



October 2, 2011  
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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Thank You* Philippians 1:2-8

You know, Chapel Hill, this past Friday was my last day as one of your pastors—on Saturday I became Honorably Retired. That has several implications. One is trivial but fun: I prepared this sermon while I was still on the payroll, but I'm delivering it as a volunteer—it's my first volunteer ministry. It also means that Pastor Mark isn't my boss any longer, and Pastor Jeremy isn't the senior associate who outranks me in authority and accountability. But here's the wonderful thing: now that I've retired, Mark and Jeremy are to me what they are to you: my pastors. This is Carolyn's and my home church—and it will stay that as you almost certainly change denominations from the Presbyterian Church (USA) to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. How good God is to us.

You know, a friend of mine in Pittsburgh used to say there are two kinds of friends: friends of the road and friends of the heart. Friends of the road are wonderful to have: you share work and ministry, you pour yourselves out together for things that matter. But some people become friends of the heart: friends with whom you share all of life, in addition to work, friends you count on over a lifetime. And these men, and others on this staff, are that to me and to Carolyn. How blessed she and I are.

As you can see, I'm sitting down this morning for our sermon. That's because what I want to offer this morning is more like a chat than a sermon, more of a witness than a proclamation, and doing it seated seemed about right for that.

Our scripture reading this morning is from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippian church. The church in Philippi wasn't a perfect church, but it was Paul's sweetheart church, as pastors said in a previous generation. They loved him and he loved them. About like you and me, Chapel Hill.

Philippians 1: 2-8.

In a nutshell, here is what I want to say to you this morning: I am exceedingly grateful to God for his long faithfulness to me. There have been lots of players in the story of my life in Christ—Mark and Jeremy, my wife, my children, my grandparents, my dad, and my mom who is here today with my aunt and uncle, you as a congregation and lots more. But my "thank you" is really directed to God even more than to them. Please: I'm not trying to be all spiritual about things; I

don't want to take anything away from people who have loved me and helped form me. It's just the truth: in all of it, it is God who has been at work through others on my behalf, and through me for the sake of others. And I'm grateful to God. I'd like to tell you some of what God has done for me, so you can join me in telling God thank you.

I'm going to begin with what God has done for me in giving me Carolyn as my wife. Here's the thing: she's a wonderful wife, mom and grandmother; and like some other women she's a real fighter for what's healthy and best in our marriage. But the remarkable thing is this: when I fell in love with her, courted and won her, I had no idea how important a choice I was making. But God knew. God knew what he was going to ask of me, what he was going to let me be part of in Christ, and he made sure I would have a wife who loved me . . . but who loved the Lord more than she loved me. God knew I would need that very rare Christian who would be able to put Christ's mission first: before herself and her own needs, before comfort, before security, before emotional safety, before her love for me or our children, before the feelings and needs of her own family. That would be crucial, because the Lord was going to ask the two of us to go places and do things that would be very tough on our loved ones, and on us.

Just briefly, here are some of the specifics of that. After 17 years with the wonderful University Place Presbyterian Church, God sent us to Pittsburgh. In Pittsburgh I was the pastor to a presbytery and not a congregation, and that meant Carolyn really had no church home. For nearly nine years she was lonely and somewhat detached from the body of Christ—she sometimes said to me, "You are the only person who phoned me this whole week." And my heart would break. But Carolyn knew God had sent us to Pittsburgh. And she knew that what we were doing there mattered for Christ. It's not that she never complained; she complained up a storm sometimes. And sometimes she just cried. But she knew we were where God had sent us, and she was grateful to be part of what God was doing.

I could never have done it without you, Carolyn. But it is God who gave you to me: I married you as an impetuous young man swept away by your sweetness, good looks and your love for Christ, but it never occurred to me to give a single thought to whether you could be a partner in costly ministries for the sake of the Lord Jesus. God knew, and that's what mattered.

Which leads me to say this: I'm enormously grateful to God for my two sons—now grown men—who paid prices for the things God asked me to be part of. Not always willingly, of course. But in the long run, they got it about Carolyn and me going to Pittsburgh and leaving them and their families behind. They got it—because they get it about how precious people are to the Lord, and they get it that they are sons of parents who try to put Christ and his mission first—even if those parents only sometimes got the rest of their priorities right.

Let me tell you the short version of how I wound up being one of your pastors, so that you'll see that me being in ministry here at Chapel Hill where my sons are members was God's doing and not my clever planning and maneuvering.

When Carolyn and I had been in Pittsburgh for 7 ½ years, we began asking the Lord if we could be done in Pittsburgh and if he'd send us to be close to our children and grandchildren. Three months later, while I was on sabbatical, the Lord made it clear to us that he was going to send us back to be with our families. We were thrilled. So, in my fine "take charge" way, I was just sure God would use me to be a consultant with congregations and presbyteries. And, indeed, three friends who were consulting all across America courted me to work with them. But to my amazement and confusion, none of those positions worked out. You've heard of God opening and closing doors? Well, after those three doors slammed shut on my fingers, I finally got it and said, "Okay, Lord. I get it. When you are ready to tell me how you're going to send us back to our children and grandchildren, and what you'll have me do in ministry, you just let me know. In the meantime, I'll be waiting . . . almost patiently, but not really."

