

Cassie Helms, May 18, 2008 (Youth Sunday)

### **“Reflections”**

It is human to expect things, and to be critical. When a person stands at a podium to speak, I am critical of their purpose. I expect to gain greater wisdom from listening to them than I had before, so that I haven't wasted my time. It is also human to demand order – most of us get up at a certain time every day in order to go to a certain place, and rarely do we exercise spontaneity in going someplace new. It is human to predict, in order to prepare ourselves for the future. We must predict that the car with its turn signal on may not actually turn. We must predict that we will be tired tomorrow morning if we don't go to sleep early tonight.

If these standards represent the qualities of man, and we know that the opposite of mortality is divinity, then we can assume that Divinity also exhibits qualities opposite that of man: a Divine being is not critical. She does not judge because she does not need to. She is satisfied with her existence such that she need not better herself through the sacrifice of others. Being divine also means respecting the beauty of chaos – are leaves on a tree arranged in rows? What about the millions of drops of water in a river? Divinity means taking things as they come – not trying to predict life, but rather, letting life run its course in the hopes that something new and unique will surface.

Clearly, homeless people are divine.

“When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained,

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?” (PS 8:3-4)

If we are so small and subject to the vices of mortals, what makes us special enough to receive the attention of God? Especially the same God that created things as magnificent as the moon and the stars?

About two and a half years ago, Kate Shrumm pulled me aside at lunch and asked me to come to her locker. She said she needed to tell me something. I remember being confused, curious, and a little bit afraid, because usually if Kate wanted to tell me something, she didn't have to specifically pull me aside to do it. Our friendship was always very open; she accepted that the too-smart, tomboyish Cassie had a softer side, and I accepted the fact that she could accept me.

Needless to say, before I came along, Kate Shrumm never swore. And then when she did it was only in times of desperation. On that day when we got to her locker, before she could tell me anything, Kate looked at the ground and muttered a four-letter word. We'll just say it's synonymous with "crap". That's how I knew it had to be bad.

Then she told me about how her Dad got a job in Littleton, Colorado and the whole family was going to fly down there soon to look at houses. They were going to move forever.

I have no idea what it was like for this church to lose the Shrumms. I can only tell you what it's like to let go of your best friend in the middle of the years when you need one most. Without Kate around, I don't ride my bike to anyone's house in the summertime to help with yardwork and eat spaghetti. I don't leap like Wonder Woman into inflatable pools after losing a bad mitten round. And I don't share my locker with anyone at school anymore either....there's just a bunch of crumpled up papers, sad looking books and some ugly memories from German class living in there. You can make new friends, but you can't have the same friendship twice. I've missed having Kate around.

"Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the world," said Jesus. Every time I heard my name in

the hallway for two years, I turned around expecting Kate. In the beginning I thought I even saw her. I would get excited and turn to greet her, but then she wouldn't be there. She was gone. "Teach them the things I have taught you, and I will be with you to the end of the world." It has taken me this long to figure out that Kate and the Shrumms have been with me all along, through the memories I carry of them and the experiences I gained from friendship with Kate. That is a comforting lesson to learn.

In that vein of thought, I feel that people are like walking mirrors. We reflect every experience we've had, every phrase we've picked up, and every lesson that we've taken from our relationships with other people. In essence, we carry the people we care about with us when we repeat the things they've told us, and make choices based on how they would want us to act. If you saw my "mirror self" instead of this body standing before you, not only would you see Kate's face, but you'd see my dad's and my boyfriend's, my middle school Challenge teacher's, my stepmom's, my siblings', and probably even Carolyn Blackhurst's, Randy Marshall's and Julie Anderson's faces, (but I've only picked up really weird habits from the last three.....just kidding.) When I'm presented with a choice, I know that Kate would say to pick the more creative and spontaneous path, because that's the only way to live life. When I'm in disagreement with a teacher, Brian (my honourable boyfriend) would want me to have the utmost respect for my elder, but stand my ground nonetheless. And when I'm reflecting on the dream I had last night, Carolyn would tell me to find the part of myself that it corresponds with most to decipher its meaning.

