

“Saying Goodbye” GPPC 3-22-20
2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

So, I sometimes wondered what my last Sunday as Guilford Park Presbyterian’s pastor would be like. What might the sanctuary look like. Who would be there. And the really important detail--what we might eat at the reception.

Things are a little different than I imagined. I’m speaking to you not from the sanctuary but while sitting in my office. Four intrepid church members are here spread about, making one exception to our “Stay out of the church building until further notice; this means you.” rule. Two are in the Church Administrator’s office, one in a chair in my office, and the one sitting on my couch has promised that she will not snore during my sermon.

It’s not exactly what I expected. But then again, *life* is often not what we expect. Yet even in the midst of tough times, scary times, we know God is good. And God’s love will prevail in the end. Our call as Covid-19 continues its onslaught is to show each other and the world God’s love even with the limitations imposed by “social distancing.” So this week

Jeff Paschal

and in the weeks ahead, let us love as creatively, deeply, and persistently as we can. How might God be calling you and me?

We're going to spend our last few moments together looking at the congregation through the window of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonian church. Paul writes to a church dear to him but separated from him by distance. That's going to be our situation soon. But here's the main point I gather from Paul's letter: Because we've seen God's work in the church all along, we celebrate the past, we're challenged in the present, and we're confident about the future.

We celebrate the past at Guilford Park. Donna Barrier, one of our members, has an excellent history of the church year by year on the church's website. <https://www.guilfordpark.org/yearly-history.html> Take a careful look. Especially I celebrate the past eight years and five months with you. Think about just a few of the memories we enjoy. Spiritual growth nurtured by prayer, worship, study, service, and fellowship together. New members who've come to share life with us here. The joy of baptisms and weddings. Caring for each other when death came and grief was its expected but unwelcome partner. Do you member?

Jeff Paschal

Then there were the “ordinary” events often filled with extraordinary grace. Learning together in Christian education. Visiting with sick or hurting people and shut-ins. Welcoming confirmation classes. Fellowship events such as the Christmas Breakfast, the Chili Cook-off, the Pig Picking (poor piggies), Christmas caroling at homes and, this year, near the Oak tree, and the Spring Festival complete with bouncy houses. The gorgeous works of the Liturgical Arts Ministry and the loving creations of the prayer shawl ministry. Going to meeting after meeting after meeting. (T.S. Eliot said he had “measured out his life in coffee spoons.” I’ve measured out my life in Presbyterian calendars—not a bad way to measure out a life.) Sharing the glory of worship and celebrating the beautiful music provided by our choirs, accompanists, and their leaders. You remember, don’t you?

There were several year-long church emphases: the Year of the Bible (when many of us read through the entire Bible in a year in order to receive the coveted stained glass cross suncatcher), Tend the Temple (a year of focus on spirituality and care of the human body), Walk the Walk (various discipleship practices), and Stand Up and Step Out (a year of

Jeff Paschal

combining mission and social justice).

I've also enjoyed working with church staff: Fred, Kit, Jane, Kim, Bill, Brian, Jordan, Susan, Debbie, and other staff who were here before they were. Thank you.

Guilford Park has continued its tradition of local mission with financial assistance and hands-on involvement in Greensboro Urban Ministry, the Interactive Resource Center, and other organizations. With the support of the church, in 2012 one of our members, Mike Sasser, founded the Guilford Park Guys program that provides basketball, tutoring, and mentoring for at-risk boys from Partnership Village and nearby. Many of these boys have not only graduated from high school but have gone on to find good jobs, enlist in the military, or go to college. The program has continued to grow recently with amazing young men from NC A&T coming over and serving as mentors.

In 2017, members of our congregation took part in a mission trip to Nicaragua. We served, built friendships, and made memories. And we have almost forgiven the rooster with a self-image problem who kept waking us up at 3:30 a.m. Do you remember?

Jeff Paschal

Social justice has flourished at GPPC since its beginning and that emphasis has increased in recent years through the leadership of the Justice and Peacemaking Committee. In 2012, the Rev. John Fife, co-founder of the Sanctuary Movement spoke here about immigration reform. Dr. Gene Nichol gave a riveting presentation about poverty in NC. Guilford Park was the first congregation in our presbytery to receive national certification as an Earth Care Congregation committed to protecting the environment and responding to climate change. The church has also fought for LGBTQ rights, racial justice, hunger and poverty relief, and fought against bigotry. We've been blessed by a friendship with the Islamic Center of Greensboro that began several years ago, and has transformed us as people. There's so much more. Read the history. Do you remember?

Some of my favorite memories involve the children and youth of the church. The learning, laughter, hustle and bustle of Vacation Bible School. The impromptu Christmas Pageant each year with its menagerie of critters, shepherds, kings, angels, Mary and Joseph, and baby Jesus who might be male one year, female the next, and, depending upon mood,

Jeff Paschal

sometimes even switched mid-pageant if the babe got cranky. I recall leading youth Bible studies outside at the Friendly Center, taking youth to the beach, taking the youth skiing (no, I didn't ski. Are you kidding?), going with the youth to the Massanetta Youth Conferences and attempting the "energizer" dances. Do you remember?

Then there were the special things you (the church) did for Beth and me. We're grateful for meal invitations, and many encouraging words, phone calls, emails, and letters. I've kept lots of those uplifting emails and letters to read again on a rainy day. Thank you for all your kindnesses given to us over the years and especially recently. We will be writing thank you notes for weeks. So as Paul said, I also say, ". . . we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord . . ."

We celebrate the past.

Guilford Park Presbyterian is also challenged in the present. Though this congregation is strong in many ways, Salem Presbytery, and eventually your interim pastor, and later still, your next installed pastor, will help you address patterns that need to change while continuing to build on your many strengths. All the challenges are really part of just one

Jeff Paschal

challenge: Becoming more committed disciples of Jesus Christ. As Paul put it, ". . . God chose you as the first fruits of salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth." In other words, God wants our commitment and faith to grow deeper every day. So we're challenged in the present to grow in greater commitment to Jesus Christ.

And we can be confident about the future because we know God has always raised up new leaders for the church when old ones have left. We remember God has promised never to abandon us, and that includes dealing with Covid-19. We know God raised Jesus from the dead. If God can do that, then keeping the church faithful should be a divine piece of cake, if we'll each be willing to do our part.

As I prepare to leave, I'll miss dear friends and colleagues. I'll miss the honor of performing weddings, baptisms, and funerals for people I love. And I will simply miss being here with you. As the old monk in Frederick Buechner's novel *Godric* says, when we leave home we leave behind a scrap of our heart there and we send a scrap of heart ahead to the place we are going. (Frederick Buechner, *Godric*, 37.)

Somehow in the mystery of providence, I believe God called me

Jeff Paschal

here to plant some seeds and to experience growth myself. I do not know where or how God may call me next, but I'm excited to find out, and I'm excited about what God will do with you. So I borrow from Paul again to say, ". . . [I] have confidence in the Lord concerning you . . ." And I know the Lord will "comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word."

Tomorrow I'll no longer be your pastor, but I'll be your friend if you wish. Beth and I promise to stay in touch, but not too closely; it's important not to rob the new pastor of building close relationships, unhindered. I ask your prayers for Beth and me. We'll be praying for you.

Sometimes it's hard to say the word "goodbye," isn't it? But I can say it clearly and dearly. You see the word goodbye is really just a shortened version of a prayer. Goodbye is a shorthand way of saying, "God be with you." I'll say it, because I know it has been true, and it will always be true. Goodbye, dear friends. God be with you. Amen. ©Jeff

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