Six months later—no foolin' SIX months—I was talking with my buddy Mark Toone, who told me that his lead associate pastor, Stuart Bond, was taking a new call in California. Mark and I had said years before how much fun it would be to work together someday. So I said, "Mark, I can come and be your interim associate and do whatever you think needs to be done." We talked carefully for the next few months. Mark made it clear that he had a fabulous younger associate he was sure would one day be senior pastor of a large church, and that if I came, Jeremy Vaccaro would be the Senior Associate. I'd be the oldest associate—and third pastor on the staff. Could I live with that? A few days later, I told Mark I could—and it's been a privilege to serve in that capacity, and to defer to Jeremy: at first because he was in the role of senior associate, and then because that was what he became.

When we got here, all I could say was, "Who knew God could be so nice?" I know that's lousy theology. But, honestly, God had asked Carolyn and me and our family to do so many rotten hard things—so many precious things that mattered for Christ, but which came at a very high cost to us—that it was a bit disorienting to have God send us here. Here in this wonderful church with you wonderful people. Here to work with a long-term friend of the heart, here where Carolyn almost instantly found a home and friends of the heart. Here where she could grow as a teacher. Here, with our children, a daughter-in-love and grandchildren. A dream come true.

Not only are we members of the same church our sons are members of, I have had the unimaginable joy of being in ministry with my dear sons—all of us on the same staff. Dean was part of the Chapel Hill team before I was: everything you see on the screens comes from and through him. He's up in the booth, nearly invisible to you all, which suits him just fine. He is a wonderful theologian, and it shows in his work, and he gets it about the church and God's mission. Every Tuesday for 4

years, we've been in ministry together planning this congregation's worship with Kathy Alvestad, your pastors, and the rest of the team. Lance was in ministry on this staff for more than two years as co-ministry leader of Life Hurts/God Heals, a ministry to youth dealing with hurts, habits and hang-ups. I've known for years what a gifted counselor he is, but what I learned from his ministries at this church is that he is also a powerful speaker and interpreter of life and God's word. He continues in ministry at Chapel Hill, providing tech support to weddings, funerals and special events.

Chapel Hill, you and your leaders have been God's blessing to Carolyn and me. We have grown in Christ, become more obedient to the Lord; our marriage has grown, and we have found a church family for a lifetime. Thank you, Chapel Hill. Truly, thank you. But, mostly, thank you God. How could you have been so good to us? Thank you.

Now, I want to go back to our call to Pittsburgh and tell you a little bit of what God did to get us ready for that very difficult call. Pittsburgh Presbytery is one of the three largest presbyteries in the denomination, and in those years it was widely considered to be the most difficult presbytery of them all: fractious and contentious, and skillfully resistant to change. I have never done anything in my life as costly and frightening—nor as wonderful—as being the pastor to that presbytery. And, I am so grateful to God that he let me, with Carolyn, be part of the amazing things he is doing in Pittsburgh. Here are some high spots of what God did to get me ready for that call.

Oddly enough, part of the beginning was with a church I kind of struck out with. They liked me well enough, and I liked them. But the First Presbyterian Church of Sherman Oaks was successfully resistant to my charm, talent and youthful good looks. They were also successful in resisting the Gospel. After the congregation voted unanimously to call me as its pastor—at age 32—the wise old interim pastor sat me down and said, “Young man, I wonder if anyone has told you that this will be a very difficult call?” Uh, no, they hadn't, but, wow, was he ever right. No matter what I did, I couldn't budge them, and I couldn't figure out why. I tried to be faithful to the Lord. But mostly he was faithful to me. I learned there some of the things I couldn't do. I learned to fail. I learned to beat my heart against a wall if that's what it took. I learned that being smart, charming and a generally fabulous guy would never be what it takes to move a congregation forward in mission.

Three years later, God sent us to University Place. We were relieved. It was and is a great church: my claim to fame for the first 4 years at UPPC was that I hadn't loused them up yet. Together we learned to reach the unchurched for Christ. Then we began to learn to make disciples out of each other. It was at University Place that I finally learned I couldn't please all the people all the time. It turned out that the better I pleased some people, the more unhappy other people became. I began learning to decide who to disappoint, and praying that it wouldn't be Jesus I disappointed. And, it was in those years that I spent several thousand dollars in

therapy: getting past my need to please people, learning to speak the truth in love to people whose feelings I couldn't imagine hurting, learning to say no and make it stick when it was the right thing to do. Again, my wife was instrumental in some of this, telling me at one point, "Jim, I love you, but you need to know that I'm not willing to continue living this way. Get some counseling." I could never have done what God needed me to do in Pittsburgh if God hadn't taken me down all those unpleasant roads.

