

“Do What Paul would Do”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Psalm 106:1-5

New Testament lesson: Philippians 4:4-9

OK, during today's Welcome and Announcements, I ask you to be thinking what are the most important historical events of the past 500 years? Who has one? ... (*List them*) Actually, physicist James Trefil proposes that new discoveries are what really stand the test of time. He says, for example, that the most pivotal events of the last 500 years were Copernicus discovering that the earth is not the center of the universe and Columbus opening the way for exploration of the New World, the Americas. "Each (of these discoveries) forever changed humanity's view of its place in the universe," notes Trefil.

It's kind of hard for us to think of something *that* important that happened in the past 500 years. We're a lot more focused on the present.

Human beings have short memories and lose relationships with the past. To illustrate this point, consider the following questions that were actually asked of one tour guide at the Gettysburg battlefield:

Imagine you're leading a tour and someone raises their hand and asks: "Did the soldiers hide behind the monuments when they fought?" True story – someone asked that.

Do you want to hear another one? Someone at Gettysburg actually asked the tour guide, "What was Lincoln's address?" His Gettysburg address. OK. One more. One guy actually asked why so many of the Civil War battles were fought one national park land?" Of course, the parks came later, in honor of the battles.

Human beings sure do have short memories, even about important events. And yet, the Apostle Paul lived more than 500 years ago – actually, he lived nearly 2,000 years ago – and Paul is remembered to this day, what he did and

what he said. Paul had a very specific idea about what was most important, what would last forever, and how to ensure that it would.

Writing to the Philippians – and us – Paul says, “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

It takes something of us to stay conscious of God’s presence in this world, and not to get overly worried about stuff that in the grand scheme of things is not all that important.

Are you worried about healthcare? Do what Paul did. Are you worried about employment and the economy? Do what Paul did. Worried about war and conflict – both global and local? Do what Paul did. Whatever you are worried about right now – take a moment right now to think about that Whatever it is that you are worried about – whatever you’re thinking about right now: finances, a certain family member, your job or schoolwork or career, whatever it is – do what Paul did and the God of peace will be with you. What did Paul do?

Anyone?

- He became a follower of Christ, and then continued to grow in faith and knowledge. Do what Paul did.
- Proclaimed the Gospel.
- Developed a practice of regular prayer, worship and service.
- He called and equipped others to work together on behalf of Christ.
- And finally, in the end and through it all he showed courage and resolve *and patience* in the face of earthly, spiritual and religious and earth struggles, persecution, and confinement – he was 9in jail when he wrote the letter to the Philippians.

Because you are here today, I know that you, like Paul, are a follower of Christ. I hope that you, like Paul, find a way to proclaim the Gospel in how you live your life – and I’m sure you do, to some extent. But we could all be more bold and thoughtful about sharing our faith with others. Like Paul, I encourage you to begin or continue regular practices of prayer, worship and service.

What else is there? That’s right, calling and equipping others to work together on behalf of Christ. Oh my! That is so important, isn’t it? And we need to do that with resolve and patience-call and equip others to spiritual growth and service.

None of us can keep the faith and the church going all by ourselves. Paul knew that. He knew that it takes others. It takes new people and those who come after us encountering Jesus and growing as followers of Christ. That's how we ensure that 500 years from now – and even 2,000 years from now – the work and the faith of Jesus, Paul, and all the other apostles will be remembered and practiced and lived.

Last week, I attended a church leadership workshop in Columbia. We focused on the adaptive challenges that all churches are facing. An adaptive challenge is a goal or challenge without an easy, visible and certain solution.

If it were easy, we'd be there. With an adaptive challenge, you have to find your way along and grow into the solution, try new things along the way. For instance, one adaptive challenge we and all mainline denominations are facing today is a decline in church membership. And this begs the question, are we in the membership business or the disciple-making business?

The Great Commission given to us by Jesus is to make disciples of all people. This means moving beyond thinking of membership only in terms of church rolls, financial pledges and serving on committees and boards. Rather, being a disciple-making church means focusing on the spiritual growth and wellbeing of our visitors, regular guests and members which of course is what we do. And yet, how do we measure that – the spiritual growth of people?

We have members on the rolls of this church who are there in name only. And we have people deeply involved in the life of this church who are not members. What's more important? Being on the church rolls or growing in Christian faith and basic spirituality – learning to look at the world through God's eyes and not our own?

That sort of lays out the adaptive challenge facing our church – shifting from a membership mentality in order to focus more on spiritual growth and practices. *And* finding ways to measure and celebrate that – the spiritual growth of this church and all of our friends and members.

For instance, we have young families who are newly active in the life of First Church this year. Some of these families are already members – have been for years. So there's no statistical, membership blip with them returning to a more active role in the life of First Church. But it is worth recognizing and celebrating.

We have other families who are not members, but they are very involved in the life of the church. What is more important – that they join the church or that they feel welcomed and nurtured whether or not they join?

I'm happy to say that each of these young families does feel welcomed and nurtured at First Presbyterian Church of Independence. And I pray that they and other new and returning families would continue to feel blessed by coming alongside us in worship and ministry. And I'm confident that as they do, our church will grow – both in membership and spiritually.

I am confident about this because I know that what we really care about the most – whether we can measure it or not – is the love that we share in Jesus Christ, *and* the way that Jesus brings us together to worship God, to learn how to be better Christians, to show care and concern for others, and to reach out in service to a world in need. Now that is church growth-and boy, do we have that going on. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, today we pray for all those who serve you. We pray for those who tirelessly work in the name of Jesus Christ, and who do so with no thought of earthly reward or recognition; who do so with no motivation other than to better the lives of others along the way, to hold a hand out for those who need a hand up, to comfort those who sorrow, to befriend the friendless ... – in short to bring a ray sunshine into the lives of those who sit in darkness.

These are your servants, gracious God. These are the ministers and mediators of your love and mercy. These are the true disciples of the Good News.

We pray for those here and elsewhere whose lives are lived fulfilling the great commission. Bless them and empower them for the ministry to which you have called them, so that someday it may be said of them, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter in to the joy of your reward."

We pray, too, for those in need of your care and comfort.

We pray all this in the name of your son our savior, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

Thy kingdom come,

thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.