

“Family Forever”

Reading from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians; words that not only express the love of Paul for the people of Philippi, but words that also express the love I have for you.

“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.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am (in Paul's case) in chains or defending or confirming the gospel or (in my case) accepting a new calling in the NALC, all of you share in God's grace with me...

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.”

“Family Forever.” It's hard to know (where to start) on a day like this. James and Jeff and Elizabeth, thanks for your fun-filled and, yet, supportive and caring and loving words. So many people, so many events, so many special and dear memories (and friends) who have blessed my life (and the life of my family) for what is now (going on) almost 25 years.

I never would have thought that I would have been here this long. It's really not the norm. This is only my second calling in a (more than) 33-year ministry. Most of my seminary classmates, (most pastors) serve in (at least) three or four or five (or more) places by the time they're finished. I've been blessed to have served in just two and (in this one) going on for nearly a quarter of a century.

That sounds like a long time, doesn't it...a quarter of a century! And it is, (for us) in this life. But it's not (for God) in the scope of eternity. And that's why this place and (each of you) have been such a gift, because this isn't about us. It's about him. It isn't about you and me, it's about Jesus. It's about Christ. It's about what he is doing, what he has done, and what he will continue to do, through the power of his Holy Spirit, to save the world for which he died.

Let me start with where it all started, at least in terms of this life (and my life) and how our lives together have crossed. For me, it started in 1961. (Many of you know this.) I was six years old at the time. My father was called to serve as the Mission Pastor. San Jose was projected to be a growing city and this area and (Camden Avenue) were projected to be a good place to start. And so they did, and this congregation started, and it all happened before I was old enough to realize what was happening.

Two years later, we moved to South Dakota. Four years (after that), my Dad was called to return to San Jose (and to St. Timothy's), and so we came back. I grew up in this area from 1966 – 1986 (when Dad retired), I finished grade school at Lietz, went on to Dartmouth, then to Branham, then to West Valley and San Jose State...from there, on to seminary in St. Paul, and (from there) to my first pastoral call in Elk Grove.

I still remember the phone call I received from one of the members of the Call Team. There was a pastoral vacancy at St. Timothy's they were trying to fill. They called to see if I would be willing to be interviewed for the position.

My first reaction was “Yes, I'd be more than willing. It's where I grew up. It's a congregation I know well. I'd enjoy it.” My second reaction was “I'm not quite so sure. Let me pray about it and talk with Mary. I need her to weigh-in.” My third reaction was, “I doubt if that would be a good idea, because it's the same congregation where my father had served (for more than 20 years) and where some of my Sunday School teachers, who knew too much about me (and those years), still worshiped. Bottom line, I interviewed, and I received the call, and here we are (nearly 25 years later) on the other end.

“Family Forever.” That's what you are to me. I want you to know that. I need you to know that. My love for you and for this place and for the ministry we have been privileged to share goes deep.

“I thank my God every time I remember you...every time.” Even in the hard times, even through the tough times, even during those times when we wished (those times) were not happening. And there haven't

been many. Most of the times have been good. Much of the time has been nothing but a gift. And (in all of the times) and for all time, God is good and we are and we have been blessed.

It was a week like no other, early last month when all of this changed. For Mary and (for me), we'd never experienced anything like it, and (quite possibly) never again will.

The NALC Convocation in Indianapolis; the election of a new Bishop for the North American Lutheran Church. Out here on the West Coast, in a church body that is more Midwest and East Coast centered, I honestly didn't think it would happen. There was part of me that would have been very happy if it hadn't. But it happened and it (all of a sudden) became real, and from that moment on it all changed.

The vote, the acceptance speech, the installation at the closing worship, the dinner that same night with the other national and international leaders, it all happened so fast. Do you know what happened the next morning? The night before, we were nobodies (Mary and I), just two delegates among many in the crowd. The next morning, it (literally) took us 15 minutes to walk from the elevator (about 40-50 feet) to the front door. "Good morning Bishop. Congratulations Bishop. Can we get a picture with you and your wife?" We're thinking, "What just happened? What did we miss?"

