

September 16, 2007
Saugatuck Congregational Church
Susanna Knox Griefen

Prayers for the Church
Farewell Sermon

My heart is so full of things I want to tell you. There is still so much I wanted say of my hopes and prayers for you. You'll be happy to know that one of my prayers in preparing this meditation has been that I resist the temptation to say everything I'd like to tell you before I leave. But my heart is full of prayer for you. All my adult life, my prayer has been informed by scripture: by the Psalms, by King David, by Jesus, by Paul; and a pastor can hardly do better than to look to the magnificent, faithful prayers of Paul for the churches he led and loved. Every letter Paul wrote includes a prayer. His concern and love and longing for the church shine through. Often, I find my own prayers enlarged and deepened by Paul's example.

Our scripture for today is from Ephesians. Please pray with me another prayer ascribed to Paul's from Colossians: *Holy God, may we be filled with the knowledge of your will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that we may have a walk worthy of the Lord, and fully pleasing you, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. Amen.*

Paul wrote what I also pray for you: *I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, according to the working of God's great power. For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you 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 that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Ephesians 1: 16-19a; 3:14-21

It's poignant for me to come to this place, where our conversations as pastor and congregation come to an end; although our voices will echo in each other's heads and hearts for years to come. But now, my part in the conversations of this church comes to a close.

In two weeks, you have a big decision to make: (it's poignant to say you, not we. It will take a while to get used to that.) I pray that clarity and grace are abundantly present in the decision, and I will have you in my prayers especially on Sept. 30th. But I thought I'd get a few words in now—I'm still here!

The First question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism of my youth was: *What is the chief end and purpose of Man? Who knows the answer? The chief end and purpose of Man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.* My prayer is that in all the busyness of what has to be done, in all the decisions to be made, in your own lives and in the church; you will give priority to glorifying and enjoying God! As Anne Patterson would say, "What a concept!"

More than duty, more than progress, more than growth, more than anything, what God offers and wants to receive, is love. It's like marriage: all the good works in the world don't make up for an absent heart. Numbers are not the measure of our success as the church of Jesus Christ. Buildings made of stone are not the most important thing we need to tend to. What is important is that we glorify God.

The faithful Question is not about worldly success in our fundraising, or in the graciousness of our building— God is glorified and enjoyed in straw shacks and prison cells, in slums and on battlefields. The question is whether we glorify God in our gifts: our tithes and offerings, our time, our talents. If we renovate our private homes but not the church building, does that glorify God? My guess is that what we, the church, want to spend renovating the church building in the next three years, pales in comparison to what we, the church, have spent on renovating our own homes in the last three years.

We are often posed what seems to me a false alternative: Should we spend the money on our building or on Mission? But that is not the real choice before us, is it? The real choice is how we will give glory to God in all the ways we spend our money, time and talent. Will our living give God glory? Will our giving change our lives? Will our choices invite others in to the transforming presence of Jesus Christ?

In the book of Acts, the 4th chapter, early in the life of the church, the disciples were electric with the power that was in them, and the authorities arrested John and Peter, and asked them: by what power did they teach and preach and heal?

And Peter and John answered so boldly, though they were uneducated and ordinary men, that the religious rulers were amazed, the scripture tells us, and recognized them as Companions of Jesus.(Acts 4:4-13) My prayer for us, for you, is that in all you do and are and say, you will be, and be known as, companions of Jesus.

You can have a great building, but a bad spirit; a big budget, but without joy. My prayer for you, with Paul, is that you may walk *a walk that is pleasing to the Lord*. If we are in the business of transformation, (and what else are we about?) then we can praise God that thousands, and perhaps tens of thousands of lives have been transformed in the back rooms of our church, as day by day, one step at a time, people find strength here, and hope and help, and a higher power to turn their lives around. And many of you are here in the pews today, because you found the courage to come in through the back door, and found a welcome, and a church home.

What is the faithful response to the opportunity given us to change lives through our building? What is our calling, as a church that welcomes all people, but can't receive any in wheel chairs into our offices or classrooms or many meeting rooms? I can't tell you the number of times I've seen people resting on each step as they made their way to a meeting. Bonnie has never been in my office, nor Elmer, nor Hazel.

God has given us, through those who have gone before, this amazing building for worship and service. What is our grateful response to the opportunity given us in our building to change lives? None of us were here when the sanctuary was built. We aren't a new church start having to fund everything from pews to hymnals. Not many of us were here when the church school wing was built to teach the parents of the children in the classes now. What will we leave in gratitude and hope for those who come after us? I don't have the answer for you. You will have to find that in your hearts. What is that God calls you to do now?

With Paul, I pray, whatever you decide, that *your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment that you may approve the things that are excellent*. (Philippians 1: 9-10a)

The chief end and purpose of the church is to help people glorify God and enjoy God forever. More than anything else, I wanted to tell you that. I so pray it for you. We are a dutiful bunch. We get a lot done. But often at too great a price.

I have told you before I often turn to the list of the Fruit of the Holy Spirit that Paul gives us in Galatians as a kind of spiritual inventory. (Galatians 5:22-23) I still recommend that you memorize it: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

When any of that is absent, from our lives, from our church, I take that very seriously. If the fruit of the Spirit is absent, it is a spiritual crisis. You need to tend to it. What is not done in the Spirit does not glorify God.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control— these are gifts of grace: no one can give these to you; they are not dependant on externals, but on your relationship with God. When they are absent, right there, in that part of your life or the church, the Spirit is absent for you. And that is not God's will for you, each or together.

Often, for me, the only way to tend the Fruit of the Spirit is through gratitude. I love the prayer: "God, you have given me so much, give one thing more, a grateful heart." (George Herbert) In my experience, earth hath no sorrows or frustrations or stinking thinking or regrets or furies that enough gratitude cannot change. In your disagreements, in the frustrations for your life together, I pray that you will lift up your eyes. If you look to God with gratitude and with the prayer that God will change your heart, you will find transforming grace, I am sure of it.

I told the prayer group about being so angry one day that I closed my door, sat in my glider in my office, and prayed first as if I *were* thankful. Thank you for this day (grr), thank you for my life, thank you for listening. I prayed and prayed all the thank you's I could think of, until through my prayers God renewed a right spirit within me, and my heart was changed, and I saw my part in what had gone awry, and repented it, and I could make amends with a light heart;. And I looked up and it was an hour and 15 minutes later.

If I could leave you with anything, I would leave you with the habit of gratitude. Be grateful for one another. Each one of you is a person for whom Christ died. Each of you is a gift to all the others.

One of the great insights of my life came when I was on Sabbatical in Israel, in the Negev dessert outside Eilat. I was praying, as I so often did, my prayers of confession, prayers for self-improvement, and I was struck silent.

I have told you this before. Suddenly, I realized that I didn't look at the sunset and think, that would be better with a little more red in the middle, or brighter purple; I didn't look at a wave and think, that's a good wave, but it would be better if it broke more evenly. I didn't look at the mountains and critique them. And I realized that all these prayers to change myself were ungrateful to God who made me as I am.

Don't be too hard on yourselves. Don't be too hard on each other. God is good, and you are loved. And God has gifted you with each other. Be grateful, even when it's hard. It will do your heart good.

These years together have been full of blessing and goodness, of challenge and growth. We have done good work together, and by God's grace we have enjoyed what is these days an unusually long Associate Pastorship.

With Paul, I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion... And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best,... through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1: 3- 6, 9-10,11b)

I will miss you.

I will never forget you.

I will always be grateful.

Glorify and enjoy God.

Love one another.

Be grateful in all things.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15: 13)

Thanks be to God.

God bless. Amen.