If you haven't noticed already, let me point out that God didn't make the list of people I reflect. That's because God is the mirror. Being able to love people and recognise that my good habits come from imitating others is something, I think, God would want me to do, and so that part of me that can respect good ideas that aren't my own and live with decency is one of the few divine pieces of myself that I cling to, especially in times when not everything comes easily.

And so if I had to guess about why God pays attention to us all, it's probably because He knows that given the chance, we can learn, and we can be good people. And knowing that He's there to help us out in finding the right path is, for some of us, the last flame of hope that keeps us burning.

In closing, I'd like to quote some words from Max Ehrmann:

"You are a child of the universe  
no less than the trees and the stars;  
you have a right to be here.  
And whether or not it is clear to you,  
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God,  
whatever you conceive Him to be,  
and whatever your labors and aspirations,  
in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your  
soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams,  
it is still a beautiful world.

Be cheerful.

Strive to be happy."

Marci Glass, June 1, 2008

**“One *minor* difference between God and humanity”**

Scripture: Psalm 104

I don't like to brag, but I make a pretty good lasagna.

It is a fairly standard recipe, I suppose, but with a few added ingredients to make it my own *creation*. Perhaps some of you are actual chefs, like the “dessert goddess”, creating amazing dishes and desserts out of disparate ingredients. Or perhaps you paint, or sculpt, or knit, draw, wood work or garden. Perhaps your creation involves technology, designing and creating new software applications, graphic arts, or beautifully edited home movies. We all just experienced the holy mystery of beautiful music, created first a few hundred years ago when Hayden drew notations on a piece of paper, and then again today as musicians interpreted the notes, and the choir added their voices.

For all of the creations I have listed, I know there are myriad more. And all of these instances of creation are reasons for us to pause and give thanks to God. For our gifts. For the fact that we aren't all given the same gifts. For the beauty that results when gifts are shared in community.

But as the psalmist opens Psalm 104 with praise, “Bless the Lord, O my soul!”, he or she goes on to describe creation in a way that leaves no doubt that God creates differently than we can.

“You are wrapped in light as with a garment...you stretch out the heavens like a tent...you set the earth on its foundations...you cover the earth with the deep as with a garment.”

We can't do *any* of that. I can't at least. You should know that about your pastor.

The way God creates is so far beyond any amazing thing we can do. God does not take different ingredients and put them together as we make apple pie. God speaks a word and apples are *created*. God creates out of *nothing*.

All we can do is make good use of what God has already created.

In the face of God's creation, all we can do is notice it. Describe it. And say thanks.

**Bless the Lord, O my soul.**

How often do we notice creation? I confess that when I am in the outdoors, I tend to be on my way somewhere. I'm out for a jog. Or I'm walking to get my son at school. I look ahead, rarely up or down. But God occasionally calls me to notice. I run with my friend Katy, who is an avid naturalist. And we'll be running through the streets of Decatur when I notice that I have lost her. That she has stopped. So I go back to discover that she saw a red bug on a green leaf. Or she is smelling flowers. Or she's seen an owl, quietly lurking in the high branches of a tree. I'm not such a fast runner, so the stopping doesn't bother me. It usually gives me a chance to catch my breath, actually. But Katy has provided me with a gift, just as the psalmist has. She reminds me to look around. I ran this week without Katy, but something made me look up anyway. And I saw a beautiful bird perched on a wire, with what was left of the moon hanging in the early morning sky.

**Bless the Lord, O my soul.**

Kids can be like the psalmist too. When Elliott, my nine year old son, and I walk home from his school, it turns into a tour of the "creeping things innumerable" that the psalmist describes. He spies every beetle, caterpillar, ladybug, spider web, and ant hill in the block between our house and his school. I used to think it was because he was so short. You know. Closer to the ground.