And then, 5 years before God called us to Pittsburgh, God told me that I was to go to the hilltop and start meeting with the African American pastors there. But I didn't go because I was really, really busy in a really busy congregation. But the next summer, the Spirit was back again: go to the hilltop. So, I talked with my buddy, associate pastor Harlan Shoop, about what the Lord was telling me, and it turned out that the Spirit had said the exact same thing to him the same two summers! So, since we had each read the book of Jonah (who didn't go where God sent him until he'd been swallowed by a whale), we got involved with the Tacoma Ministerial Alliance. It was wonderful.

And, here's why it mattered. When I got to Pittsburgh I encountered something I'd never experienced before: black Presbyterian congregations in black communities. What got me ready to serve those congregations was the years I had spent with the pastors of the Tacoma Ministerial Alliance. Amazing how God works. Please note: it's not like he told me in advance. He just told me what to do, and when I didn't obey, he came back the next year to tell me he meant it.

Then this amazing story of God's providence in getting me ready for the call to Pittsburgh. As I was flying home from interviewing for the position, and certain they would call me, I found myself sitting next to a pleasant young pagan. Looking back on it, I know it was the Holy Spirit who put me in that seat next to her. She asked me what I did, and I told her, and then I told her I was returning home from an interview. She said, "That's what I do for a living! I coach CEO's to help them be successful in transitions." She said, "Would you like me to do for you in the next 5 hours what I usually get \$30 grand to do in a week for big shots?" So, in the next few hours, she helped me identify what had been my "winning strategy" (as she put it) as a pastor at University Place, and then she asked me what strategy I thought would be needed in Pittsburgh. When I told her I thought I'd do the same thing there I'd done at University Place, she said, "Yeah. That's a mistake leaders often make. They think the winning strategy that worked for them at the last place is what will work in the next place. But sometimes, they are wrong." And it became clear to me that the Holy Spirit had opened a window of opportunity in Pittsburgh through the courage and suffering of its search team, and that if I didn't move quickly and firmly, that window would close. So, for the next 9 years, I worked against my ordinary leadership style: instead of going slowly and building trust and leading change on that basis, I worked with key leaders to make changes to core things very quickly. It was the Spirit who made sure I knew to do things that way in

Pittsburgh. It scared me to death—but God bore fruit through it for the 157 congregations and the 153 communities they served in that dear city.

Then, let me close with this. After my wife married me partly because I loved the Lord, I plunged into a time of terrible doubt and anger toward the church. It continued on and off for at least the next decade. But about 2 years into that dark time, God sent someone to keep me from getting permanently lost; someone to help me walk through it. His name is Darrell Guder. Darrell is a brilliant and disciplined man—he became the Dean of the Faculty at Princeton Seminary and is among the most prominent missiologists in the world today. But when I met him he was young, and fresh from getting his PhD in Germany. His ministry at Hollywood Pres involved starting a Sunday school class for young marrieds, and as God would have it, Carolyn and I became the first presidents of the class. While I was lost in doubt. But for the next two years, Darrell and I had breakfast together once a month. I poured my questions and dark disturbing doubts out to him—and to my relief he wasn't horrified or offended. He'd asked most of those questions himself. In the end, what mattered wasn't so much that he gave brilliant answers—the kind of answers John Lennox gives. What mattered was who Darrell was as a person. Loving. Transparent. Full of intellectual and relational integrity. And more than anything, he loved the Lord, trusted the Lord, believed Jesus was the Son of God who died and rose from the dead. He believed it all—and there was no baloney in the man, not a single facile, trivial, stupid answer. I loved him for it then, as I do to this day.

God did that for me. God did that for Carolyn. God did that, and used that, to help me reach people who don't believe; people who long for something more profound than simple answers to questions that are vast; to help me help congregations and pastors reach people who need Jesus.

So, here's the conclusion. Thank you, God, Father, Son and Spirit. You have been faithful to me across a whole lifetime. You have loved me when I haven't loved you; you find me and bring me home when I am lost. You've let me be part of what you are doing to help congregations, presbyteries and even denominations matter in Christ's mission. For the life of me, I can't imagine why you would love me so. I can't imagine why you chose the likes of me to be part of those wonderful, painful, things. But you did. And, like David and Jacob, two other rascals you loved, I do love you for it; and I'm grateful. I want all the rest of my life to show that. Thank you, Lord. Amen.

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Pastor Jim talked about God's long faithfulness over his lifetime. Perhaps this would be a good week to think about what God has done for you. Spend at least 5 minutes in individual, silent, reflection and complete the following sentences.

1. As I look back over my life, the most important things God has done for me are these things:
2. God was with me in these crucial, difficult times of my life:
3. One of the toughest times in my faith journey has been . . .

Take a few minutes as a group to reflect on how the things you heard from others in the group would sometimes be part of an authentic witness to others.

Even though Thanksgiving is nearly two months away, to take some time to tell God thank you for what he's done in your lives. Don't share prayer requests—simply pray and tell God thank you. Be specific: "Thank you God for . . ."