

Some Thoughts

II Timothy 1:1-14

October 3, 2010

“We are an open community of Christians, who love God and serve our neighbors.” Well, where do I begin? That’s the question I asked myself the most the early part of this past week. I’ve known for awhile what I wanted to talk about with you this morning, it was the how to get started and how to keep this final opportunity from going on too long that concerned me.

So, I finally decided to start as I so often have, albeit poorly at times, with a little humor. There’s a section in some of the issues of *The Joyful Noiseletter* titled “Signs and Wonders.” I’d like to share a couple with you:

A sign outside the Presbyterian Church in Struthers, Ohio announced: “Honk if you love Jesus – Text while driving if you’d like to meet Him!”¹

A Huxley, Iowa veterinary clinic had one in front of their establishment that read: “1000’s of years ago cats were worshipped as gods. Cats will never forget.”²

Freedom Baptist Church in St. Augustine, Florida included this phrase on their sign one week: “Now Open between Easter and Christmas.”³

An elderly woman went to a clinic to see her doctor. The old doctor was training a young doctor and referred the woman to the young doctor to see how he worked.

Within ten minutes the woman came out of the young doctor’s office screaming.

“What did you do? What did you say to her?” the old doctor asked.

“I told her she was pregnant,” the young doctor replied.

“You’re crazy!” the old doctor said. “She’s 68 years old, has five children, and 15 grandchildren.”

The young doctor replied with a satisfied grin, “Cured her hiccups.”⁴

One more? A pastor was playing golf with a parishioner. On the first hole, the pastor sliced the ball into the rough, and under his breath muttered “Hoover!”

On the second hole, the pastor’s ball went straight into a pond. “Hoover!” he again said, a bit louder this time.

On the third hole, the pastor’s drive landed on the green only a few inches from the hole. “Praise God!” he exclaimed. But his short putt missed the hole, and he exclaimed loudly again, “Hoover!”

Finally, his curious opponent asked the pastor why he said, “Hoover.”

The pastor replied, “It’s the biggest dam I know.”⁵

While it wasn't until Friday, August 13, that we knew for sure that ALS was probably what we were looking at and the following Monday that we received the fairly official diagnosis and we knew we needed to consider either my retiring or going on incapacity leave, I have to admit to you that for several months I'd been pondering a couple of unfulfilled hopes and dreams I was hoping I would still have the opportunity to address here at Maple Grove. While there were several, two seemed to occupy the most time in my heart and mind.

Sunday morning worship at Maple Grove is a special time. We are privileged to have a magnificent music ministry – our chancel choir, our bell choir, New Leaf and New Song, the visiting brass. And then you add a couple of other groups that take part in worship once in awhile, the Maple Grove Players and Handisciples, and well, they all contribute to making worship at Maple Grove this rich, fulfilling experience – they blend their gifts to help us all encounter God and have our faith deepened. I can't tell you how often I hear from visitors how impressed they are with what these ministry groups add to our worship experience.

I don't know how many of you have taken a look at the area in front of the chancel area this morning – but, it's a little congested. That's often the case and I would share with you that it would be even more noticeable except Greg and Len and Skip and Patrick and the usher team leaders often work miracles to make this all appear to be as seamless as it does. And then, attempt to add a little technology to the service, well, be careful where you tread.

Almost three years ago we approved the formation of a building committee to research what a possible refurbishing of the sanctuary might look like, keeping especially in mind our desire to retain the traditional look. We did some good work – the plan exists on paper – but, we never presented it to the congregation because when we finished our work it was the fall of 2008. You all do remember what the economic picture was in the fall of 2008, don't you? Well, it was decided that it wasn't the right time to share the vision the team and architects had worked so hard to create.

I really wanted to see this project through to completion, but I can't. I do want to encourage you to finish it though. I have to say to you that I believe with all my heart that it will enhance even more our worship experience – improve it - and help our witness to this community. It will help us do a better job of calling people into a relationship with Jesus Christ – help us witness of our being an open community who loves God.

Now, before I offer the second hope I had hoped I could continue to nurture along in the next few years, let me share with you something about the church as I have experienced it and believe it to be – at least the churches where the Croys have been blessed to serve – Lima Grace – for just nine months at the end of our senior year at ONU - , Miamisburg Parkview for the final two years of seminary, Urbana for four years, Lima Trinity for seven years the first time, Linden Heights for four years, Worthington for four years, Lima Trinity again for another ten years, and finally here at Maple Grove for these last eight years. I loved every place I served. The church has been for me the biblical image of the Body of Christ in each of those settings. I leave the ministry of serving the local church as a paid minister without regret – without anger – without disappointment in you, the people of God. You all, in every one of those places, have been Christ to me and in your communities. I have been privileged to serve among you.

The church is the physical body of Christ – the world only knows Christ when the church is the church – when we get together and worship with music and words and symbols, when we offer up food and clothing and stand up for the poor and disadvantaged in our community and the world, when we cry with those who hurt and rejoice with those who know the joy of new life. In order for us to be all we can be – in order for the church to

be all it can be – it's important, dare I say necessary, that we spend time together. We need to share with one another our hopes and dreams and disappointments – our pasts, our presents, the realities of daily living.

The second hope and dream I wanted to see further along its journey here is the involvement of the younger and newer members of this church. This is sort of a tricky one to talk about. Most of you are aware that we have been blessed with the addition of numerous persons between the ages of 20 and 40 these last few years. Our recent history runs contrary to what has been the case in most mainline traditional worshipping congregations. We're not sure why: some have shared that it's the result of the hospitality they experienced around the wedding experience; others have talked about appreciating how much we seem committed to doing things in the community – beyond the walls of the church building –; still others have mentioned liking our Every Member in Ministry model; and still others the authenticity of this community of faith. To be sure, there's a phenomenon happening around here that many churches wish was their reality.

But younger adult ministry doesn't end by just getting you thru the doors or on our rolls. Becoming the community of faith involves spending time together – lots of time together – in worship, in ministry, sharing with one another hopes, dreams, disappointments, joys and sorrows. Time with one another is the only way community happens – the only way the body of Christ becomes a reality. I wish I could convey to you how hopeful I am for the ministry of Jenifer. She's only been here three months but I am really impressed with how hard she works – how much she understands what her role here is. I am exceptionally pleased with her passion for ministry with both the younger adults of our church and our youth. But, it's going to take more than her enthusiasm and hard work. It's going to take all of you deciding that you want to know others in the life of the church and making the effort to make it happen.

I commented on Jenifer because of the relevance her work here has on one of my still to be realized hopes and dreams for Maple Grove. But, I hope you all know what a really special and outstanding the rest of the staff here at Maple Grove is. There are not enough words in the dictionary to convey my love of, confidence in, appreciation of every single one of them. SueAnn, Mark, Cathy, Brenda, Len, Greg, Amy, Skip, Patrick and Rhonda have made my life around here heavenly. It's been a joy to work with them, laugh with them, and cry with them.

Now, I'm going to go a totally different direction the rest of my sharing. I want to say a few things regarding death and dying – about heaven and hell. First, this is not a funeral. I am not dead – only dying – and all of you are as well. I hope this won't come as an extreme shock to anyone, but I'm guessing some of you sitting here this morning will die before me.

To be sure, I am not happy about my diagnosis. I don't want to die. I'm not looking forward to death. I don't want to disappoint anyone here this morning, but I am not one of those persons who can't wait to die to go and be with God – to see my dad or my brother or my grandparents or to walk some gold covered streets. I know there may be a time closer to the end when I may want to die to end my pain or the discomfort of the process of dying, just as there have been those times when I've prayed for the release from this life for those who've been at that point on their journey. But, that's not where I am right now. I plan on continuing to get out of life what I can and continue to give of myself if possible.