But then I realized that it is because he's giving his attention to the moment. He's not distracted by the long list of things to be done later that afternoon. On our walk home, he doesn't fret about the sub-prime crisis or the war in Iraq. On our walk home, he looks around. He sees what God has created.

So, this morning, let's notice what the psalmist has described for us.

First, I notice the range of creation. From big ticket items like throwing down the heavens like a tent to small details like providing prey for the lions, God creates with purpose. God is watering the mountains from on high and providing trees in which the birds can build their nests. From the little creeping things to the giant Leviathan, God has created them all, and created for them the things they need to thrive.

Second, notice this provision. From water to quench thirst, plants to eat and to cultivate as food, God has given us in creation all we need. And has given us specifically what we need. The coney have their rocks. The goats have their mountains. The birds have their trees. Lions have their prey.

Third, this provision is more than we need. One of John Calvin's favorite verses is "wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart." Calvin saw this as evidence of God's over-abundant generosity. Because if God were only providing for our survival, God would have given us only water to drink. Maybe Gatorade. But wine, and I would argue espresso, are proof that God wants us to do more than survive. God gave us grape, grain and olive oil so that we can savor the gifts of creation and enjoy them, as we will soon when we gather around this table to share the gifts of bread and wine given us at our Lord's table.

How often do we sit down at a table, as families, to enjoy meals? I know that in our home, it does not happen as often as I wish. Life is busy and we are distracted. But this verse seems to be the opposite of America's fast food culture. Just as we are to slow down and look around to notice creation, so too are we to slow down and enjoy the abundant generosity of God's provision. Because, of course, when we take time to savor our food, we enjoy it more.

**Bless the Lord, O my Soul.**

Fourth, notice the role of human construction in creation. Here it is: "There go the ships".

That's it. The only reference to human building. There go the ships.

It does get a mention. It doesn't seem to be a bad thing, but rather a sign of human creativity.

But our creativity is just one small piece of God's creation. The ships of human creation just float across the surface of the real creation, leaving nothing but a wake on the water.

Is that what our construction is doing today? Floating across the surface of creation?

**Bless the Lord, O my soul.**

The other interesting reference to human creation is the reference that *isn't* in the text.

When the psalmist describes the cedars of Lebanon, I was expecting the reference to be about the great building projects of the Hebrew Scriptures. David and Solomon's palaces were built out of Lebanese cedar, as was The Temple, you know—that site of worship in Jerusalem. These trees can be 130 feet tall and 8 feet in diameter. Romans, Greeks, Persians, and Egyptians also used them in their projects.

But the psalmist makes *zero* reference to that use of the cedars of Lebanon. “The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that God planted. In them the birds build their nests.”

These trees are high rise condos for birds. Or, they are supposed to be. But years of over harvesting and deforestation has left few of them. There are concerted efforts being undertaken to replant the cedar forests, but in the midst of war and conflict, I suspect that tree planting is not given the priority.

Next, let’s talk about humans. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but humans don’t play a huge role in this psalm. We get a shout out in verse 14 because God gives us plants to use to bring forth food. And then we come out after the night is over to labor during the day. And we build the ships, of course. But other than that, we are just a part of the rest of creation.

Do we live that way, though? It seems we have taken the Genesis account of creation—the “made in God’s image” and “dominion over creation” parts, at least—and disregarded texts like the 104<sup>th</sup> Psalm. And, as American humans, we not only seem to think we have dominion over all creation, we sometimes act as if we have dominion over all other humans as well.

There was a story on NPR earlier this week about how the “average” American family lives. If every human on the planet lived like an average American, we would require 6 planet earths to have enough natural resources. 6 planet earths. Somehow we are living as if every verse in this psalm is about us. As if creation was made just for us.

So, if not just for our own uses, why did God create the world? Look at verse 31. “May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works.” This psalm is

the only place I know of in the Bible where God is called upon to rejoice. Creation is so beautiful, and so finely intertwined, that even God rejoices in it. The earth itself, in v 13, is satisfied with the fruit of God's work. Creation should be about our enjoyment. It is for our flourishing. But our flourishing should NOT come at the cost of the rest of creation. At the very end of the Psalm, there are a few verses about sinners tucked into a closing bit of praise. "Let the sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more." While the majority of the psalm is about all of creation, and not just humans, I suspect that *this* verse is *all* about humans. I doubt the Leviathan, or the storks and mountain goats are the sinners to whom the psalmist is referring. I don't know a single lion out there who is hoarding wildebeest carcasses in the freezer in his 4 car garage. How many cows do you encounter who are stockpiling grass? Humans are the only animals in creation who take more than their share. "Let the sinners be consumed from the earth." As we look at our world and our culture, I suggest we need to call ourselves, and our brothers and sisters to repentance, before we consume ourselves from the earth. As serious as the implications are for our greedy sinfulness, the psalm ends with praise. "Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord! This suggests to me that we can guilt ourselves into a funk all we want, but guilt won't bring around real change. When I hear "Bless the Lord, O my soul" immediately after "Let sinners be consumed from the earth", it seems as if the psalmist is giving us a better way. We do need to change the way we live, but not out of guilt. We need to do it in praise. We should look around at the beauty of God's creation and say thanks. We need to change the way we live in response to the abundant way God provides for us and for all of creation. If God provides grass for the

cattle, high mountains for the goats, and branches in which the birds can dwell, then surely God will provide for us.

Living in thanks and praise is ultimately, I think living in trust and confidence that God is in charge.

So, this week, let us take time to notice. To savor. To enjoy. To live simply so others may simply live. And, most of all, let us take time to give our thanks and praise to the God who has given so abundantly.

Amen.

First a word of warning.

This morning we're going to talk about justice – and not criminal justice, social justice.

Criminal justice has to do with "...the system of practices, and organizations, used by national and local governments, directed at maintaining social control, deterring and controlling crime, and sanctioning those who violate laws with criminal penalties."

Social justice is "...the concept of a society in which justice is achieved in every aspect of society, rather than merely the administration of law. It is generally thought of as a world which affords individuals and groups fair treatment and an impartial share of the benefits of society. (Not surprisingly, different proponents of social justice have developed different interpretations of what constitutes *fair treatment* and an *impartial share*.) Social Justice can also refer to the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society."

So if the concept of social justice makes you nervous or uneasy, prepare to be nervous and uneasy.

----- **THE GOOD NEWS** -----

I first got hooked on Bible study with a question. It's a very simple question really. It's something that a Sunday School teacher probably mentioned one day, when I wasn't paying attention. Or maybe I was absent. Whatever happened, I managed to get all the way to adulthood without knowing what, exactly, "the good news" is.

They're called the Gospels. Gospel means "Good News". So the function of the Gospels is to proclaim the Good News. But when I read them...at a cursory level, they are stories about the birth, life, teaching, miracles, arrest, execution, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Oh, and along the way he calls people to follow him, to be his companions. And at the very end, he sends them out to "make disciples" – he gives them a mission. That's all great stuff, life-directing stuff. But where, in that, is the gospel? What about that is good news?

This has been a long search, my quest for the gospel. It's something I have pondered off and on (more off than on) for the past 30 years. I keep going, searching, for a couple of reasons. First, it's an engaging occupation. Trying to tease ultimate truth out of the scriptures, and out of the church, is anything but straightforward. There are a number of reasons that could be, but basically I believe that's the way God wants it. Second, it's a journey of surprises. Every now and again someone will say something, or I will see or hear something that adds another piece to the puzzle.

So it was, last week, in our young adult class when the topic turned to the Kingdom of God.

----- **THE KINGDOM OF GOD** -----

It starts at the beginning of our oldest gospel, Mark. Mark, the gospel where we don't meet Jesus until he's grown, begins like this: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." There's that pesky reference to "good news" again. Notice how he just dangled it out there like a teaser? Next Mark quotes a prophesy from Isaiah. Then he devotes seven

verses to Jesus' baptism – seven verses in which Jesus has no dialogue. Nor does he speak in the two verse reference to the wilderness temptations. So it isn't until verse 15 that Jesus actually gets to speak. And the first words out of his mouth? "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has at hand; repent, and believe in the good news."

That's how it starts. That's how the earliest of the four gospels introduces Jesus' mission.

**"The time is fulfilled..."** We're not going to talk about that statement today. It's commonly understood that Jesus came to a time of great expectation. What, exactly was expected is less clear. We could spend the better part of a couple of months of study on those four words. Maybe someday we will.

**"...The kingdom of God is at hand;..."** This is actually why we're here today, so we'll skip over it for now and come back to it in just a bit.

**"...Repent..."** Explicit in the message is the element of repentance. Remember the couple of months we were going to spend on the first four words of this statement? Well, we could spend another couple of months on this one word, and its importance in Jesus' proclamation.

And finally **"...believe in the good news."** So there it is. Somehow the good news is clear to those who believe in it. While that may sound strange to our modern minds, in the language of faith it makes perfect sense. "Seeing is believing" is replaced by "believing is seeing", people from Missouri (the "show-me state") have an extra challenge, and at the other end of the Gospels, in John chapter 20, we are reminded: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

I get it. In order to see the Good News you have to believe. Lord, "I believe. Help my unbelief!" But what? What is it that I am to believe? The time is fulfilled? OK, I get that. And the kingdom of God is at hand. Ah – therein lies the rub!

The kingdom of God is at hand. It's not out there somewhere. It's certainly not up there. Jesus isn't talking about heaven—the other side of the veil. In Jesus' terms, the kingdom of God is at hand. It's here, now. This is it. Which really only leaves a couple of questions:

First; What does it all mean?

Second; Why is this good news?

As it turns out, the second question is the easier of the two, so I'll deal with it first. This is good news (actually it's the best news) because carried within this statement is purpose for our lives. Assuming "the kingdom of God" is a good thing; our role seems to be that of members. Who are we? We are the members, the citizens, of the kingdom of God. Not a bad position to be in. It's interesting to note that, for all the importance of this concept, for the significance of its place in Jesus' ministry, he has a very hard time describing the Kingdom of God. Whenever he refers to the kingdom he resorts to metaphor – mustard seeds, camels through the needle's eye, yeast and great banquets. So it is with our place in the kingdom. In one parable we are the heirs. In another we are the banquet guests. Clearly ours is the place of honor in the kingdom.

And that's good news indeed.

But then we have the first question. What does it all mean?

----- **JUSTICE** -----

Bible Trivia Time: The phrase the “Kingdom of God” (or Matthew’s preferred alternative the “Kingdom of Heaven”) appears in the 4 gospels 83 times. Jesus lays out a vision for it, talks about how it is planted, grows and is spread, and he spends a lot of time talking about who’s in and who’s out – the sheep and the goats as it were. And usually, particularly when he’s talking about who’s in and who’s out, his illustrations carry an overtone of social justice. Clearly, the Kingdom of God is a place where the sick are healed; the outcasts are welcomed; the poor are cared for; the helpless receive help; the afflicted are comforted and the comfortable are afflicted. That pretty-well lays out an agenda for us, as heirs, as Christians, as a community of faith.

There’s another message here that is too important to miss. Nobody gets in because they “deserve” to be in. As a matter of fact, nobody even “deserves” to be in. If entrance were on the basis of merit, then nobody would make it. This inheritance is open to all who respond to the invitation. I’m reminded of the parable of the banquet where the invited guests are too busy to attend – inspecting the farm or looking at the oxen they’ve just bought. So the host (God) sends his servant out – not to the synagogues or the temple, not to the banks or the business offices, but “...into the streets and lanes of the town...” to “...bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” That’s probably not how we would go about filling our pews, but that’s definitely how Jesus would do it.

And did you notice who we are in that parable? We’re the servant sent by the master to invite the guests. That says something profound about our role, our task, in the kingdom. It says that there’s work to be done and we are the ones to do it.

If this were a time for hell-fire and brimstone I would quote Jesus who told the chief priests and temple leaders: “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”

That’s a pretty straight-forward message. Perhaps it’s a little harsh, but you get the point. The kingdom of God, if it is indeed here and now, only really exists for those who participate in it. And it is through our participation that we come to believe, that we perceive its significance, and that we rejoice in the really great news that it is breaking in, evident all around us, yes; but more importantly, evident through us.

Southminster, and we Southminsterites have a long and fruitful history of proclaiming the Kingdom. We take great joy in engaging in acts of kindness, charity, benevolence. Through the work of Presbyterian Women, by volunteering at the interfaith sanctuary; by stocking our food pantry or volunteering for Vacation Bible School; these are all ways in which we proclaim the kingdom of God. We volunteer at the Assistance League; Our Sunday School bought chickens for a family in Africa; we are school volunteers and foster parents, we Southminsterites actually spend a lot of time in “Kingdom work”.

In a way, I hate lists like these. Because for every act listed there are a dozen that are forgotten, or that we don’t even know about. But that’s one of the really great things about Southminster.

When we see something that needs done, we do it. Be it in our daily work, or our volunteer involvements, or even here in this faith community. It's truly impossible to catalog all the ways we act out our faith, enriching our community, serving our neighbors and our God.

But there's more. As I read the scriptures I see that kingdom work is more than just caring for those in need. Being an heir to the kingdom includes an element of assailing the structures that create the need. John Dominic Corssan talks about "Systemic and structural injustice..." which he describes as "...the line item in a budget that guarantees that half a million kids will be hurt six months from now -- and sort of nobody 'did it.' It just sort of happened." Too often our society functions to keep the downcast on the fringes. So while we are going about our work of being Christ's people in this place and time, we also need to ask some tough questions. Questions like: "What is our appropriate response to the influx of refugees coming into our community? Is it better to use our time and talents and resources seeing to their immediate needs? Or should we devote some of our energies to the reasons that these children of God are forced to flee their homes and homeland, seeking a safe haven half a world away?" or "Do we better use our time and talents and resources feeding the hungry or working to alleviate the systemic and structural causes of hunger?" And the same questions can be asked about the homeless, battered women, abused children, abused elders, even prisoners.

Have you noticed what all these groups have in common? They are the great second class, the growing segment of our nation who exist (You can't really call it living.) who exist at the margins of society. And when you read the gospels, when you look at who is present at Jesus' dinner table, you discover that these are the people who, according to Helen Prejean, "receive preferential love" in the eyes of our Lord.

If we are to fully participate in the Kingdom of God, we need to view everything we do through the lenses of social justice.

I have a vision of just such a church. I have a vision of a church where the Kingdom is constantly breaking in because we are constantly looking for ways to spread the good news, and to build a community where, well, "...justice roll(s) down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Is it easy? Of course not. There's not doubt that it's easier to donate money to a battered women's shelter than to take on a criminal justice system that too often regards the victim as the defendant. And it's easier to volunteer at the interfaith sanctuary where somewhere between 23 and 40% of those served are veterans than it is to take on the issues of funding for veterans' programs, affordable housing and the lack of available mortgage credit. Those are big tasks; and it's sometimes easier to tell ourselves that there's no way we can make an effective difference. But if we are to be true to our faith, if we take our role as heirs to the Kingdom seriously, we must admit that with God nothing is impossible. With God's help we can make a difference.

So how do we start?

I'm not going to tell you. I've got some ideas, but they are mine, not Southminster's. What I will tell you is that this is something for Southminster to figure out. This is good conversation for session to have, either now with Edward, or in the fall with Marci – either way it's important to

remember that what we're talking about here isn't a program, but an attitude. If we truly are to be participants in ushering in – announcing the kingdom, we need to look at everything we do with that attitude. To show my age and paraphrase a line from the TV show Night Court: "Justice isn't what we do, it's who we are."

