

Sunday June 29th, 2025
Last Sunday at First Simcoe

PRAYER: O God, we have rejoiced in the stories of your faithfulness. We pray that you will increase the hearing of our ears, the perception of our eyes, the compassion of our hearts, and the willingness of our hands, that stories of our faithfulness might reach your ears, and you, too, might rejoice. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where they will never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they will be safe from thieves. Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will be.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God of the gracious word and mighty deeds, we thank you for granting us your loving presence every moment of our lives. Your presence has been the source of life and faith from the day of our birth, and for countless generations who have gone before us, but how fickle we humans are. How quickly we are to set aside the source of life for empty promises and fleeting hope. Long ago when the Israelites threatened to trade allegiance to you for alien gods, you sent inspired prophets to warn of the dangers of idolatry. When the powerful began to exploit the weak, you raised up lawgivers to proclaim the demands of justice. How the people chafed at your discipline and judgment even though it was for their own good. Thank you, loving God, that even when we protest about your ever-watchful eye focused on us, you will never leave us alone.

Despite our knowledge of your watchfulness, O God, we like our ancestors confuse your presence with alien deities. We pretend to attribute ungracious words to your mouth. We ascribe deeds to your hand that are less than noble. We try to turn our enemies into your enemies, seeking to put our sword into your hand. We pillage the land for our own use all the while declaring ownership transferred from you. We justify preferential treatment of us, claiming your hatred of others different from ourselves. Shamelessly, we identify our passions with yours, shrinking your compassion to the size of ours.

O God, forgive our indulgence in the works of the flesh that Christ was crucified for, and forgive our crucifixion of the works of the spirit that Christ sought to initiate. Let us never forget that the freedom for which Christ set us free is not the freedom to become masters but the freedom through love to become servants.

Help us, O God, to become faithful servants-servants who will inspire others to heed your summons without hesitation; servants who will make a difference in the world as in the church. Let us, as we first believed, put our hand to the plow and, without looking back, use our freedom to multiply the fruits of your spirit.

BENEDICTION: O people set your face steadfastly toward the world. Greet the call of Christ not with an excuse but with enthusiasm that your faithfulness might testify to the faithfulness of God.

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“Final Words”

This past week I have really enjoyed reading through the many cards I received at the retirement dinner last Sunday. So, I thought I'd begin with sharing with you some wonderful quotes, suggestions and ideas many sent to me as I begin this new chapter in my life.

1. When you retire, you switch bosses—from the one who hired you to the one who married you.
2. Congratulations on quitting your job without being escorted out of the building.
3. Congratulations on extending your weekends by five days!
4. What do travel plans in retirement look like? A route from the bed to the couch to the fridge and repeat.
5. Congrats. You can binge-watch all those great TV shows! What will you do in the second week?

This is just a small sample of the incredible sentiments offered to me as I undertake this thing called retirement. My biggest challenge seems to be how to understand what the “pig and the poke” have to do with retirement given John Wallace’s sentiments given at the dinner. I admit freely that I really struggled with what to talk about today. Several ideas flowed through my head and ample prayer. I eventually decided to follow John Bunyan’s example and talk about the lessons, the stops according to Bunyan that I encountered on my 38-year journey.

I couldn’t possibly share all the lessons I learned over the years, but I chose a few that I thought might help this church fellowship in its next phase of service and ministry. Some of the lessons God taught me came after an “aha” moment of God given clarity. Other times the lessons were learned through some challenging and life altering events. In every instance, my life’s trajectory, theological opinion and focus was shifted.

The first thing I can share with you is that God can and does use all of us for his kingdom’s work. God takes us as we are, warts and all, and molds us into his servants. This was certainly my life’s story who as a young man, was adrift, not knowing what his life’s purpose should be. Ministry as a possibility was not on my radar until I experienced at Camp Oneida a Christian community where I could thrive among my peers.

As a kid growing up, you could have asked many folks in my home church where they thought I was headed vocationally, and I doubt many, if any, would have said ministry. However, as a church family we need to be alert to the fact that we do not know how God is going to direct the lives of our young people and children. The best thing we can do is be encouragers, prayer warriors, and mentors to the flickering flames these precious ones carry. Do not underestimate the potential of anyone, regardless of background, educational prowess, or skills.

