

1SERMON FOR THE 20<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY SERVICE  
AT SOUTH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS  
NOVEMBER 15, 2009

“HELP ME, HELP ME, HELP ME,  
THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU”

EPHESIANS 3:14-21

COME SAY THESE WORDS WITH ME:

“MAY CHRIST DWELL IN OUR HEARTS.....

TO ROOT US AND GROUND US IN LOVE.....

MAY GOD GIVE US THE POWER.....

TO COMPREHEND WITH ALL THE SAINTS.....

WHAT IS THE BREADTH.....

AND THE LENGTH....

AND THE HEIGHT....

AND THE DEPTH.....

AND TO KNOW THE LOVE OF CHRIST.....

THAT SURPASSES KNOWLEDGE .....

SO THAT WE MAY BE FILLED .....

WITH ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD” .....

THIS CHURCH, THIS CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY,  
THIS NOAH’S ARK, THIS PEOPLE WANDERING IN  
THE WILDERNESS, THIS BAND OF PILGRIMS,  
HAS BEEN ON A SPIRIT LED 20 YEAR JOURNEY.  
I HAVE WATCHED YOU AT A DISTANCE WITH FEAR  
AND TREMBLING, PRAYING FOR YOU  
WHEN YOU STUMBLED AND SHOUTED “PRAISE GOD”  
WHEN YOU SUCCEEDED. AND LOOK AT YOU NOW.

ST. PAUL’S PRAYER, WRITTEN LONG AGO FOR  
THAT STRUGGLING CHURCH IN EPHESUS, MEANS  
EVERYTHING TO PETER. ITS VISION AND BEAUTY  
CAPTURED HIM. IT GROUNDS HIM IN GOD AND  
ROOTS HIM IN CHRIST LIKE FOR YOU.

THIS PRAYER REMINDS HIM AND US, WE FOLLOWERS OF THAT CRAZY CHRIST, THAT WE ARE LED BY FAITH THAT SURPASSES KNOWLEDGE.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS?

IT MEANS THAT YOUR PASTOR DOESN'T ALWAYS KNOW WHERE HE IS GOING. HE TRUSTS GOD.

HIS FEET KEEP MOVING AND HIS HEART BEATS WITH HOPE. YET THE PILGRIMAGE CHANGES THE PILGRIM. HE KEEPS ON MOVING JUST LIKE THAT CRAZY JESUS. YOU KNOW, MY FRIENDS, IT'S THE ONLY WAY YOU GET ANYWHERE. "ALLELUIA"

THIS CHURCH ARRIVED WHERE IT IS LESS BY PLANNING THAN BY PRAYING. WHEN YOU MAKE A PLAN, GOD COMES ALONG FOR THE RIDE.

WHEN YOU PRAY, YOU GET ON THE BUS AND JESUS

IS THE DRIVER.

YOUR PASTOR STOOD BY THE BUS DOOR AND SAID, “COME ON BOARD”. SO HOW ARE YOU ENJOYING THE RIDE SO FAR?

THE WAY I SEE IT, SOUTH CHURCH HAS BEEN IN A 20 YEAR LONG PRAYER. HERE’S WHAT I KNOW ABOUT PRAYER. IT CHANGES YOU. PRAYER TRANSFORMS YOU. YOU START IN ONE PLACE AND YOU END UP IN A DIFFERENT PLACE.

THE WRITER, ANNE LAMOTT, ONE SUNDAY, WANDERED INTO A SMALL CHURCH IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA AS A CYNICAL CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR TO RELIGION. THEN HER LIFE CHANGED, NOT BECAUSE OF THE LOGIC OF CHURCH DOCTRINE, BUT BECAUSE OF THE LOVE THAT THOSE CHURCH PEOPLE OFFERED HER AND HER LITTLE BOY, SAM.

THEY MELTED HER HEART.

SHE WAS A PRODIGAL WELCOMED HOME.