Incidentally, I have no illusions that the conversations on the topic will show much in the way of agreement. You'll remember at the beginning, when I defined social justice, I indicated that "...different proponents of social justice have developed different interpretations of what constitutes *fair treatment* and an *impartial share*." There is no doubt in my mind that several different interpretations are well represented at Southminster. But honestly that doesn't scare me. I think it's far more important to have the conversation, charged with emotion though it may be, than to use our different values as an excuse to avoid the issue. This is much too important for that.

Ultimately, we need to spend some time thinking about what it means to "...desire mercy, not sacrifice." Maybe that mercy takes the form of healing the sick, or comforting the afflicted. Maybe that mercy takes the form of eating with sinners and tax collectors. And maybe, just maybe, that mercy takes the form of looking at our world and asking; "What can we do to make life more just and fair?"

The Lord has given us great gifts. And the Lord has given us a work to do. The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. May God richly bless our work this day, this week and into the future.

Amen.

**A Promise Fulfilled**  
**Genesis 17:1-8**  
**Southminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Edward Dunn July 6, 2008**

How did you spend your Independence holiday? Some of you won't hear today's sermon because you're away on vacation. Some spend the day working around home and some of you may have even had to work because of your occupation. Many of us spent the day with family and friends. How did you spend your day?

John Buchanan writes, "The fourth of July is certainly not a church holiday, but it is an opportunity for the church and the preacher to reflect on the history of the republic, the extraordinary group of leaders who gathered in Philadelphia to declare independence and their remarkable conclusion that at the heart of the American revolution would be individual liberty and freedom of conscience."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes, its necessary for reflection in order to fully understand what our next steps might be or even to hear that voice – God's voice speaking. Listen...

Pastor McAfee stared out his office window. Summer had a way of turning him into a daydreamer watching the world became an artist's palate of greens and yellows, purples and reds of the summer varieties of flowers. He found himself taking walks more frequently enjoying the very places that in other seasons he preferred to avoid. Warm weather had a way of improving his attitude toward the world.

His gaze wasn't fixed on anything in particular. He was lost in thought about the church. It wasn't that there was anything wrong. In fact things at Third Suburban Presbyterian Church couldn't have been better. There was a feeling of excitement and anticipation because in just a few days they would be celebrating the church's anniversary.

Their history began in 1833 when a mission church named Long Creek Presbyterian Church was established. The church had been founded out on the town's frontier. A group of folks at the First Church had decided that the time was right to develop a new congregation in what was going to be a growing part of town. A site was chosen some 8 miles from town to plant a new congregation.

He had seen pictures of these church "ancestors" dressed in dark suits and white shirts. Most of the pictures depicted men whose faces were filled with stern, pious determination. He knew that that fierce and determined faithfulness was probably driven and sustained by an equally fierce determination from the women of their day.

It had been their intention to re-create First Presbyterian. These early "church fathers" had been only partly right – the area did grow with families as the town expanded but these new people didn't fit the model of the ideal Presbyterian. They included the hourly workers in the local factories, not the salaried managers. The store clerks rather than

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<sup>1</sup> "Free to believe", The Christian Century, July 1, 2008

store owners. The neighborhood homes weren't filled by Scotch-Irish Presbyterians but were by immigrant families from across Europe and in recent years from Africa and South America. Each family brought with them a set of different customs and ways of thinking about God and the church.

The original plans for Long Creek had to be scrapped. A few of the charter members left disgusted that it couldn't become a clone of the church they left behind. Despite a less than optimistic outlook the church survived. It survived and grew because of people who must have been like Abraham and Sarah in their faithfulness to God's vision. It was clear that God was faithful, too.

Third Suburban, formally came into existence in 1900 when the congregations of Long Creek and another church plant, Juniper Presbyterian Church, were merged to create a new church on the southern suburbs of town. The merger hadn't been easy and surprisingly, although no one today was even alive when the merger took place, there were references to the "good old days" - a phrase Pastor McAfee had determined to be clearly subjective for each person. Despite their differences they persevered and grew and became Third Suburban Presbyterian Church.

