

Thanks and Yes

May 4, 2025

Philippians 1:3-6; I Thessalonians 5:16-18; Isaiah 43: 16-19; Matthew 22: 26-40;
2 Corinthians 4:7-9, 12:7b-9a; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; Ephesians 3:14-19

My last sermon as a pastor to you, my beloved congregation for nine years. I had thought my last sermon as a pastor was in February of 2013. But here you came renewing my pastoral vocation in 2018. Nine grace-filled years at Grace.

Well, what to preach? I ditched my original title: “Thanks and Yes: A Final Sermon in Two Movements and Seven Acts”—George Buttrick, my beloved mentor in preaching said, “Never mark off your sermon with an announced number of points! The congregation will begin to tick them off as you preach!”

In one sense this sermon is a summary or distillation of what I have wanted to say about the gospel and the church these nine years. But I hope there will be a few surprises along the way. Stephen Sondheim was the lyricist for Bernstein’s West Side Story. Bernstein went to him and challenged him to write a love song without using the word “love.” What was it? “Maria.” This sermon, though I use “love” sparingly, at its heart is a love song.

It is a sermon based on a theme. The theme comes from the spiritual daily diary of Dag Hammarskjöld. He was the Secretary General of the United Nations in the 1960s who died in a plane crash while on a mission to the Congo. Few knew of his deep spirituality until after his death, when his spiritual diary, *Markings*, was published. Here is the entry I cite today:

For all that has been—Thanks!

For all that shall be—Yes!¹

So I begin with Thanks.

I

I Thank my God.

Paul opened his affectionate letter to the Philippians with the words, “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you”. Thankful, he adds, for “your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” What a beautiful phrase, “our partnership, companionship, in the gospel.”

That’s what we’ve had for nine years, a partnership in the gospel. Nine years of Easters, Seasons of Grace, Advents and Christmases. Nine years of Lents, of Maundy Thursday services and Easter Sunrise Services. Nine years of Scary Suppers and nine years of some of the dearest Communion services I’ve experienced as a pastor.

Then the times we went downtown to stand for justice and peace. Nine years of worship together, of hymns and anthems and reader's choir. Nine years of local mission involvement together. Nine years of grace.

Sue and I getting married after Sunday worship on the labyrinth, and the choir singing at the end, "All You Need is Love!" A lot of Beatles music has shown up over the years!

I thank my God for our partnership in the gospel from this day until now. From the deepest places of my heart, I thank you.

II

Give Thanks in all Circumstances.

Paul's instruction here is so important to us today. Let gratitude, not grievance or complaint or bitterness, fill your heart. When gratitude is there, the lesser emotions drop away. Again, note he did not say, "Give thanks *for* all circumstances, but in the midst of them.

In Wendell Berry's novel *Hannah Coulter*, Hannah looks back over her life and says:

You mustn't want to be somebody else. What you must do is this: "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks." I am not all the way capable of such [she adds], but those are the right instructions.²

What about this *praying without ceasing*? I offer this, by way of Anne Lamott, as you go through the day use her three main prayers: “Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.” “Help me, Help me, Help me,” and “Wow!, Wow!, Wow!”

III

I am Doing a New Thing

We now turn our own lives and the life of the church, to the future and to that most beautiful word and attitude of the heart: Yes.

The Hebrew people were languishing in decades of exile in Babylonian captivity. They began to whine to God:

You saved us in the past! Remember? Our deliverance from slavery in Egypt? (Why do we think we need to remind God of things—especially in prayer?) How about now? We are in slavery all over again?

And God answered:

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. For

behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

That’s pretty startling, the part about not remembering. Remembering is important as guideposts along the way. In Lent we celebrated our roots which continue to nourish us. However, we can suffer what one Irish novelist called “the

corrosive power of nostalgia.” It can keep us focused on the past and our way of remembering it.

There is one thing that saves us from the corrosive power of nostalgia. What is it? Gratitude, back to that word again. What we remember with gratitude is always life-giving.

God is doing something new all the time. Such a word is especially important as Grace Baptist enters a time of pastoral transition. There may be some anxiety, there should also be even more excitement. Every pastor has their own strengths and weaknesses, their own new visions and own blind spots. So it is with congregations too. Now we get to turn our faces to the future. Brother David Stendl-Rast describes hope as the “openness to surprise.” May God bring you some wonderful surprises!

IV

The Main Thing

It’s important to keep ourselves focused on the main thing. And what is it but love?! Jesus made it clear. “What is the greatest commandment?”, he was asked, and we know his answer by heart. Combining two commands from his Hebrew Scriptures, he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your

heart and mind and soul and strength; and the second goes right with it, to love your neighbor as yourself.”

That’s our main thing, the heart of our being and our call. H. Richard Niebuhr states what I believe is the core of our mission as a church: “*The increase in the love of God and neighbor!*” Both, not one, for the second is the expression of the first and the first is the beating heart of the other.