AND AREN'T WE ALL? LOOKING FOR A HOME?

IN HER FIRST BOOK ON FAITH, "TRAVELING  
MERCIES", SHE WROTE THAT THE FIRST PRAYER  
IS "HELP ME, HELP ME, HELP ME".

THEN YOU COME TO THE SECOND PRAYER,  
"THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU."

LISTEN TO THOSE PRAYERS. YOU START WHERE  
WE ALL START WITH;"ME, ME, ME". WE BEGIN  
CONFUSED, AFRAID, IN NEED, AND HUNGRY.  
THEN HOPE APPEARS. AND GOD IS PRESENT.

AND EVERYTHING CHANGES. YOUR EYES ROTATE  
FROM INWARD TO OUTWARD. NEED TO GRATITUDE.

AS WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN SAID, "I LOVE THE

WILDNESS OF FAITH. FIRST YOU LEAP AND THEN  
GROW WINGS.”

EVERY PRAYER CONJURES UP JACOB’S LADDER;  
CONNECTING HEAVEN AND EARTH SO THAT ANGELS  
CAN COME AND BE AMONG US, BLESSING US AS WE  
WANDER IN THE WILDERNESS OF WHERE WE ARE.

FOR 20 YEARS, SOUTH CHURCH HAS BEEN  
BREATHING PRAYER, IN AND OUT, IN AND  
OUT, TURNING FEAR TO HOPE, CHANGING, LIVING  
NOT BY SMALLNESS OF KNOWLEDGE BUT BY THE  
LARGENESS OF FAITH.

IN 1989, YOU WERE A GREAT FLAGSHIP OF A  
CHURCH. BUT THE SHIP WAS LISTING AND SINKING.  
BY TOSSING OVERBOARD THINGS NO LONGER  
NEEDED OR THAT WORKED, YOU SAVED THE SHIP.

YOU SAILED ON. YOU LET GO AND LET GOD IN.

COME AND FINISH PAUL'S PRAYER WITH ME.

“NOW TO GOD WHO BY THE POWER OF THE WORK  
WITHIN US.....

IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY...

FAR MORE (TWICE).....

THAN ALL WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE...

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.” PRAISE THE LORD.

‘JESUS LOVES ME, THIS I KNOW,

- SING IT WITH ME -

FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO,  
LITTLE ONES TO HIM BELONG,  
THEY ARE WEAK BUT HE IS STRONG.”  
LET'S SING IT TOGETHER.

THIS IS NOT QUITE RIGHT. JESUS LOVES US. YES.

THE BIBLE TELLS US SO. YES.

BUT JESUS DIDN'T WRITE THE BIBLE. WE DID.

THE BIBLE IS LESS GOD'S WORDS TO US AND

MORE OUR WITNESS TO GOD'S POWER IN US.

IF WE KNOW THAT JESUS LOVES US, IT IS BECAUSE  
THE MEN AND WOMEN AROUND HIM, AND THE MEN  
AND WOMEN WHO HEARD IT FROM THEM,  
TELL US SO. NOW WE TELL IT. AND YOU ARE.

WHAT THEY TELL US IS THIS: FOR GOD SO LOVED  
THE WORLD, THAT GOD CAME TO BE ONE OF US.  
GOD WANTS TO BE WITH US. WE ARE GOD'S  
BELOVED.

YOU CANNOT LOVE FROM A DISTANCE. LOVE  
HAS TO DRAW US CLOSER AND CLOSER, IT MAKES US  
LOOK AT ONE ANOTHER WITHOUT FEAR OR  
JUDGMENT. LOVE TURNS THE LENS INTO FOCUS.