Do you know what happened (in the elevator) on the way down? (It was hard to miss.) We get to the main floor and the door opens and this little boy starts walking out. The father says (to his son), "David, step aside and let the Bishop and his wife get off first!" We're thinking, "Wow! This never happens...at St. Timothy's!"

It was a life-changing week. That's what we both thought that next morning, after the election. All of a sudden things had changed. Do you what we both realized later that same day? It was almost as if it hit us both at the same time. Do you know what we realized, what God whispered in our ears?

We both realized that it was a life-changing week (when it happened), but not when we were chosen (and elected) to serve in this new role. Life changed (for both of us) when we were elected and chosen (by God) in our baptism (in Jesus), and by the grace of God and the power of his Holy Spirit, life has never been the same ever since.

It's a life-changing call when the call comes from God. It's a life-changing moment when the election (that happens) is one that comes from Christ. That's why we are a family, and that's what will keep us as a family forever. Our connection is Jesus. What brings us and (holds us) together is Christ. This is all so much bigger than us...so much bigger.

Life changes when you become a Christian. Life is different when the calling in your life comes from Christ. Don't ever think about your life apart from what God has (thought) and said about you in his Son. Don't even consider your life apart from who you are (and will always be) because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Do you know how many jobs I've had since I graduated from Seminary? Not a one. I have not had a single job for the past 33-plus years of my life. I've had a calling, two callings, and now I'm about to begin my third. But a calling is not a job. It's a calling. And when it's a calling, all that matters is that you're serving the one who called.

Now, you don't have to be a pastor to have a calling in life. God can (and he does) call people to serve him in countless ways. It's in our vocations that we serve God. It's in the work in which we are involved (whatever it is) that we give honor and glory to Jesus. No matter what it is, no matter what you're doing, do it always (and in every way) as if you are working for and serving Christ, because you are.

You don't have to be a pastor to have a calling in life, but (on this final Sunday), let me put a little plug in for becoming a pastor and for answering the call. And here I'm talking not so much to those of you who are on the (older end) of life, but to those who are not: middle school, high school, college-age students; young adults in your 20's and 30's; some of you considering a second career. There is no greater opportunity to impact lives (in this world) for now and for eternity than to commit your life to answering the call to serve Christ in his Church. There's no greater way, at least not fulltime.

In the next ten years, more than 40% of the pastors currently serving in the NALC will be retiring. That means that we need to find pastoral candidates to be trained and to serve. It's one of the biggest challenges I'll be facing in my new role.

I look out over this congregation and (honestly) there are at least ten, if not fifteen, or twenty, or even more of you, our young people (some in their 20's and 30's and beyond), who would make wonderful pastors.

You have the heart. You have the faith. You have the passion. If you're hearing the call (in any way), then don't fight it, but follow it. Talk to us, talk to me. You can always learn the gifts.

Life changes when the call of God happens, for all of us. Life is never the same when it is claimed and owned and directed by Christ. As a result, at least now (for me) there's a new role (in front of me) as a result of a decision that was not mine to make, but his.

Let me say a bit about this new role as NALC Bishop, in hopes that (Mary and I) don't have to answer the same questions more than once. Many of you have already asked if this new role requires us to move. We've both heard that same question, although in different ways.

People have asked Mary, "You don't have to move, do you? This isn't going to require you to go away?" For me, it's the same question, although phrased a bit differently. (They've asked), "You are going to move, aren't you? We're sorry you have to leave?"

So, here's the deal. There is no requirement (with the office) to relocate. The national staff (for the NALC) is scattered throughout the United States. For now, we've decided we're going to try it for six months, staying here in California. If it turns out we have to move, then we'll figure it out then.

In prepping for that (possible event), I've already hinted to Mary that we might have to relocate to the Midwest to be more central. To her credit, even with two new grandchildren, she's OK with that. She's already told me (if that happens) to have fun. (It's only four years. You'll be back.) No, she didn't say that. What she said was, "I'll sure miss you when you're gone."