The rabbis tell the story of the famed rabbi, Hillel. A gentile came to him and said, “I will convert to Judaism if you can teach the entire Torah standing on one foot.” The rabbi stood on one foot and said:

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor, this is the whole Torah.

All else is commentary. Go, study and learn it.

The love commands are the whole of scripture.

V

The Mystery of the Gospel: Strength Made Perfect in Weakness

God uses our strengths to carry the gospel. But God can use our weaknesses too—which is good news, considering we have a goodly number of both!

In Second Corinthians Paul describes the nature of the church: “For we have this treasure in earthen vessels.

Yes, we have the treasure of the gospel in our crackable clay pots.

Sometimes we mix that up and think the *church* is the treasure, not the gospel!

We're the earthen vessels.

But then Paul lets us in on the secret: "This is to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us!" The gospel even shines brighter though the cracks in our pots. The songwriter Leonard Cohen writes this truth:

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

That's how the light gets *out* too! We are not fine china to be put behind glass and admired, we are sent into the world, flaws and all!

Later in Second Corinthians Paul is addressing his "thorn in the flesh" which dogged his heels and made him a laughing stock to his opponents who paraded their "strengths", the ones Paul sarcastically called "*hyper-apostotloi*" or "super-apostles". Paul prayed over and over for this thorn to be removed. God did not answer those prayers as he asked, but gave him something more important, a grace sufficient in all things. God said to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness." Here is the mystery of the gospel and of our ministry: God's strength made perfect in our weakness.

Can God use our flaws? Yes, if we offer them to God for God's service—as it is that God uses our strengths when we lift them to God for God's purposes.

One of my favorite stories in the Old Testament is the story of Gideon, who was leading the Hebrew soldiers against the Midianite forces. Gideon's army numbered 32,000. The Midianites numbered 120,000! Four to one, not good odds. He was probably shaking in his sandals.

But God spoke and said, "You've got too many! If you win with that many, the Israelites will say, 'Our might has won the battle!'" So God told Gideon to send some home! First 22,000 then 9,700 more, and only 300 were left! Just the right size for God. Each of the 300 were given a trumpet, a torch and a clay jar. They quietly surrounded the Midianite troops at dark. At Gideon's signal they all blew their trumpets, broke their jars, revealed their lighted torches and shouted, "For Yahweh and Gideon!" The Midianites fled in terror!

There's a spiritual message and challenge here. The reconstruction and renewal of the church in America today will come not from the big box mega-churches. Not from the churches with enough power and wealth to defend themselves against the gospel, but from the smaller ones like ours as we trust in God and seek to follow the way of Jesus.

We take heart in the words of Jesus: “Fear not, little flock, for it is the Abba’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32) So take courage. God gives us the courage to love, and all courage begins in love for someone or something.

Pope Francis, whose death we mourned this past week and whose life we celebrate, said:

The church should be a place of God’s mercy and hope where all feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged.

This is who we are and who we with God’s help aspire to be.

VI

Fulfill Your Ministry

I was ordained to the ministry right out of Union Seminary at Emerywood Baptist Church in High Point, N.C. on September 2, 1973. I was given this ordination Bible, which I have opened almost every week since. In the front was inscribed these words from 2 Timothy:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus.... preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience, and in teaching.... Always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

I have sought for 52 years to live up to that charge and fulfill my ministry, imperfectly, sometimes blunderingly so. I now offer this charge to you. It applies to whole churches in their ministries, not just ministers: *Preach the word in season and out of season, in word and in deed. Speak the truth in love. Be unfailing in patience—we need a lot of help from God with that—and in teaching. Be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist. Fulfill your ministry!*

VII

Grace

Paul followed every charge with prayer and blessing. Here is his prayer for the church in Ephesus. It is the most beautiful prayer for a church that I can imagine. Hear it for you:

For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father,
 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,
 that according to the riches of God's glory,
 God may grant you to be strengthened with might
 through the Spirit in the inner person,
 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith;
 that you, being rooted and grounded in love,
 may have the power to comprehend with all the saints

what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge,
that you may be filled with the fullness of God.

Now to our God who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more than all that we ask and think,
to God be glory in the church [yes, even the church] and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

And now the blessing. Paul ends all his letters with a benediction and blessing. His last words in the Second Letter to the Corinthians end:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

In the French spiritual classic novel by George Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*, an old priest recounts his life. With his last words he says, “All is grace!” It is, you know, life itself a gift, God’s love and our salvation a gift, grace working in every moment of our lives a gift. So my last words, as in the novel, “All is grace.” Say *Yes* to it, say *Yes*.

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1. Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (N.Y., Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 83.
 2. Wendell Berry, Hannah Coulter (San Francisco: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), 113.