IN HER BOOK, "LEAVING CHURCH", BARBARA  
BROWN TAYLOR, WRITES,

“THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF THE BIBLE, IT SEEMS TO ME, IS TO CONVINCING PEOPLE TO SET THE WRITTEN WORD DOWN IN ORDER TO BECOME LIVING WORDS IN THE WORLD FOR GOD’S SAKE. FOR ME, THIS WILLING CONVERSION OF INK TO BLOOD IS THE FULL SUBSTANCE OF FAITH. IN PRACTICE, THIS MEANS THAT MY FAITH IS FAR MORE RELATIONAL THAN DOCTRINAL.”

SHE UNDERSTANDS THIS CRAZY CHRIST. JESUS DID NOT SAY, “CHECK YOUR DOCTRINES.”. JESUS DID SAY, “CHECK YOUR HEART. LOVE GOD. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR. NOTHING ELSE MATTERS.” DON’T LOOK FOR LOOPHOLES. DON’T STAMMER IN ARGUMENTS. GET UP AND GET TO WORK.

PETER HELPED YOU TO HEAR THIS GOSPEL. YOU, HERE AT SOUTH CHURCH, KNOW

THAT JESUS LOVES YOU.

IN ADDITION TO HIS FICTION, RAYMOND CARVER  
WROTE POETRY.

LISTEN TO HIS SHORT POEM “LAST FRAGMENT”  
“AND DID YOU GET WHAT YOU WANTED FROM  
THIS LIFE EVEN SO?            I DID.  
AND WHAT DID YOU WANT?

TO CALL MYSELF BELOVED, TO FEEL MYSELF  
BELOVED ON THE EARTH.”

ARE YOU LOVED? ARE YOU GOD’S BELOVED?  
THIS IS EVERYONE’S QUESTION. AND HERE IS THE  
GOSPEL TRUTH, WE KNOW THE ANSWER. WE HEAR  
IT THE WORDS OF JESUS. YOU HAVE HEARD THEM.

SOUTH CHURCH IS NOT WHAT IT WAS 20 YEARS  
AGO. YOU HAVE BEEN ON A JOURNEY, LIKE NOAH,

LIKE THE ISRAELITES, LIKE THE PILGRIMS.

YOU ARE A NEW CHURCH THAT LOOKS  
DIFFERENT, THINKS DIFFERENTLY, IS LOUDER,  
MORE PRAYERFUL, MORE FREE, AND, MORE FUN.

BECAUSE YOU KNOW THAT YOU ARE  
GOD'S BELOVED PEOPLE YOU HAVE FOUND VOICES  
THAT CAN SING AND FEET THAT CAN DANCE.

YES, THIS IS A DAY OF CELEBRATION.

HOW DID YOU GET HERE? YOU HAD A LEADER.

LIKE THE ISRAELITES, BLAME PETER OR PRAISE  
PETER, BUT HE WAS YOUR MOSES.

I KNOW THIS. IN THESE 20 YEARS, PETER GAVE  
HIS SOUL TO GOD AND EVERYTHING ELSE TO YOU.  
HE SHOWED YOU HOW TO GIVE YOUR SOULS TO GOD  
AND EVERYTHING ELSE TO THE MISSION AND

MINISTRIES YOU DO HERE IN JESUS' NAME.

YOU DISCOVERED THAT YOU ARE CHRIST'S HEART  
AND HANDS ON EARTH.

YOU DISCOVERED THAT YOU ARE CHRIST'S LOVE  
AND LIGHT IN THE WORLD.

NOW LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE.

SING WITH ME.....

“THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE,  
I'M GOING TO LET IT SHINE.”

TODAY, CELEBRATE, REMEMBER, SING AND LAUGH.

THEN TOMORROW, HERE IS WHAT YOU DO.

ALL OF YOU, GET BACK WORK.

CONTINUE WHAT YOU HAVE BEGUN,

PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL MESSAGE OF LOVE AND  
JUSTICE,

PRAY LIKE IT WAS BREATHING

TO BE CHRIST WELCOMING THE STRANGER

BE CHRIST TO THE LOST AND LONELY

FEED THE HUNGRY WITH HOLY BREAD

GO, GOD'S BELOVED, LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE.