

**Philippians 1:3-6**

Pentecost Sunday

**Lessons for the Day: Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-21; John 7:37-39**

**From First to Last, It's All About God**

June 12, 2011

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Preaching the Word of God has always been a passion of mine. I'm not sure that I have always approached it quite like Jeremiah, who said: *If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.* (Jeremiah 20:9 - ESV) But I do love to preach. Maybe that is why I find it hard to sit still on a Sunday morning, if I'm not in the pulpit!

But I do have to say that there have been two occasions in which I was not really eager to preach. The first was my farewell sermon at St. John's, Gasline. The second is this sermon today. It is hard to think of this as the last time I will have the privilege of sharing God's Word of hope, promise and life with you as your pastor. I may, indeed, have another occasion to preach in this pulpit, but it will not be as your pastor. I will do it as a guest, or as a substitute. Should that occasion arise, it will be a joy to share that Word with you. But I won't do it as your pastor.

I have preached somewhere around 1700 sermons from this pulpit, not including weddings and funerals. One thousand, seven hundred times I have spoken God's Word to show you your sinfulness. That is what the Bible calls 'law'. How many times did your mother tell you not to run with scissors? I've got mom beat! Just as many times, I have come to you to remind you of the great love and mercy that is ours in Jesus Christ, and how our loving Father has given His Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and for the sins of the whole world. That is the Gospel. Seventeen hundred sermons pointed you to the cross of Jesus Christ, and to the life we have through faith in Him who died and who rose again from the dead, and who lives and reigns over all things, so that we may be His people both now and forever.

What a joy it has been to share in that Word with you. What a joy it is to see how God has been at work through the Word of life. What we are as Faith and Grace Lutheran churches is all because of God's word, and God's grace, and God's power. Through His grace, a lot has changed over the 23 ½ years I served this congregation. The obvious change, to anyone who was here in the early days, is that God has granted growth to this congregation. From our humble beginnings, He has brought here a people who know His name; who know His grace at work in their lives, and who serve Him together in joy. God granted the growth, so that we emerged from years of struggle to take on the various challenges He laid before us. We have become, by His grace, and by His grace alone, a leader among the churches of our circuit, and a help and support to those throughout Lutheran Church-Canada.

There are other changes, too. There are different faces: new faces, to be sure, but also an absence of some of the old faces. There are those who have gone ahead, and who are now resting from their labours in the sweet arms of the Saviour, in whom they lived and believed. There are those who have gone to new areas of service in the church, and those who moved for other careers. Sadly, there are also those who have returned to the world with its empty promises and hopelessness.

God has granted us the means to carry on an effective ministry in this place. At the beginning, we were a struggling mission, heavily in debt, and fearful that we would not be able to make ends meet. God provided, and continues to give us the resources that come from the faithful stewardship of people who know His grace and mercy in Christ, and who respond to that grace as they give of the bounty He always first gives to us. The debt is gone. We still struggle sometimes to pay the bills, for there are days that we forget that God is the source of each and every gift we enjoy in this world. But we aren't as fearful anymore. Our experience has taught us that the Lord has provided, and that He will continue to provide.

So much has happened through what Paul, in our text, refers to as *your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*. We have come together as pastor and people, gathered around God's Word of life. We have come together to be fed at His table, and to find the grace that He gives to us in Word and Sacrament. We have come together to the foot of the cross as low-down, good for nothing, lower than a snake's belly in a gutter sinners, and we have shared together in the forgiveness that is ours in the Saviour, who took our sin upon Himself, and who suffered and died in our stead as the perfect sacrifice for sin. We have come to the empty tomb, and we rejoice in the life we have in the resurrected Christ. We have rejoiced together that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, baptized into the name of Christ, clothed in Christ, washed, redeemed and sanctified in Christ. We are God's people, the chosen of the Lord, and richly blessed through all He has done, is doing, and will do for us, until the day of our final salvation.