Now, please understand, my not wanting to die has nothing to do with a concern about the afterlife – what happens to me after I die – nothing to do with what I believe about heaven and hell. It has everything to do with loving this life – having absolutely wonderful memories of times with my lovely wife of 40 years, Dorothy, and

wanting to enjoy more days with her – being so proud of my two children, Jeremy and Megan, not just because they are both doing what they enjoy in life – being a coach and being a minister – but because of the really wonderful people they are – because of wanting to spend more time with Jeremy’s wife, Meladie, and our two living grandchildren, Evan and Corinne, and the unnamed one yet to be born – because of not wanting my mom to have to experience the pain of the loss of another adult child – because of the love of so many other members of my family and the churches we have served and the communities in which we’ve lived. I’ve been overwhelmed by the emails, the cards, the Facebook messages, the phone calls from childhood friends, high school teammates, college friends, high school teachers and college professors, and church people from every church we’ve served.

You see, I’m not worried about the afterlife because as far as I am concerned I’m already experiencing heaven. Heaven and hell are here and now realities to me, not places we go to when we die. Let me be as blunt as I can be about this, I don’t believe in a future hell. I don’t believe people go to a hell after they die. Hell is a here and now reality.

I’ve held this view for a long time, but recently I came across a book by Keith Wright entitled The Hell Jesus Never Intended that helped me bring a little more focus to my ideas. In the forward of the book David Jensen notes: “At the center of (Wright’s) work is a rejection of Hell as eternal punishment that awaits the unrighteous and a reclamation of Hell as a reality that we create for ourselves and others in the present. The Good News is not that we are saved *from* fires that loom in the future, but that God frees us *for* abundant life with each other, with creation, and with God’s very self for all time. Jesus Christ doesn’t save us *from* Hell, but saves us *for* God and each other.”⁶

Hell exists all around us – I don’t need to go into detail – you know the reality I am talking about. But, heaven exists all around us as well. And life involves this journey of wrestling with the realities of hell around us at the same time we’re trying to create heaven for folks and ourselves wherever possible while dealing with all life throws our way. Friends, I am painfully aware of the reality of hell in this world of ours – around us all the time – but, I am also aware that I am living in heaven at the same time – that is, that I already am on the journey of eternal life – that God is with me.

Let me tell you why I chose to deal with this subject this morning. I want you all to know that I do not believe that God chose for me to have ALS – some hells we don’t choose and they aren’t the result of us doing anything wrong – they just happen. ALS being a reality in my body is not the result of God punishing me for anything in my life – it’s not a wake-up call telling me I should slow down or that’s there’s something wrong with my spiritual life. Bad things happen to people – many people – for no good reason. I believe God is crying with me and with my family and with you and that is what comforts me – now. God is my comforter – the one who will walk with me through this.

And do you know how I will and am already experiencing God’s comfort and why I am so confident in this belief that God is the comforter? It’s because of you – because of the church – the resurrected Body of Christ - because of your witness throughout my life – the way I’ve observed you caring for others in pain – because of the way you’ve comforted those in pain – those who’ve wept – those in need – and the way you’ve included me in your prayers, emailed messages to me, sent cards to me, hugged me, cried with me already.

This holy meal is a reminder of who we are to one another – that we are the body of Christ broken because of the ministry we’ve been called to be about for and with one another. We break the bread and drink the cup this

morning with people all around the world to remind ourselves that we are one in the spirit and that it is in our brokenness that God comes to us.

1. The Joyful Noiseletter, August-September, 2010, p. 5.
2. Ibid.
3. The Joyful Noiseletter, October, 2009, p. 4.
4. Ibid., p. 2.
5. The Joyful Noiseletter, November, 2010, p. 2.
6. Keith Wright, The Hell Jesus Never Intended (Kelowna, BC, Canada, Northstone Publishing, 2004), p. 10.