

Ever Challenged to Feed and Be the Church of God

Acts 20: 17-18,25,28,32-38; and II Timothy 2:1-7
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It has been said, “All God’s children got problems.” My own paraphrase of that is, “All God’s people and groups of people got challenges.” We all have challenges; and groups and communities have challenges as much as individuals do. Twenty to thirty years after Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and resurrected, a Jewish scholar named Saul changed his name to Paul after his conversion to being a follower of Jesus Christ. He traveled the Mediterranean Sea’s east and northeast side preaching and teaching and relating to persons in communities spreading the good news of God’s grace which (Paul was convinced) God’s Spirit creates through faith within followers of this Jesus. As we have read and heard from verses in Acts, chapter 20, the leaders and members of one of those local faith communities – the one in and around Ephesus (in today’s western Turkey) – appreciated Paul so much that they were moved to tears when he stopped on his way west to Rome, convinced, as he was, that this would be the final time he was at Ephesus in person.

Marie’s ministry has taken forms similar to Paul’s – not identical to but similar to. Marie is not the Apostle Paul. Paul was not Marie Mickey. We are not the church at Ephesus. So you may or may not hug Marie and weep today, or you may. We all do well, though, because we are God’s people in the first quarter of the century 2000 years after Jesus and Paul walked the eastern Mediterranean, (we all do well) to ask ourselves, “Do we strive to be a church more like Ephesus or Philippi – churches from whom growing and serving in Christ took the form of a unified, vision even with the diversity which existed among their members? OR do we muddle around – and crackle around – more like the church at Corinth, which was preoccupied with disliking itself because it had a diverse membership which could not “get past” their differences to live and serve and grow in Christ – and into Christ – with a unified vision – in spite of their diversity? Is FPC-Bryan today (and will FPC-Bryan, after Marie departs, be) more like Ephesus and Philippi, or more like Corinth? Gladly growing and serving in Christ among a broad community of which our internal diversity is only a sample? Or unhappy among ourselves because others among the First Presbyterians – in their particular personalities and opinions – are not as close to each of our individual personalities and opinions as we would be more comfortable with them being? More like Ephesus and Philippi? Or more like Corinth? Time will tell. And, thankfully – because don’t we always depend on this? – (thankfully) God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ is at work among us, including all the days and weeks and months and years beyond Marie’s (or Ted’s) or anyone’s time or tenure here. God’ Spirit in Jesus Christ is at work among us, thankfully, as we are ever challenged to feed and be the Church of God, whose love is known as embodied in Jesus Christ.

Now, while I’m finished speaking from the Scripture in Acts Chapter 20, I’ve taken the liberty of asking Marie’s daughter, Elizabeth Cluff, to bring us a message from Elizabeth City, North Carolina, where she serves as pastor of a Presbyterian congregation there. Elizabeth’s voice will be heard through the sound system, and you can follow by reading the script folded in your bulletin.

“This Sunday, on Mother’s Day, in my own congregation, we are celebrating the gifts of all women, and our Presbyterian Women will be leading worship. In the scripture, Paul reminds Timothy to remember, fondly the gifts of faith passed down from his Grandmother and mother. It is that faith from the strong women in his life, which will give him the power to continue on ministering and teaching others. It is only fitting that I share this text with them and with you today, as I too give thanks to God “whom I worship with a clear conscience,” for the women in my life who have shaped and formed my faith, especially my wonderful mother Marie.

“When I share my faith story, I always mention, that my faith has always been a constant stream, and I owe that to my mother immersing my world in the story of God and God’s people. I grew up as a cradle Presbyterian, and was nurtured and developed by my mother’s love, compassion and desire to

teach me what it means to be a child of God and live into that promise. It was my mother who taught me the familiar childhood bible songs and sang me hymns as I fell asleep. She taught many of my Sunday school classes, including my confirmation class. And answered many of my deepest faith questions when my faith wavered. And when I decided to be Episcopalian for a few years (despite her best efforts in finding a Presbyterian church in Austin) she welcomed the broadening of my ecumenism and worship.

“My mom has been my greatest supporter and champion. She has pushed me and encouraged me as well as help me pick up the pieces when I have failed. Over and over again she has reminded me that she will “love me forever, because as long as she is living, her baby I’ll be.” My mother has been incredibly supportive throughout my time at seminary and during my first call as a minister. While I struggled through Greek and Hebrew classes, she sent a steady stream of wisdom and encouragement, not to mention her study notes for Greek paradigms! While I worked on assembling my documents for ordination, she kept me “on-track,” making sure that I would be ready to receive a call when the time came. While I fretted, failed, and floundered through my first year of ministry, her advice was only a phone call or text message away. “No, you don’t need to approve the annual budget at the congregational meeting, but yes, they need to approve your change of call.” “You might not want to do a baptism on a communion Sunday--that’s a lot of moving parts in worship.” And my favorite mantra which always helps in times of crisis, “This, too, shall pass.” On my very first Easter Sunday at my church, she sent flowers with a note reminding me that I wasn’t alone for the holidays. And every time I begin to think this whole ministry thing is for the birds and that I should find a new career, she is there to remind me that this is who I am called to be and where I am called to serve. My ministry has been enriched by having my mom in the same field. As the weeks and years have gone by, we’ve shared both the joys and the challenges of ministry--even though we live states apart. It is a great blessing to share this life of ministry with my mother. Though our ministry contexts differ and our theologies sometimes challenge one another, we value and affirm each other’s unique and God-given calls. Like a caring mother, I know that she worries about me, she hurts when I hurt, she rejoices when I rejoice. But that’s part of her calling as a mom. I take comfort and delight in the knowledge that she will support me as I do the work I am called to do.

“I am grateful that she is not only my mother, but also my colleague and my friend. As the scripture says, “I am grateful to God-whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. It is tearful to see the part of my mother’s ministry come to an end, for her to leave a town and a church filled with many memories (not only for her but for me as well)...it is never easy to say goodbye, but I pray that we may all be filled with joy, and remember fondly, the imprint that she has had made upon our hearts. We all are grateful for how she has shaped our lives and our faith. I want to close with a blessing not only for my mom, but also for all whom she leaves behind. Not only is this a new phase in life for my mom, but it is also a new phase in the life and ministry of First Pres Bryan. As the days go on, you all can rejoice in the memories that you all have created and look forward to where God is calling y’all to go and be and do.

“Blessing That Does Not End by Jan Richardson – ‘From the moment it first laid eyes on you, this blessing loved you. This blessing knew you from the start. It cannot explain how. It just knows that the first time it sat down beside you, it entered into a conversation that had already been going on forever. Believe this conversation has not stopped. Believe this love still lives – the love that crossed an impossible distance to reach you, to find you, to take your face into its hands and bless you. Believe this does not end – that the gesture, once enacted, endures. Believe this love goes on – that it still takes your face into its hands, that it presses its forehead to yours as it speaks to you in undying words, that it has never ceased to gather your heart into its heart. Believe this blessing abides. Believe it goes with you always. Believe it knows you still.’ Many blessings to you all; and many blessings to my mom.”
– All honor and praise be to God!