That's what happens when you're a family. And that's what we are in Christ. Even when you go away, you're never really gone. Even as transitions (in life) take place, we'll all finally end up together in the same place.

My new role will involve preaching and teaching (in congregations) and at Mission events. It'll involve visioning and staffing and planning for where we believe God is leading us (as a denomination) to go. It's an ecumenical role, working with other church bodies. It's an international role, interacting with our Lutheran partners overseas.

There are meetings, there are celebrations, ordinations and anniversaries and special events. More than anything, it's working with people (throughout the country) who have the same need (in their lives) as we have (out here) in ours, and who trust in the same Savior we've all come to know. And his name is Jesus. His name is Christ. And he has been and will be the only one I will work to serve and to please.

I'm going to miss this place. And I'm going to miss each of you. You (and this place) have a special place in my heart, and it's in my heart that that same special place will always remain.

Let me show you something on this (my final day) with you as one of your pastors. (I've asked a couple of the guys to help me.) I brought something with me I'd like you to see. Actually, I brought a whole bunch of (somethings with me) that I want to share.

Do you know what these are? These are copies of sermons preached in this sanctuary. Do you know whose they are? The ones on this side of the table are not mine, but my father's. My dad served (as I've shared) for almost 22 years here at St. Timothy's. These are copies of the sermons he preached during those years of ministry: Matthew, Mark, Luke & John, and then a shorter stack of some of the others.

He was a gospel-preacher, almost always from those first four books. When he retired, he took them home and kept them in his office. When he died (eight years ago), I couldn't throw them away, so I've kept them in mine.

Once in a while, I'll pull one out and read it. It was a different time and a different audience, but the content was solid and the central focus was right-on. I was inspired when I read what he wrote, and I'm glad I still have what was a central part of his work. It focused on Jesus. It proclaimed, week after week, the need we have (in our lives) and the answer that is found in his.

Now, on the other side of the table, do you know what those are? Those are also copies of sermons preached in this sanctuary. Do you know whose those are? They're mine. They're copies of the sermons I preached during my nearly 25 years.

I didn't have to read these. I wrote these. I didn't have to pull one out to find out what was in it. The content was a content I produced, or (should I say) God produced through me. In the same way my father worked (during his years) to stay focused on Jesus, I have worked (in mine) to do the same thing.

I brought along something else. It's one of those little cards that have been available over the past few weeks, on which you can write a little note. I'm looking forward to reading what you wrote. Then again, I better read it before deciding how to respond.

I brought one of those little cards with me. My parents both passed away a few years back. But I wrote (on this card) what they might have written had they still been here.

This side is from my Mom. It says, "That Danny sure is a good preacher! I always enjoyed listening to what he shared. He never preaches too long. From start to finish, it's always good. And (growing up) he sure was a well-behaved young boy. I wish his brothers and sisters would have been so good. I'm proud of my son."

The flip side is from my Dad. With the stack of sermons (on my side) a bit taller than on his, he wrote only one word: "Long-winded."

There are a lot of sermons laid in front of this altar. Even as they were preached, they were laid before the Lord. I trust that in laying them before the Lord, that he took them and used them to serve this congregation (and its people) to the glory of Christ.

Now, I want you to take a look at the front wall, because I don't want this family thing to get out of hand. For 47 out of the 57 years since St. Timothy's started, it has been served by a father and a son from the same family.

Take a look at these two. (This was taken on my confirmation day, here in this church.) The one looks like he could do it. The other, a young preacher in the making (perhaps); it's hard to tell (from this picture) if it would ever happen.

Do you know what made it happen for these 47 years? Do you know who made it happen that their human (and sin-filled) lives would be used by God? The One who became human and took on our flesh, and the One who never sinned and who gave his life so we could have ours.

That's the funny part about being a preacher for all of these years in the same place. Honestly, after about four or five years (into it), my personal preaching-well had run dry. I had told you more, in those first four to five years I was here, than I had ever learned. But God knows so much more, and so he kept on writing, even when I could not. And here we are, 25 years later, and it's the same message as it was from the start.

