

Saying Yes

October 7, 2018

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This sermon is a way of saying yes to your call to me to be your pastor.

First, I want to thank John Barnard and the Pastor Search Committee for choosing to recommend me to be your pastor and to thank you the congregation for saying yes last week.

To be sure your decision and mine is a risk of faith, trusting in God to lead us together where God wants us to go. I told Nancy Davis “Thank you for going out on a limb for me.” She said, “You’re out on the limb with us!” We go out as Abraham and Sarah, by faith. By faith together.

You saw my befuddlement as I led worship last week, as the votes were being counted. I heard that during the laughter Tip Nicholson said “I want my ballot back”. It took me back to my first call to be a pastor at Richland Baptist church in the heartland of Kentucky farm country. I was a PH.D. student, and they asked me to come preach a trial sermon, or as some named it, “to preach in view of a call”. I drove out and preached as

best I could at the time. After the sermon they asked me to step outside onto the front steps of the church—it was an old one-room school house kind of church- while they deliberated and voted. After awhile the chair of the deacons opened the door and said, rather sheepishly: “We couldn’t make up our mind. Can you come back next week and preach again?” I did and they voted to call me. My auspicious beginning as a pastor. I’m grateful that after two *years* of sermons you said yes to me.

I

My yes to you begins in thanksgiving. Paul’s words feel like mine today:

I thank my God in every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.

Then he adds these words:

...thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

I love the phrase “partnership in the gospel”, in the Greek, *koinonia eis to evangelion*, our partnership, our companionship in the good news of Jesus Christ.

That is what we have today, a partnership, a companionship in the gospel. We are a circle of friends moving together toward what God wants us to be and do.

Then Paul says,

And I am sure that the God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the way of Jesus Christ.

The God who began a good work in you forty seven years ago will be at work among us bringing it more and more to completion. Paul is sure of it, as am I.

I

Partnership is the right word. Our relationship, pastor and people, is like a dance. Sometimes I lead, sometimes you lead. Paul warned the Corinthian church about those who would come in and “lord it over” them.

One of the things I love about you is the way the lay people here lead. I look forward to the partnership, as we will together lead the church into its next chapter as God’s people. In the pastor profile, the Pastor Search Committee said it was looking for a pastor as a “player-coach”. I like that image.

As I lead I hope to do so as a “servant-leader”. One mark of a servant-leader, says Bishop Bennett Sims, is the capacity to be *influenced* not just to influence. I will learn from you, and we will learn together how to be the church God is calling us to be in Statesville at this time.

When a new pastor comes to a church there are two fears. The first is that there will be too *much* change. The second is that there will be too *little* change. I hope we can strike the right balance between the two.

An essential part of a pastoral call is the bond of affection between pastor and people. I feel deep affection for you, for who you *are*, right now.

It is bad news if a pastor withholds affection until the church becomes what he/she wants it to be. I love you now for who you are. It is not my calling to change you into my image of what a church should be. It is my calling to help us listen together for God’s dream for us at this point in our life.

So, this first year as your pastor I plan to visit every home in the church. I will go alphabetically, unless special opportunities present themselves. If you would prefer to meet for lunch or coffee instead of at your home, that’s fine. Billy Adams and Sarah Adams, you’re first.

In our conversation I will offer four questions: 1) Why did you join Grace? 2) Why are you still here? 3) What are your hopes and dreams for our church? And 4) How can I be of help to you in your spiritual journey?

I want to get to know all of you better, and from these conversations I will know better how to lead you as a servant-leader.

The Reformation church defined church as this: “Where the Word is rightly preached and where the sacraments are rightly administered.” I like to add a third: Where the church is rightly organized for its service of love in the world.

As these three pertain to my role, I will preach and teach the Word of God as diligently and faithfully as I can, with God’s help. I will lead in the sacraments of Baptism and Communion and in other sacred actions. A sacrament is the offering of the grace of God. I will seek to do this in my pastoral care of you. And I will help you organize your life together so to maximize your mission, your service of love in the world. An important part of this third dimension will be helping you identify and exercise your spiritual gifts and personal callings. I believe the Spirit is at work in us to do so. And I believe the Spirit can gift and call us to different forms of ministry in different seasons of our lives.

In all of this our deepest calling as the church is this: *The increase in the love of God and neighbor*. That should be foremost in our hearts, and we do it through worship, teaching and mission.

I think Grace Baptist has a particular calling in Statesville as a progressive community of faith. This is who you are. I'll talk more about this next week. For now I will say this. It is a thoughtful kind of Christianity. As someone quipped, "It doesn't take a great mind to be a Christian, but it takes all the mind you've got!" You are a compassionate people, compassionate in words, deeds and relationship. You are a people of gospel hospitality, who welcome all people. And you are a people who seek to do justice. The words you sing every month at communion are your theme: "to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God."

I believe that God wants and needs progressive communities of faith to thrive. That is part of my own mission in life, to help such churches thrive.

In closing here are some reflections on our text from I Peter.

"You are a chosen race", which is not ethnic or tribal, but spiritual. Chosenness does not mean exclusivity or superiority. It does mean

particularity. As God called Paul to a mission to the Gentiles, He/She has a particular mission for us at 719 Club Drive.

And “a royal priesthood.” We are called to be “priests to one another” bearing God’s grace to one another and to the world. But we are also a “royal *prophethood*”, helping God make this world be a more just and compassionate world, as we pray “Thy Kingdom come”.

And this, you are

...God’s own people that you may declare the wonderful deeds of God who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

We do not point to ourselves but to all God has done and is doing, in our lives and in the life of the world. Frederick Buechner says,

A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, “I can’t prove a thing, but there’s something about his eyes and his voice. There’s something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross...the way he carries me.”

And finally this word of grace:

Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

It's all grace, the land, the building, the carpet, roof, piano and each other, and the Christ who is with us, grace upon grace upon grace.

You are the sixth church I have been called to pastor, urban, rural suburban, of all economic classes and many theological flavors. All have been a grace to me, but none more than you as we begin our partnership in the gospel.