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*The God Who Heals:
The Healing Church*
Leviticus 25

Happy New Year! The Toones just returned from a skiing vacation in Utah. It was a nice breather after a pretty hard sprint that started last August. But let me ask this: where did the idea of vacation come from? Taking a break from work, hanging out as a family, doing things that bring renewal? Was it the unions that came up with this plan? Actually, rest is God's idea! After creating for six days, we read that God rested on the seventh. The Fourth Commandment orders us to keep the Sabbath... a Hebrew word, "Shabbat," which means, "rest." God's very design of creation included space for us to rest. Isn't God good?

Most of us know about Sabbath—although most of us are lousy at keeping it—and our culture is downright devoted to desecrating it. (For those of you who insist on working seven days a week, it is worth remembering that failure to observe a weekly Sabbath is right up there with adultery and murder in God's eyes. I'm just sayin'...)

But did you know that the Lord also required a Sabbath of years? Exodus 23:10 says, "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused." How many knew about the Sabbath year? Well, you ain't seen nothing! There is one more Sabbath celebration... the granddaddy of them all. It happened every 50 years. Do you know what it was called? Jubilee! The year of Jubilee! This morning, for our first text of the New Year, we turn to the unlikely book of Leviticus for a surprising and gracious gift: Jubilee! [Various texts from Leviticus 25]

The Year of Jubilee

⁸Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. ⁹Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. ¹⁰Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. ¹¹The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. ¹²For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. ¹³In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property...

³⁵“If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. ³⁶Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. ³⁷You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit...

³⁹“If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. ⁴⁰He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you... ⁵⁴he and his children are to be released in the Year of Jubilee, for the Israelites belong to me as servants. They are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

I read on a Kindle. Last week, it froze up on me, but all I needed to do was hold down a button for 30 seconds, and everything reset. Jubilee was the reset button on the nation of Israel. Every 50 years, once in every person's lifetime, God told them to press the reset button; to return everything to its default position in several ways:

1-The land was allowed to rest and heal! I grew up in Yakima and, like so many kids, picked apples after school in the autumn. Today, the orchards I picked are gone. Pushed over and burned because the soil was so spent and toxic, trees just can't grow there anymore. Jubilee meant that land could lie fallow and regain its strength.

2-Property was restored to its original families. I heard last week of a woman who went down to visit where she grew up in California. Her parents bought a house there for \$15,000. Today, the prices approach \$1 million. She couldn't go back home if she wanted to. Jubilee meant that all land returned to its original owners.

3-Slaves were set free. How many saw "Lincoln?" Great movie! Jubilee was God's Emancipation Proclamation. However you ended up in servitude, Jubilee meant freedom.

4-Debts were cancelled. One of my year-end traditions is to make a big principal-only payment on my house. I do it in person: go to the bank, give them the check, ask for the balance and a written receipt. (Dave Ramsey would be proud of me.) But imagine if I had gone in this year and they said, "Dr. Toone, there must be some mistake. It appears that the bank has forgiven your mortgage." Jubilee meant that all your debts were cancelled!

Just imagine what a gift Jubilee was to the poor, the young and those in bondage! It meant they had a future. To the person in poverty, either by cruel circumstance or by their own poor decisions, it meant hope! To the youngster who watched his

father sell off the family farm, it meant that one day, he could get his land back. To the young widow willing to do anything to care for her family—even sell herself into slavery—it meant that one day, she would be her own person again. Jubilee.

Jubilee may best be summed up in v. 10: “Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” Does that phrase sound familiar? Do you know where else it can be found? Right here. The Liberty Bell, the iconic image of freedom in this country. Cast into the side of the Liberty Bell are the words of Leviticus 25:10: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all inhabitants thereof.”

So why begin a new year with this unusual text from this unusual book? Because, on Sunday November 17, 2013 exactly, we will celebrate the 50th year of our existence! On November 17, 1963, the Reverend Paul Neel and 75 charter members started Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church. This year is our Golden Anniversary, which means something else. What? This is our Jubilee! The end of 50 years of ministry in Gig Harbor. Do you know how many of those 75 charter members are still active in our church? Two! Hollis and Carolyn Small. Yet look at what has grown from their faithfulness, prayers, hard work and sacrifice!

Fifty years from now, I will be gone. And most of you will be, too. The question is, what legacy will we hand on to the next generation? Our Jubilee year is the perfect opportunity to think about the answer to that question and lay plans for our future. I’ve actually been thinking about this for a long time. I’m a historian; stuff like this interests me. But I’m also your pastor and your leader and three years ago I began to ask myself, “What must we do over the next ten years to prepare us for our future?” I came up with three things—the Big Three—upon which I, and we, must focus if we are going to pass on a legacy worthy of that which we received. I have spoken ad nauseam to the elders about the Big Three and been encouraged to share them with you. So now, on this Jubilee kickoff Sunday, I do. Here they are: Denomination, Debt and Discipleship.

Denomination. This may seem like old news to you. After all, June 3 we will celebrate our one-year anniversary as members of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. But your pastors and elders were praying and working towards that moment for more than 15 years. It wasn’t originally our plan to change denominations. We wanted to revitalize the one we were in. But as the years progressed, we realized we were less and less in line with the changing theology and mission of the PC USA. We spent a year making our case to you and you agreed overwhelmingly. And I need to say, this was the single most important decision we have made as a congregation in my 25 years here. It is such a gift to be a part of a denomination that affirms our most deeply held convictions.

