

“Sharing in the Gospel”

Philippians 1:3-11

June 13, 2010

Rev. Jeff Allen

This past Wednesday was a day that I had been looking forward to and preparing for for almost ten years. It was a day that I had spent thousands of hours in reading and conversation to be ready for. It was a day that I had written tens of thousands of words to prepare for. It was a day that I had invested tens of thousands of dollars to be ready for. It was a day that I had answered question after question about my faith, about my theology, about my convictions, and about my practice of ministry and about my lifestyle to be ready for. It was a day that I never would have imagined as a child or even up to ten years ago that would have ever even happened. It was the day of my ordination as an Elder in The United Methodist Church.

It was the summer of the year 2000 when I first sensed my call to vocational ministry. My journey toward ordination first began with a conversation I had with the youth pastor of my home church after returning from a youth mission trip where I was one of the adult leaders. “I think God might be calling me to the ministry,” I said. “What do I do next?”

Now, almost ten years later, I faced the final step on the journey toward ordination. All of the time I had spent reading, writing, talking, paying tuition and answering questions – all that I had invested over the past ten years – led me to that ordination moment on Wednesday, June 9th, 2010, in Hoover Auditorium in Lakeside, Ohio.

Around one hundred of my friends and family from all stages of my life came to share this moment with me. There were people from all my different church families from Riverside, Scioto Ridge, Maple Grove, and even some folks from High Street where I will begin serving soon. With the exception of just one, every living pastor I have had in my life was there. There were friends from my childhood, college years and adulthood there. Even some friends I had made while at a United Methodist church camp as a teenager were there. My preschool teacher and my junior high youth group leader were there. And I could feel the presence of those who could not be there physically but were there with me in spirit.

As I processed down the aisle at the beginning of the service, hand in hand with Sandi, I followed directly behind the banner you see here in worship this morning, carried by Sherri Scholl. This banner was made by the sewing group here at Maple Grove, with the help of Sandi, my mom, and a family friend who is a member of my home church. I helped them with the design of the front of the banner, but they surprised me with the back of the banner. On the back, they put pictures of family, friends, colleagues, and people I’ve worked with from throughout my life who have been a part of my spiritual journey. The back of this banner truly represents my very own cloud of witnesses.

And so, as I processed down the aisle on my way toward ordination, this is what I saw. As I looked at these pictures and as I saw the faces of those who were there in the

congregation with me that day, I could not help but to reflect on the fact that, in a very real way, I was, right then, surrounded by my very own great cloud of witnesses, and as I thought about that, the tears began to flow. They didn't stop at the end of the processional. It seemed that with every verse of the opening hymn, my mind turned to one of the groups of people that were there with me either in body or in spirit and another wave of emotion would flow over me. It was so emotional because I am so very appreciative of all the people who have touched my life and who have made me who I am today.

Today is one of those days when I get to say thank you to at least a part of my cloud of witnesses. And so I say a heartfelt thank you to all of you here at Maple Grove for your part in my journey of faith. I am the man and the pastor that I am, in part, because of your faithful witness in my life.

That's why I selected the Philippians text for this morning's worship. I selected it because it speaks deeply about how I feel as I reflect on my time at Maple Grove and as I think about the people I have been privileged to serve here at Maple Grove. Paul wrote, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now."

I do thank God every time I remember Maple Grove, especially because of your sharing in the gospel from my first days in appointed ministry until now.

The summer of 2007, three years ago, was a whirlwind of change in my life and in the life of my family. Our twin boys were born May 5, I graduated from seminary May 19, I was commissioned for ministry as a probationary Elder by the Bishop at Annual Conference on June 12, and I began my appointment as Associate Pastor here at Maple Grove on July 1.

I had just graduated from seminary and I thought I knew it all. When I took the StrengthsFinder assessment this past year, self-assurance didn't make it into my top 5 strengths but it has to be in my top ten. I remember at one point in my first year here, one of you said to me, "You're going to be great!" I remember thinking, "going to be?" What about now? I wasn't great already? Looking back now, I realize how wrong my thinking was.