For 25 years, I've worked hard to stay focused on Jesus. Week after week, sermon after sermon, year after year, my goal was to continue telling you the same thing: his death, his resurrection, the promise we have in Christ. (I hope it came through.) Because it's a message we need to hear. It's a message I need to hear. And it never gets old.

Now, let me turn back the clock again to when that phone call (from the Call Team) happened and it led to my eventual call. Do you know what I was afraid of when I came here? I was afraid of having to fill these. (These are a pair of shoes worn by my dad.)

Actually, they're not my Dad's shoes. (That's not true.) I kept his sermons, but not his shoes. There are support groups for people who do that. I'm not one of them. But they're big shoes, just like his; size 12 to be exact...bigger shoes than I'd ever be able to fill.

I am thankful that no one (from day one) ever expected me to fill these shoes. No one. They're not my shoes, but his. They're not who I am, and (I am thankful) that not one person ever expected me to become what he was. When I came here, I was only called to fill my own. And, as a result, I was blessed, because the shoes I was called to fill were created for me and because they were created (for me), they were filled (for me) by God.

So here's the deal. You see these shoes? (These are my shoes.) When I'm done here, I'll put them on the pulpit, just like these others. (I hope it's OK to place shoes on the pulpit?) I guess (if it's not) and you don't like it, maybe you should call the Bishop and ask?

Here's the deal, these are my shoes to fill, and (for 25 years) I've worked hard to fill them. But they're my shoes and not someone else's. And because they're mine and they were created and (given to me) by God, I could fill them...and I trust that I have.

So (here's the deal), when you find that (someone else) to serve in this place and to fill the role I've been privileged for these 25 years to fill, don't ask them to fill these shoes, because they're not their shoes. Ask them to fill ones they were given (and created) by God to wear; the ones that fit them. That's when this works and that's how it works, and when it works and how it works, that's when God is at work and lives change.

Let me close with this, and this is a bit of a confession. Remember back to when Pastor Judy retired, I mean when she (first retired), about two and a half years ago? When she announced her retirement and the call

process started, the Call Team (at that time) was not only looking for a replacement for her, but was starting to plan for that day when I would be finished.

My prayer (from that day forward) was that when that day would come, which it now has, that I would be able to leave this place in a good place. And now that it's here, I can say with a strong and a bold confidence that it is.

This place is in a good place. This place has everything God needs to move it forward and to grow. Strong pastoral leadership, rock-solid lay and supporting staff, the priorities are clear, the disciple-making direction is set, and the commitment to share the faith and to serve God's people are well-established and evident.

My confession is that I thought leaving this place (in a good place) was up to me, and that what would make it a good time (for me) to leave was when the things I wanted to see happen were done. My confession is that I was wrong. There's always more to be done. There's always something that is still not where it needs to be. What makes it a good time is not when it's in my time (or yours), but his.

This is his time. (I truly believe that.) My final week has now arrived. A new calling has been given and after today I will move on...and so will you. But because it's his time, in the hands of God, it's all good and the future is secure...for all of us.

And so, my prayer (like the apostle Paul) has not changed. "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..."

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God."

"Family Forever." I look forward to seeing where God will lead in the next four years, for myself as the new NALC Bishop and for our denomination, for you as the congregation (of believers) at St. Timothy's Lutheran Church in San Jose, and for us as the body of Christ that we are and will always be.

I love this place. I love each of you. And I always will. I will be praying for you. I ask for your prayers (for Mary) and for me. Thanks for these 25 years. You will always (as family) be in my heart.

Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for your faithfulness to us, for your forgiveness, for your calling, for making us a family forever in Christ. We thank you for these 25 years and for the countless ways in which we were drawn closer to each other and to you. Thank you for using us. Thank you for choosing us. Thank you for who you are and for what we can become in Christ.

Lord, we pray that these next chapters would be ones in which you would be glorified in us. Give us wisdom, give us courage, give us the faith we need to never take our eyes off of you.

Thank you for bringing us together and for keeping us together even as we part. Fix our eyes on Jesus. Center our minds on Christ. And keep our hearts always in line with your heart, that our lives might be used for the glory of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.