The church had grown and expanded its building and programs. It had supported the work of mission around the world. It had engaged in community service projects and had at times been a prophetic voice on social issues. It had years when it struggled - lean years when money was short and programs needed to be trimmed. It had pastors who had been strong leaders and others who were not. Pastor McAfee suspected that the congregation saw his leadership firmly in the middle - he had his moments in both directions.

The Session had commissioned an anniversary committee charged with organizing the celebration to be culminated on the first Sunday in July which also coincided with the date of Third Presbyterian's original charter. The committee invited several former pastors to join them that Sunday. Somewhat reluctantly, Pastor McAfee had agreed that it would be nice if former pastors could participate in worship that day. In his own insecurity, he had thought, "What if they realize they made a terrible mistake letting good old Pastor Jonas go?" He imagined the beginning of a vigorous campaign to return a now 92 year old former pastor being waged in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings much like the political campaigns for public office.

Secretly he hoped they'd all come down with a terrible case of laryngitis. He knew that the only thing worse than one preacher on Sunday would be a room filled with preachers who when given a pulpit and the opportunity to "say a few words" would turn a normal worship service into a worship marathon as Jello molds melted and formerly hot fried chicken sat waiting in the wings.

His fears were relieved when it began to look as though there wouldn't be any additional speakers. Most of the former pastors had responded with regrets at not being able to attend but with best wishes to the congregation in its celebration. Pastor Jonas who was

Pastor McAfee's predecessor had served Third Suburban for 29 years – longer than any other pastor – wrote that he was unable to attend because of health reasons. Pastor McAfee suspected that his health condition was brought on as a result of working 29 years in one place.

Genesis 17 was the text for the anniversary celebration. He selected it because it is there that God establishes a covenant with Abram. It was a covenant that would make Abram the father of many nations, that would see him as the ancestor to kings and it was a covenant in which his descendants would possess land. It was also a covenant in which God had pledged to be the God of Abram and his descendants.

He planned to preach about how God had been faithful to the covenant and that God continued to be faithful to this covenant even to this very day. He was going to talk about how unfaithful the descendants of Abraham had been – how they challenged God and how they mistreated one another yet God had been faithful.

He had been looking at those photographs – the old ones from Third Suburban's past. He thought how some ancestors were disappointed in this new church. Some of them had given up. But from the few who had remained loyal to this vision God had created this wonderful congregation.

He looked at recent photographs depicting a variety of people...men and women of different skin colors...but with the same determination found in the earliest photos. The old photos showed construction of a church building while the newer ones showed the building of a Habitat for Humanity home. The old photographs depicted a community school for their children and the newer photos showed a community building in Honduras built during a mission trip by members at Third Suburban. He saw the pictures of suited and dress wearing worshipers and compared them with the t-shirt and jeans wearing guitarist from the Joyful Noise praise band and determined that faithfulness cannot be determined by attire. God had been faithful to Third Suburban for many generations. Yet God had allowed them the freedom to become a faithful people who were not constricted to time, place or even "the way we always did it."

They celebrated communion that Sunday and it was when Pastor McAfee proclaimed the invitation to the table, "People will come from the east, and from the west, from the north and the south to sit at table prepared by our Lord Jesus Christ", that he was struck by the miracle that was Third Suburban Presbyterian Church. As he looked out at the many different faces that made up this congregation, he was struck by how God's faithfulness had sustained this congregation through its history.

God had been faithful even to the point of offering his Son, Jesus Christ to die for the sins of the world. God's faithfulness wouldn't end with the cross but in the power of the resurrection. To have the story end at the cross would make the feast they were about to share a memorial meal. Through the power of the resurrection the meal they were about to share and the life they had been called to lead, as disciples and as the Third Suburban Presbyterian Church was a celebration. God was faithful indeed! Amen.