But you might say, “OK, but that’s done. Let’s move on to number 2.” Yes, we are safely out and into a new home. But now we need to live into what it means to be actively involved in our denomination. The EPC has a passion for church-planting.

What would it mean if Chapel Hill committed to a ten-year church-planting strategy? The EPC is passionate for evangelism to the Muslim world. How will Chapel Hill be a part of reaching Muslims for Christ? Our Presbytery of the Pacific is the fastest growing presbytery in our denomination. Formed a little over a year ago, we will probably split in 2015. How will we partner with sister congregations in the Pacific Northwest to reach more people for Christ? The next ten years will be a chance for us—for the first time—to really live into what it means to be partnered with a larger community of believers.

Debt. Let me see the hands of those who were here in 1987? Look around. These were the folks who made the courageous decision to build the facilities that would make it possible for you to be sitting here this morning; for your children to be in Sunday School; for Upward Basketball to minister to hundreds of un-churched families; for youth ministries unsurpassed in this community. We needed to expand our church home. And like many families, we took on a mortgage to do it. It now stands at \$7.7 million. It wasn't supposed to be that large, actually, but things happened. Some folks did not fulfill their pledges. The city's unexpected requirements added more than \$1 million in construction costs. In one sense, it doesn't matter. It is what it is, and we have managed our debt wisely over the years. But our mortgage costs us about \$51,000 every month—\$611,000 per year. Just imagine what we could do if that debt were paid off!

Jubilee was about the forgiveness of debt. I would love if B of A chose to forgive our mortgage debt, but I kind of doubt that will happen. But wouldn't it be magnificent if, on November 17, we could announce that pledges had been received to reduce or eliminate this debt before it comes due in November, 2015? Three years ago, we did not want to reduce the debt on our property, because we didn't own our property... the PC USA did. Now we do own it, and no one can ever take our land or buildings from us.

So now is the time for us to eliminate this burden of debt. Some will say that debt isn't very "sexy" to raise money for, but if ever there were a time when people understand the risk of passing to their children a mountain of debt, this is the time... and we Americans are that people. How many of you have never been through a capital campaign here? Most of you are using facilities you never paid a dime for. We need a Jubilee! We need to be set free! It will take every single person doing their part—many for the first time—starting with the handful of leaders who love our mission and can write a check that most of us could never imagine. This is the year, and I am praying that God will raise up generous people who believe in our future and view Chapel Hill as a great place to invest their kingdom resources.

Discipleship. Jubilee is about handing off ministry to the next generation. The third major initiative for the coming ten years must be the raising up, training and deploying of a new generation of leaders. This really struck me last year when eight senior staff leaders left for calls elsewhere. This provided an opportunity for

us to craft a new team of pastoral leaders for a new generation. I told the Session, “We have got to hire young and lay the foundation for a succession of leadership. If we do not, this church will just get old with me.” Well, we now have a pastoral training cohort of four in which the average age is 31.25 years—not including me! And I can tell you, it has brought a new level of energy. Do you feel it? There is a buzz in the air!

And this commitment to discipling young leaders goes beyond us. I have been invited by Whitworth to meet with the board and discuss the possibility of Chapel Hill becoming a “training church” to prepare their graduates for ministry. I have also been invited to address the EPC’s national committee responsible for pastoral education. They are interested in our mentoring model and want to talk about revising their requirements so that more of the work can be done in a church setting, exactly as we are doing. Apparently, God has called us to be a training and sending church!

But discipleship is not just about future pastors. I was in Atlanta last month meeting with folks at Ravi Zacharias Ministries. Our Oxford Northwest Conference is getting attention across the country. Other churches want to know how to do what we are doing: put world-class teachers in front of our congregations to create world-class disciples. Michael Ramsden, John Lennox, Os Guinness... my pastor friends ask, enviously, “How did you get such people?” Our answer? “We asked!”

And in the coming years, under the leadership of our great team—through LifeGroups, Men’s and Women’s Life, Lay Counseling, Christianity Explored, Financial Peace University and other programs—we are going to turn up the heat on training you, the members of this congregation, to be disciple-makers. That must be the focus of the coming decade.

Jubilee! This year is a one-time opportunity for us to look back over the last half-century and celebrate what God has done. Aren’t you grateful to inherit what a handful of faithful and courageous people set out to do 50 years ago? This is a time to celebrate!

But more importantly, Jubilee is also an opportunity to look ahead to our next 50 years.

What kind of church does God want us to be? You will notice that I am speaking more of turning our hearts and attention outward. Truthfully, the first 50 years have been largely about us; getting established, growing, building. We were like a teenage church. Consuming more than we produced, growing like crazy. But teenagers grow up. They become less about what they consume and more about what they contribute. How they give and lead and serve. God has blessed us greatly. It is time for us to be an even greater blessing to His world. I think we are

prepared for that moment. Don't you? I want to grasp this moment, don't you?
We need a congregation that is all in!

The first Sunday of the New Year is our traditional renewal of baptismal vows. We come forward to be blessed with baptismal waters as a reminder of God's faithfulness and our renewed commitment to serve Him. In the spirit of Jubilee, when we make the sign of the cross on your head, we will say, "Remember your baptism and be thankful." If you are grateful, Jubilee people, I invite you to reply, "I am thankful, and I'm all in!"

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Pastor Mark talked about three ways in which God encourages us to rest. Can you recall them?
 2. Leviticus 25 describes a remarkable 50 year celebration. What is it called? How was it celebrated?
 3. Pastor Mark mentioned three key initiatives for our next decade of ministry. (They all start with 'D.')