During my time here at Maple Grove, I have grown in so many ways. I have learned so much with and through you. Because of your sharing in the gospel from my first days as an appointed pastor, I am now more fully prepared for a lifetime of ministry. I have grown in so many ways over the past three years. There are too many ways to name specifically, but I'd like to share with you a couple of significant areas.

On the first Sunday I came to Maple Grove, the service included a litany of welcome for me as your new pastor. As a part of the litany, different people handed me different items that served as symbols of my role as your pastor. Among those items were symbols of the sacraments. When I came to Maple Grove, I had never performed either

of the sacraments. The first sacrament I ever performed was the baptism of my own sons. What a gift that was! I was so nervous, wondering if I would get it right. I remember practicing at home the night before, figuring out how I would hold my boys. It took me a while to get over being nervous every time I would lead communion as well. It is such a privilege to be given the authority to preside at these sacraments, and I thank you for your part in helping me become more comfortable in that role as a pastor.

When I started seminary, I looked forward to my preaching classes the most. I thought that I had some of the basic gifts and abilities for preaching, but I didn't really know if preaching was going to be an area where I would excel. I had been given the opportunity to preach just a couple of times during the four years I served my last church as a youth pastor. And so as I began here at Maple Grove, I still felt very untested and unsure of myself. The first few times I entered the pulpit here, I was a nervous wreck. One Sunday, when NewSong was singing, Greg asked me to come to the chapel and offer a prayer with NewSong before the service. I don't think he knew what a gift that was to me, because it really helped to settle my nerves as I approached the service. Over the past three years, here at Maple Grove, you have given me the opportunity to develop my preaching ability and my confidence in preaching. I thank you for bearing with me on that journey.

Maple Grove has also given me a great example of what means for every member of the church to live into their unique calling to serve in ministry. It has been truly amazing to watch all of you as you discovered your unique gifts, your individual strengths, and God's call upon your life as you have lived into your own call to serve in ministry to the church and to the world. It is wonderful to watch the body of Christ in action, and you have given me that gift.

Another thing I have learned from my time here at Maple Grove is how a church can witness to its community through regular activities that are intentionally designed to include people who are not members of the church. So often, churches can become irrelevant social clubs that serve only the needs of their membership. This is not the case with Maple Grove. The concert for Children, Blessing of the Animals, Thanksgiving meal, Chili bowl, and all those other community events we've had over the past several years have really shown that Maple Grove is committed to the Clintonville community. I pray that all the churches I serve might have that same commitment.

One final thing that I want to mention is the opportunity that I've been given here at Maple Grove to be in relationship with those on the margins of life. Getting to know Oswald and Reva and Sandy and Rosa and many other folks who have stopped by the church in need of help, getting to know their struggles and getting to share in some small way in those struggles has truly been a gift. It can be so easy to forget about the poor, the homeless, those on the margins of life. My time here at Maple Grove has forced me out of my comfort zone and into relationship with many people I could ignore in other circumstances. Along the way, I have witnessed your love poured out for so many of God's children, and I have learned a tremendous amount about loving others through your example.

There are so many other things that I could talk about. The friendships we've made, the studies we've done together, the youth ministry and mission trips we've taken, I could go on talking for the rest of the day, but I won't. I hope to have the opportunity to share individual stories and words of thankfulness over lunch later today.

I'd like to close by turning back to Paul's words to the Philippians. Paul ends the section of scripture we read this morning with a prayer for the Philippians. I'd like you to hear his prayer as my prayer for you. Paul writes, "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

I think Eugene Peterson puts it even better in his paraphrase of scripture called "The Message," and so I'd like to share his version of the scripture with you. Again, hear it as my prayer for you as our journey of faith begins to travel down separate paths. Peterson puts it this way: "So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well...Live a lover's live, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God."

This is my prayer for you, and this is the invitation to Christian discipleship from this morning's text – that you might love much and love well, that your life of love would not only bear fruit that makes Jesus proud, but that it would also make Jesus attractive to all that you meet.

I thank God for giving me the opportunity to serve alongside you for the past three years. I thank you for the love and support you have showered upon me and upon my family over the past three years. You will forever hold a dear place in our hearts.