **called** to “love one another,” but how we actually live out that **calling** looks different. Some of us show our love by caring for the sick and those who suffer in body, mind, and spirit. Some of us live lives of hospitality welcoming all whom we meet. Some of us work through the systems of power to make real and lasting changes on behalf of those who have no voice in the system. Some of us volunteer countless hours in soup kitchens or homeless shelters. Some us teach children and care for our grandchildren. Some of us work to protect and preserve the beauty of God's creation so that this gift can continue to provide life to future generations. Some of us create magnificent works of art or share our musical talents to bring others closer to God. In these ways and many more we preach the gospel through our lives lived in grateful response to God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Well, next year were going to be taking a special look at the ways we live our life together, and in particular at the ways that we respond to God's **call** and claim upon our lives. Through a generous gift from the Fund for Theological Education we will embark on a new initiative in the youth ministry program and the congregation as a whole: **Called Fourth**. That's Called Fourth, spelled F O U R T H. Like the name of the church, because it is the members of this church and their lives lived in response to God's **call** that will be the focus of our attention.

Through a series of Sunday Night Youth Programs and Wednesday Night Fellowships for the whole congregation we will be examining 7 different Biblical **Callings** and we'll do so by learning from “**Mentors**” in this Church who have dedicated their lives to following each of these **callings**. Each month we will rotate through a pattern of **Studying** Scripture, **Serving** in Mission Projects, and **Sharing** stories of Call from the members of this congregation. Through the course of the year we'll examine these 7 biblical **Callings**: Stewardship of Creation, Welcoming the Stranger, Healing and Wholeness, Preaching the Gospel, Justice and Reconciliation, Guiding Future Generations,

and Praising the Lord. In some very exciting ways, the youth of this church will begin to ask questions that will guide them through the years ahead as they seek to connect God's **call** to serve and how they live their lives.

The church newsletter and website will tell you more about the Called Fourth program in the months to come as we all prepare to follow Paul's words and "consider [our] own calling" as members of the Body of Christ.

[Allen] There is so much in the life of this congregation that is good and healthy and loving. But very little of what is best in this church can happen without two things—your **personal involvement** in the things you care most deeply about in the life and ministry of the church, and your **financial support** of the church.

We all know that this is a challenging time financially. Some in the church have lost jobs, some have not had a salary increase for several years, some have seen their investment portfolio decline by 40% or more. But in my experience times of financial recession have often been times in which people reassess their priorities and ask themselves, **What is most important in terms of how I spend my money and invest my time and talents?** Where do my priorities lie? When we address such questions seriously, the result, more often than not, is *increased* giving to the church.

Let me lay it all on the pulpit. One of my concerns as pastor of this church is the number of our members who either do not contribute financially, or do so by cash without identifying themselves as the donor. Even after removing a number of names from the roll of active membership, still, as best we can tell, almost 25% of our members did not support the church financially last year. That is way too high a percentage! Even if you give generously of your time and talents, for which we are all grateful, as your pastor I want to encourage you, as I would encourage us all, to contribute **financially** as well--not just because the church needs your money to carry out its mission, but even more because **YOU need to give it as a vital part of your spiritual growth**. In our time the thing that has the greatest power to block our spiritual growth is what Jesus called *Mammon*, what we call money. To break the idolatry of money--to grow in the grace of liberality--to deepen our compassion for the poor--to further our discipleship to Jesus Christ-- you and I need to give a worthy percentage of what God has entrusted to us. The old cliché is right—"You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give." And as Bill Sibley is fond of adding, "You can't out-give God."

And so to further enhance the life and witness of this wonderful, loving congregation, I encourage you to give as God has prospered you. That is one of the concrete ways by which we show our love and demonstrate our friendship to Jesus Christ and his people. And it is one of the chief ways by which we bear fruit, fruit that will last, and in so doing, come to know the fullness of joy that Christ alone can give. He commands and promises, "**As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love...that your joy may be complete.**" In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Allen C. McSween and Buz Wilcoxon
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