The second lesson has to do with our Old Testament lesson from 2 Kings. Elijah had just had his contest with the prophets of Baal, and he ends up fleeing into the wilderness because Jezebel orders him killed. Elijah ends up at one point sitting under a Broomtree where God feeds and him and allows him rest before leading him to the mountain and having his despairing spirit refocused.

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Sometimes, as I have experienced myself, the success we think we are achieving in ministry can draw criticism, and even threats, from our own Jezebels. Criticism brings doubts, crushes our confidence and can lead us to despair. Pastors can certainly experience this, but so can anyone of us. Our spirits can get so dark sometimes that we withdraw from life and community and even make rash decisions to flee into our own wilderness.

It is okay, even very healthy, to admit you've had enough, and to seek out God's version of a broom tree for you. Its one of the reasons, Laura and I called our Bed and Breakfast/retreat center the Broomtree Guest house. God longs to care for us, if we surrender to him. If we let God give us whatever sustenance we need to recover, reenergize, and maybe even refocus our lives. It's also quite alright to take a break to allow God to work in us.

The next lesson I learned along the way and fortunately I think I learned it early on is that what ultimately matters to God is not how much we know about our bibles or how generous we are to the church, or how engaged I am in church work but rather how much I am emulating Jesus. Can we honestly say we are Christ's followers and not just we are doing Christian things. Are our hearts, truly transformed?

Matthew 7:21-23 haunts me as a warning.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers'".

My next lesson is one I have communicated many times over the years because it is at the core of our Christian faith. "All theology is transformative". In other words, if you really believe something it will make a difference in your life. If you really believe something it will alter your thinking, your behavior, your focus; everything.

As an example, if I really believe someone is trying to kill me, really believe it, then I will take measures to protect myself. Things like call the police, lock and secure my home etc. If I really believe Jesus is my Lord and Saviour that belief should change my life. That belief should change how I act, how I think and how I treat other people. As Jesus said, "They shall know you are Christians by your love".

The next lesson I impart is one that some colleagues of mine may take exception to, but I still think it is best approach to church life. I firmly believe that the primary goal of every congregation should be on community building. Everything a church does, from programs to outreach is always about community building. This is not just about getting people into the pews but more about making sure the people here know they are family.

Worship is important because we are called to worship God, and programs can help us learn about God, but if we are not getting to know our brothers and sisters on more than just an acquaintance level, we are not really making a difference in people's lives. All of us want and need community. We all need to hear and be heard.

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We all need to understand others and be understood. That goes for men and women, adults, teens and children, anyone and everyone. How are we to respond to a brother or sister in need if we do not talk to them and get to know them so that they feel confident in our care to open their hearts about their needs. The greatest sin of omission in the church maybe that we do not know the person sitting in the pew beside us.

Another thing I have picked up is that we should never underestimate the power of what on the surface are simple things. And associated with this one is the fact that in God's kingdom there are no accidents. Things happen for a reason. My mother-in-law was big on the "KISS" principle. "Keep it simple stupid". Churches are notorious for buying into the idea that the next big thing is what they need, when something simple can have a greater impact.

I can think of two immediate examples from our life here at First Baptist. I remember when we didn't have a fellowship time after church. We worshipped and went home, with nary a chance to connect with each other. Now, how much do we miss refreshments if they are not there? It's not about the cookies and coffee, although we thank Mariann and Grant for providing them each week. It's about what happens while we drink coffee and eat cookies.

We talk. We share our lives. We get to know each other. A simple thing, but huge impact. The second example happened by what we might first think was chance. On one of the very first Sundays I was here, I had to go talk to someone in the congregation about something. I cannot remember who it was or what it was about because that's not important. While out in the sanctuary I took the time to meet and greet folks who were already seated for worship.