When I stop and look back at all that has happened, I can only join Paul in saying: *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*. How I thank God for you! How blessed I have been to be with you over these years. What a joy it has been to bring you God's Word—both in the times when you heard it and even in those times when you didn't want to listen. What a joy it has been to work with you, as we all have used our gifts and our callings to His glory as partners in the Gospel.

That is what we have been: partners. In truth, it has not been an equal partnership. The office I have held among you is a

gift from Christ to His church. Paul reminds us: ***And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*** (Ephesians 4:11-13 - ESV) God brought me to you. He led you to call me 24 years ago to serve you as pastor. He set up the partnership. But it is never been about me. It has never been about you. As Paul says in our text: ***I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.***

From first to last, it is all about God and His grace and mercy for us in Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate the festival of Pentecost. We remember how the crucified, resurrected and ascended Christ kept His promise to pour out on His church power from on high. Jesus said: ***But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*** (John 14:26 - ESV) That is, more than anything else, how God has equipped us for service. His Spirit has been at work in the Word, even in those 1700 sermons I prepared. As Luther said in his sacristy prayer: "I am unfit to undertake this great and difficult office, and if it were not for Your help, I would have ruined it all." I know how my own sin and weakness sometimes led to my saying the wrong things. I know I have been far from perfect in all I have done. I ask your forgiveness for any hurts or pains I have caused. Yet the Spirit was at work, helping me, so that again, I can say with Paul: ***But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*** (1 Corinthians 15:10 - ESV)

From first to last—from the day I began work in the office on December 1, 1987, until I finish my work among you today, it has always been—and always will be—all about God. God began this good work, even before there was a Faith Lutheran Church. He began it when He, in His love and mercy, planned the salvation of sinners like you and me through the sacrifice of His own Son. He continued the work when He sent the prophets, the apostles and the evangelists who proclaimed God's grace and favour for us in His Son. He began His work among us when He planned and purposed that Faith Lutheran Church should come into existence, and when He gave us the joy of beginning the work of Grace Lutheran Church. God began it all—and He will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord, Jesus Christ. But He fulfilled that work at the cross, when Jesus died for us, and on that glorious Easter morning, when Christ rose again from the dead.

Johann Sebastian Bach began many of his manuscripts with the letters, J.J, which meant "*Jesu, Juva*" or Jesus, Help! At the end, he would add the letters S.D.G.: *Soli Deo Gloria* - to God alone be the glory. Bach knew that we need God's help for all we do, and all the good that we do resounds to the glory of God. If we are looking back at the years gone by, or whether we are looking to the years before us, let us remember that we need the help of our God. We need the forgiving, strengthening touch of the Saviour. We need the power and comfort of the Holy Spirit before we can do anything. But then we go forth to do great things by His power and strength, so that when all is said and done, the only thing we can say is: ***"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"*** (Revelation 5:13 - ESV)

I am so thankful that you, as forgiven people, have been able to forgive me. I am so thankful for the love you have always shown me. I thank God for the partnership we have shared in the Gospel. Today that partnership ends—at least in the sense that I won't be your pastor. I will always hold you in my heart, and will always be your brother in Christ. I will still be working with you, but only in the sense of the greater church working in the Gospel. Thankfully, you still have your partnership in the Gospel with Pastor Castillo, and soon you will have another shepherd. They will be different than I am, for which you should thank and praise God. They will approach the partnership differently, as God gives them strength. Take those shepherds into your hearts and love them as you have loved me. Support them and work with them as you have worked with me.

And please, don't think that I have done anything special among you. As Jesus said: ***when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'*** (Luke 17:10 - ESV) I have done my best to do my duty, by the grace of God alone, weak and failing though it often was. He began it all. He blessed it all. He will continue to bring it to completion. And that is something we can look forward to together. The day is coming when all God has planned for His church in this world will come to an end. When it does, we will join together once again to sing the praise of Him who died for us, who rose for us, who lives and reigns for all eternity. We will share in His blessings. And we will know that it was never about us, for from first to last it is all about the God who loved us and redeemed us as His own possession in Christ. *Soli Deo Gloria!* To God alone be the glory forever and ever. Amen.