

Joy's and Struggles of Ministry
Philippians 3:10-14
February 16, 2020

We are here today to celebrate Steve's ministry here at West Flamboro. I had agreed to reflect on Psalm 13 which Steve found so helpful in his struggles with illness and which he read at Presbytery last month. But in the early hours of Saturday morning the Spirit gave me another sermon. I hadn't written anything yet on the Psalm but somehow nothing was happening for me with the text. Now I know why! God had a different word for me and you today.

Steve and I have one thing in common: we each have served one congregation. I spent 24 years at Erskine and Steve has spent around 12 years here. We both know the challenges of leading a congregation. Each of us spent years at previous occupations. Mine was in accounting on Bay Street in Toronto and elsewhere and in the publishing industry. Steve, I believe, worked in the forest industry. I can't speak for Steve, but for me those jobs were much less demanding on my emotional/spiritual life than ministry would prove to be. For one, I didn't have to worry about being direct and sometimes confrontational with people who were being objectionable. Sometimes I discovered that my role as pastor and spiritual counsellor in a congregation challenged my patience. People can be difficult. I'm sure that wasn't true for Steve here but for many clergy this is reality. I can remember driving home from many a church meeting shaking my head and talking to myself.

Just ask Paul what it was like in ministry to stubborn folks in his churches. His Corinthian congregation was one that drove Paul nuts at times. They challenged his authority and calling as an apostle. He reminds them that he has been laying a foundation and others are building on it. That foundation is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of his opponents argued that they are the chief apostles of Jesus and Corinth ought not pay attention to Paul. He is a little man who is not a great orator. Paul reminds them that one day fire will test the work we have done in a faith community. (1Corinthians 3:5ff)

Steve, in his ministry here, has laid that foundation. He has had a heart for kids and adults that they might be won to Jesus Christ. This is a marvelous gift to the church: a passion for building the kingdom of God. Others will

build on what Steve has done. But his ministry needs to be celebrated. That's what we do today!

I remember many sleepless nights in my 24 years. I'm sure Steve has had a few of these. Just when you think a corner has been turned in your ministry, progress just as quickly turns to ash. I still feel that pain in my soul when I think of those setbacks in ministry. But we never gave up! Why because Steve and I believed in this Gospel; we had experienced its transforming power personally. Because of this we never gave up.

It's not surprising that Steve reflected on Psalm 13. David is suffering and feels God has forgotten him. However, notice that at the end he sings in faith: *But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me*

Steve has also suffered much in his time here. But I believe his faith in God has given him strength and perseverance through it all. And we continue to pray for Steve that God will be with him.

Both Steve and I have another thing in common. We trust God's calling to us in ministry. Our time at our respective churches was not accidental. God in his providence and love guided our steps to those congregations.

I remember one morning driving out to my office in Burlington and thinking to myself: I can't keep doing this for I believe God has something else in mind for me. I need to use those gifts God enabled me to cultivate. And not surprisingly it was within a few months that my publishing job dried up and I found myself at Knox college preparing for ministry. This was not an accident; God moved my heart to this calling. Steve, I'm sure has a similar story!

I leave us with these words of Paul: *If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it. I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back*

Or as the New Revised version puts it:

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Both of us, Steve and myself, lean into this text with deep commitment. There is much in our past that we gladly forget: mistakes, doubt, self-righteousness, false piety, spiritual wanderings, and more. But like runners heading for the finish line, muscles straining, legs aching, head pounding, heart racing, we press on. Why! Because, as believers Christ has claimed, we deep down long for that call of God to be realized. Our ministries have been joyful as well as a struggle at times, but always we held firm to our calling in Christ Jesus. And so we celebrate Steve's ministry today with the confidence that God will be with him as Steve strains forward for this prize of God's heavenly calling.

Amen