After the service one of our folks said how much they liked that I went about greeting people before we worshipped. Thus, I kept doing it every week. It wasn't by chance. God put elements and people in place to make it happen. Such a simple thing really, but it helped so much to keep me in tune with concerns of people and building a report.

Another thing I've learned is that not every idea has to come from me. Some of the most amazing God directed ideas I have ever seen, came from others in the congregation. I want to also say that it is totally okay to beg, borrow or steal a good idea from another church or organization if you feel it can help us as a community. At First Baptist just think about the great ideas that have really blossomed into something marvelous with nary a thought from me.

A church community is at its very best when creativity flows from all its people. Ultimately, it matters not who heard God's call to an idea first but that we as a community got behind it. I said last Sunday night at the retirement party that sometimes the best thing a pastor can do is stay out of the way and be a cheerleader for the engagement of others in the work of the kingdom. I had no part in seeing First serving, home for the night, riverside 83 or the reading room and many other efforts come to fruition. But I celebrate them and pray for their impact on lives.

You know, a church is very much like a family. Each member of the family is different and has his or her own special identity and his or her own personality. This morning, we have a very special family with us to show us how each member of the family may be different and how members of our church family may be different too.

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This next lesson I share with great trepidation. But it's what I have seen and experienced all through my life. The church family is made up of people with difference histories, different needs and most importantly different expectations. That last one is the most dangerous. All of us want something from our church community and the trouble brews when our expectations are not met. I was trying to figure out how to talk about this in a softer way and I found a children's sermon that I think will do the trick.

If it helps you can picture a line of potatoes with faces drawn on them. Then imagine I said, the family that I have with us this morning is the Tater family. The Tater family is made up of a father named Dick Tater, a mother whose name is Sweet Tater, a teenaged son named Speck Tater, a daughter named Emma Tater and two children in the nursery. They would be the Tater tots!

The father, Dick Tater always must be the boss. He always tells everyone what to do. He wants to be chairman of the deacons, or at least the personnel committee. If he can't be the boss, he won't even come to church at all. The mother, Sweet Tater, always has something nice to say about everyone. She never insists on having her own way and she would never get mad or get her feelings hurt if she didn't get her way. She really shows what the Bible calls the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The teenaged son, Speck Tater just doesn't want to get involved. He doesn't want any jobs; he just wants to sit back and watch everyone else do the work. Of course, if they don't do it to suit him, he will surely be the first to criticize and find fault. The daughter, Emma Tater, is more worried about what she wears to church than she is about what happens at church. It is very important to her that she is dressed in the latest style so that she won't be embarrassed. She wants everyone to notice that she is very "cool."

Well, that brings us to the Tater tots in the nursery. I don't know how they will turn out, but they will probably look at the other members of the family and decide that they want to be like one of them. They might become a Dick Tater, a Sweet Tater, a Speck Tater, or an Emma Tater. Let's hope that they make the right choice.

You didn't know the church has "taters" in it did you? We need to be very careful with our expectations, especially when we think they aren't being met. They can bring a great deal of pain to ourselves and everyone else around us.

Then there is the last lesson I want to share with you, and it may be the most important of all the lessons I've learned over the years. One of the ugliest stains on the church and its message over its history is the idea preached and practiced that God's people are an exclusive club. Time and time again, in the name of being "godly or righteous" churches and whole denominations have tried to set a bar to exclude whole groups of people from God's grace.

Their tactics are plentiful and easily recognizable. Often spoken as "must have or must believe" or worse, you cannot be this or that. So much pain, so much exclusion from hope. Just think about some of the examples. "Only the King James Bible" is the word of God. You must be premillennial. You must know the very second you became a believer.

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You cannot be gay, a person of a certain ethnic group, a single mom, a person struggling with addiction and a whole host of exclusions. The church has failed the world in so many ways, by thinking we are in, and the world is out. It's the greatest lie ever told that anyone is excluded from the love of Christ. If a church or pastor ever tells you that you are excluded from God, I urge to go somewhere else.

Our New Testament lesson from Romans lays it out for us clearly. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No (hear that?) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We are Jesus's people. He bought and paid for us. And no body can ever take us away from him. Amen!