



“TO ALL THE SAINTS AT VALLEY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREEN VALLEY, ARIZONA”

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:17

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There is a story which I’m told actually happened, of a commencement speaker who went on and on and on. Finally, a person sitting on the stage behind the podium took off his shoe and threw it at the speaker—missed—and hit a woman in the first row, who was heard to say, “Hit me again, I can still hear him!”

Well, I confess from the start that this will be one of my longer sermons. However, I trust that no one will get to the point of exasperation as did that shoe-thrower!

Of the twenty-seven ‘books’ of the New Testament, twenty-one were originally written as letters. At the time of their composition, the authors of these letters had no idea that what they were writing would find a place in the Holy Bible, the most-read book of all time. Through their letters, Paul and the other leaders of the early church were seeking to guide, encourage, and in some cases, admonish and correct the congregations in Rome, Corinth, and elsewhere. They were written, not with an eye to history, but in response to what was going on in a particular place, at a particular time.

When they were received, the letters were typically read aloud in their entirety when the people assembled for worship. Usually, these letters began by identifying the author and the intended recipients. For example, the letter we know as First Corinthians begins:

“Paul called by the will of God to be an Apostle of Christ Jesus...to the church of God which is at Corinth...called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” Frequently, the recipients of these letters were addressed as “saints”. Back then, “saints” were not as we tend to think of them today—candidates for inclusion in a stained-glass window. “Saints” was simply the designation given to the followers of Jesus. It was like our name, “Christians”. It is in this sense that I am using the word today.

As you may have surmised from the title printed in the bulletin, I have decided to put this morning's sermon in the form of a letter. I am hoping, thereby, to be able to speak to you directly and personally, about the situation in which we now find ourselves.

So, here goes --- John, your Associate Pastor and friend in Jesus Christ, TO ALL THE SAINTS IN VALLEY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN GREEN VALLEY, ARIZONA:

Nearly five months ago most of you learned of my decision to retire. This decision of mine has caused many of you to be sad. I know, because you have told me so. I am sorry for that. Yet we would not want it to be otherwise. If my announcement had occasioned great rejoicing, it would mean that my pastorate among you had been less than positive, or that I had far overstayed my welcome. I hope and trust that neither has been the case!

“Why are you retiring now?” has been a persistent question. One answer, not well accepted I might add, is that the calendar had some bearing on the decision, as I turned 66 (full retirement age for Social Security) this past December. The more acceptable (and also true) answer was that our nine year old granddaughter, Natalia (yes, the one who first broke the news to me that my hair was no longer blond, but grey; and also the one who first introduced the idea to me that I am going bald----this is the sister of five year old Daniel, the one who made my day a year or so ago when he asked me, quite sincerely I might add, if I was going to have a baby!)----well, Natalia is the priceless treasure who said to me in no uncertain terms: “*Grampy, you HAVE to retire, so you can be with us at Christmas and lots of other times.*” Obviously, when Natalia speaks, Grampy listens! That is true of my other grandchildren—Daniel, Palmer, and Anna, too! (Grandparents-know what I mean?)

Bottom line, I love being a pastor, and I always have. What a privilege! And, it's time for more time with Ruth, our daughters Mary Beth and Christine, and their families, and our friends. It is time for many adventures, yet unknown, on this incredible journey through life with Jesus.

And, because of my (our) decision to retire, we are going through a grieving process right now. You are losing a pastor, and I am bidding farewell (as a pastor) to a people who are near and dear to me, and to the role of being a pastor that has been my life for nearly 40

years. Before we can move on, we need to acknowledge our loss and face up to our feelings.

In conversations with me and with each other, and in notes and letters that you have written, some of you have already been working on that (and helping me do the same!). You have expressed appreciation for my ministry. You have wished us well and you have confessed your worries about the future. All of which is constructive and healthy. For in grief, all these feelings and more are likely to be present and scrambled together.

I must tell you that my own grief is profoundly felt. This is the last day that I will stand in this chancel as one of your pastors. It has been a joy and a privilege to be a shepherd among you these past 13-plus years. We have accomplished a lot together. You have welcomed and supported my leadership. You have been generous with your time, talent, and money in faithfulness to this church's many ministries. You have been willing to welcome new initiatives. You have faithfully represented the love and grace of Jesus Christ in this community and beyond. You have taken this pastor and his wife into your hearts. Believe me it isn't easy to walk away from all that. We will miss seeing you at church.

