

“MY PRAYER FOR YOU”

May 23, 2010

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Eternal God, your love in Jesus Christ is wider than our minds can reach, deeper than our hearts can fathom, higher than our imaginations can soar. Grant now, that through the reading and preaching of your word, we, too, may be rooted and grounded in love, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may be filled us with all the fullness of your grace and truth; through Christ the Lord of all. Amen.

SCRIPTURE LESSON: EPHESIANS 1:15-23, 3:14-21

There is something about me that loves symmetry. I like years that end in even numbers. I like seeing things come full circle. I like a sense of completion. When I left Trinity Church in Laurinburg in the blessed year of 1982, Dan Hunt gave me a bottle of Dram Buie. Twelve years later, when Dan and Connie moved to Greenville (in answer to many prayers), we finished it off together. Symmetry! Full circle.

On my last Sunday in Bowling Green, KY, we received into membership Dr. Steve Snodgrass—who had done his surgical residency here in Greenville under Mose Macfie. When I announced that he was coming from *Greenville*...the congregation booed. Now on my last Sunday at 4th Church in Greenville, we welcome as a Clergy Affiliates Trey and Julie Meredith. Trey comes from the church I served in Bowling Green. His parents and grandparents were great friends of ours. I like symmetry—things that come full circle.

And so it is entirely “in character” for one addicted to symmetry that I should retire from the same church that my beloved Grandfather, Dr. John McSween, retired from... and that I should do so on Pentecost Sunday.

Some of you may know, thought I am sure none of you will remember, that it was on Pentecost Sunday nineteen years ago that I began my ministry here. My first words to you from this pulpit were:

“Pentecost Sunday is a great time to begin a new pastorate. On Pentecost we celebrate the renewal of the church by the power of the Spirit. What better time to begin our new venture as pastor and congregation than on Pentecost Sunday—a time of new hopes and dreams for both us. A time of fresh empowerment.”

Not very eloquent, but certainly true.

Pentecost Sunday 1991 was indeed a good time to begin my ministry here. Now nineteen years later, it is the right time for this part of our journey in faith together to come to its end. Someone asked me recently whether I had ambivalent feelings about retiring now. Not, really, I said. I know that the time is right. I have pretty well worn out my voice and my robe and myself. As much as I love pastoral ministry, “the relentless return of the Sabbath” can be draining. I am tired of running back up to the church after dinner for committee meetings. I am tired of always having to be planning ahead. And as I said in a recent Newsletter, I am tired of “caring about everything and everyone all the time.” It is not the caring that is the problem. It is the *relentlessness* of the caring that can be so emotionally and physically draining. Perhaps if I had learned the “techniques of

self-care,” as they call it. Or if I had learned to pace myself better, or to say NO more often, that would not be the case...but I doubt it. After 42 years of ordination I have at least taken care of myself well enough never to have missed a Sunday in the pulpit for illness, as least not that I can remember. And for better or worse I do care deeply about every aspect of the life of this great church. In one sense I always will. But in the immortal words of Nancy Sibley, now I will be able to walk past a pothole in parking lot and say to myself, “Not by problem anymore. Not my problem.” Ahhh!

I have no doubts that now is the right time for me to retire, not just because I am running out of the energy and vigor in ministry I once had, but because it seems that things are going better in the life of this church than any time I can ever remember. Transitions can always be difficult and challenging, but it seems to me that this church is in the best shape it has ever been to go through a pastoral transition. The congregation is remarkably healthy and united. The wind of the Spirit is blowing through every facet of the life of the church. And I trust that you are well aware of what a great staff is in place to carry forward the ministry of the church. But remember, that at least for a while, they are going to be carrying more than their usual work load. Carry it with them, and continue to lift and carry them in your prayers and support. I am sure that I will miss this wonderful staff, “as my Uncle Bill used to say, “like a front tooth.” Take good care of them for me.

As much as I will miss being your pastor, I can enter retirement with a gratifying sense of accomplishment. I am deeply grateful to God for what we achieved together. I will not begin to try to list the things we have accomplished over the years. I’ll leave that to the next church historian. But there is so much over the past years for which we all can be thankful to God.

Speaking of gratitude, last week was the happiest Sunday of my entire ministry. After the service one of you wrote me, “Sunday’s service was one of those rare moments in life when you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is so much more to life than what we can consciously see or even fathom.” It was wonderful having all the associate pastors with whom I have worked over the years here. I appreciate their making time to be here, and I am so proud of each of them and their accomplishments in ministry. You could see very clearly how incredibly blessed I have been by the people I have worked with. They all have their distinctive gifts and skills for ministry and all are ones who have been dear, wonderful colleagues in ministry. As I said last week, one of the things I will most be remembered for are the **associate pastors** with whom I have shared ministry.

As my ministry here comes full circle on another Pentecost Sunday, and as I enter retirement, I have to confess that it still doesn’t seem real. Where have the years gone? How have they gone by so quickly? Especially the last couple of months. It seems like just a few years ago I was arriving in Greenville on a lovely Wednesday afternoon in May. David Quattlebaum had told me that if I came in May, I would never want to go away. He was right!

The other day I got a nice email from Dani Lawrence who said the same thing. Dani said, “It seems like only a few months ago that you called here to speak with Bob about Fourth Church and the people who worshipped there. Since he wasn’t at home, I

got the chance to tell you about the wonderful people who attended Fourth. I'm sure by now you have found them indelible in your heart. The sweet gentleness of their souls will never leave you." How true!

Our years together have been *by far* the happiest years of my ministry. You have continually made ministry a "pure joy." This church has a history of treating its pastors very well indeed, and there is no church I know of that has stronger lay leadership than this. I hope you know that that is not by accident. It's not just something that happened. It is the result of faithful, conscientious, theologically-grounded ministry over the past 65 years or more. May it ever be so.

And now a whole new generation of leaders is coming into office. Again it seems entirely fitting that my last Sunday would be the day on which we ordain and install a new class of Elders and Deacons to lead this church in the years ahead. Today is not the time to look back. That was last week, and perhaps next Wednesday. Today is a time to look forward in faith-full hope.

Let us do so in light of the words we read this morning from the Letter to the Ephesians. There Paul offers a series of prayers for the church. It seems that he writes the whole letter on his knees in prayer. I would like to echo Paul's words as my prayer to you today and for the years ahead.

Paul says, "I have heard," I can say, "***I know,***" "**...of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.**" The faith that is evident throughout the life of this church is remarkable, and the love that fills this congregation is palpable. It seems, if anything, to have grown even stronger over the past couple of years as we have said "goodbye" to some of the great saints of the church, and as we have been driven to our knees in prayer for some of the precious children of the church. For the remarkable faith and love of this congregation I will never "**cease to give thanks to you as I remember you in my prayers.**"

With Paul "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a **spirit of wisdom and revelation**, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know the **hope** to which he has called you, the **riches** of his **glorious inheritance** among the saints and the **immeasurable greatness of his power** for us who believe." **Hope...inheritance...and power.** That is what we have in Christ Jesus. That is what will sustain the ministry of this great church across the years. **Hope...inheritance...and power.**

Paul will not let the congregations to which he writes forget for a moment that the hope of the church is not grounded in himself or his ministry. The hope of the church in every age is rooted and grounded in the powerful love of Christ at work with those who believe.

As I read the passage from Ephesians this morning, did you hear how often Paul uses the word "**power**"? Over and over Paul insists that the mission and ministry of the church do not come from anything we say or do. They come from the **power of the Holy Spirit** at work in and through us. When Paul uses the word "power," the word in Greek is

dynamis, from which we get our word “dynamite.” There is an explosive power to this gospel of which we are not ashamed that comes from the untamed and untamable Spirit of the living God.

Friends, always remember that the **Lord and head of the Church is Jesus Christ** alone! The head of the Church is not your pastor, not your staff, surely not your pastors *emeriti*! The Lord and head of the Church is the risen and reigning Christ alone. He is the glue that binds you together. He is the power that animates the life and ministry of the church. God **“has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”**

And so with Paul I, too, would pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts in faith, so that, as you are rooted and grounded in love,

“you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

That’s a lot to take in all at once, but the key thing to hear is the language of extravagance—the language of plentitude that points to the overflowing abundance of Christ’s love and power.

Change of any kind is always difficult. I know. I am a “preacher of habit.” And pastoral transitions can be particularly challenging because of the deep ties that have been forged through years of pastoral intimacy.

But know this and trust it wholeheartedly--in the risen Christ there is an abundance of love and power that is able to accomplish more than all you can ask or imagine. In the overflowing richness of his love and the immeasurable greatness of his power, there is hope that all that we have done together over these past years that is good and true and to the glory of God will endure and flourish. And all that we have done that is contrary to the will of God will pass away and be forgotten.

Yes, things will change. Relationships will be different. New ministries take shape. New pastoral bonds will be forged. But the love of Christ that surpasses all that you and I can comprehend will continue to ground and guide and undergird the life of this wonderful congregation for years to come.

There are a thousand other things I would like to say to you...but this is all that really matters. My ongoing prayer for you is that from the wealth of God’s glory you may be strengthened in every way by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that Christ may dwell in you through faith. I pray that, as you are being rooted and grounded in his love, you may come to you know the incredible abundance of his love and the greatness of his power unto salvation at work within you, now and through all generations to come. To Him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and for ever more. Amen.