This congregation is blessed with competent and committed leadership: not only your two pastors, Larry and Diane; Kay and Chris, and the rest of the staff; as well as the members of this great congregation. Since the beginning of my ministry in Batavia, New York in 1973, the development of leadership in the congregation has always been an important goal for me. If in some small way I have succeeded in that effort here, then many of you will come front and center to pitch in and help with the work of ministry that is before you. This is always crucial when a pastor leaves, for whatever reason. You will encourage and support one another. You will continue to give valuable leadership to this community. You will keep growing as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Now I will sound a bit like the Apostle Paul. In writing you, I have wanted to explain my decision to retire, and I have desired to encourage you to join me in dealing openly and constructively with the grief we both feel.

Before I close, there are three additional things I want you to know.

The first is that, in the future, I won't be a nuisance. Here I quote from a policy of the Charleston Atlantic Presbytery which I take to heart: *"A former pastor should firmly, but in a positive and caring way, tell the congregation that he or she will not participate in a leadership role in any activity or special services in the church."* I affirm that ethical standard. The policy continues.... *"A former pastor and family continuing to live in the community will have many personal ties. It is appropriate and necessary that those relationships of friendship continue, but the pastoral relationship does not... It is incumbent upon that former pastor and family to refrain zealously from discussing the church, changes that are taking place, and other items of church life."* Toward that end, I kind of like the idea a friend of mine suggested: Once my retirement begins, if in one of our conversations one of you happens to cross that boundary, I simply invite you to place an extra \$20 in the offering plate the next Sunday!" And if I cross that boundary in your presence, well, I guess the same should apply!

You will, of course, always be in my thoughts and prayers. But after Thursday, the 28th, I will not interfere with those who remain or get in the hair of whomever you eventually (hopefully) call to take my place.

Second, a final word of APPRECIATION. Thank you, thank you for everything! My mind is drawn back to those words which Paul addressed to the Church at Philippi, which was one of the favorite churches he served. His letter to that church is one of the most special sections of the Scriptures to me because it portrays such joy. These were his words, perhaps written while he was imprisoned in Rome. Philippians 1:3-6: **"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 partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."**

What a joy it has been to work together, to be Christ's family. I am greatly honored to have been a pastor of this outstanding congregation. I thank God for you.

The final and most important thing I want you to remember is found in another favorite Scripture verse, Colossians 3:17: **"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."**

My calling as a pastor has been the high honor and distinct privilege of reminding people, reminding you, of Jesus Christ. In this, my farewell sermon to you I want to say it again. I urge you never to forget Jesus Christ. You can forget this pastor and I assure you no harm will come to you, but you must never ever forget the Savior. There has never been nor will there ever be again anyone like Jesus Christ. He is Immanuel, God with us in the flesh. He is the Prince of Peace. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. And he proved by his own resurrection that he is indeed the resurrection and the life. He is the great forgiver and reconciler who by his death on the cross diffused the explosive relationship that existed between the whole human race and God. He brought peace with God not only to the forefront of human history but he made it a reality in the hearts of all those who believe. We must remember Jesus Christ. He is the compassionate healer of the pains and the sorrows in our lives that are buried so deep within us that no human remedy can cure it, and no surgeon's scalpel is sharp enough to touch it or reach it. Remember Jesus Christ.

Remember him because he is like us and he can understand our trials and our temptations. He can feel our pains, our sorrows, and he mingles his own tears with ours. Remember him, for he remembers you. That's his pledge. But he doesn't remember your sins. He has removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west, never to remember them again.

One of my favorite stories is of two boys who were making a cross for a parade. The pastor came by when they were putting flowers all over the cross and he said, "Boys, the cross wasn't like that at all. It was dirty, rugged and rough." One of the boys replied, "Pastor, I didn't know Jesus ever touched anything and left it the same." He was right, you know.

The One who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son...and that Son who gave his life on the cross...invites us to be forgiven, to embrace his love, to journey though life with Jesus, to know healing and wholeness, now and forever. What a Friend, what a Savior, what a Lord, we have in Jesus!

"Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ

Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

AMEN...and so be it...in my life, and in yours.....