

A Sermon by Alex Evans
Final One as Pastor of Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Blacksburg, VA from Sunday, November 16, 2008
Psalm 92:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11

“I Thank God”

Some of you know the story about a man who was marooned on a desert island for a very long time. He was stranded there alone and remained undetected by civilization for many years. Finally, a passing ship got close enough to the island, saw smoke from the man’s fire, and sent a small boat to investigate. The man was overjoyed to see rescuers and he came running out to the beach to meet the boat.

The leader of the expedition team told the man to gather all the other people on the island so they could be transported to the ship. The marooned man explained that he was the only one on the island. He was the only one who had ever been there. “Well,” said the leader from the big ship, “what is with all these small buildings here near the beach? You built all of these yourself? What are they for?” And the man said, “Oh yes, these are the buildings that I have built over the years. Each building serves my needs.” Pointing to the buildings, he commented: “That building is where I sleep, that building is where I bathe, that building is where I prepare my meals, that one is where I eat my meals, that building is where I go to church, to worship, and ...well, that building over there – that’s where I used to go to church.”

This is humorous because this is often how we are. Human beings can be very fickle. We can be so temperamental, especially when it comes to church, and churches. To be community, and sincere Christian community, is no easy thing. It demands on-going energy and love, intentionality and patience, care and commitment.

Across the past 11 plus years, as we have served together in this place, we have been giving energy and love, care and commitment to building sincere Christian community. We have worked hard to help shape this place where the worship of God is central, where we grow in faith and fellowship, where we seek to encourage and support one another through the challenges and celebrations of life, and where we inspire each other to serve God, loving, giving, going, doings as far as we can, especially toward the needy and hurting.

That does not mean we all agree on everything. It does not mean we have it all figured out. It does not mean we have finished that work – in fact, it is never finished. It does not mean all the moments have been pleasant and positive. But on this final day for me to stand in this pulpit as your pastor, I only want to echo the words of the psalmist – “it is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises ... for you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work, at the work of your hands I sing for joy.” On this final day, after 11 plus year of life in community with you, I only want to say with the apostle Paul: “I thank my God every time I remember you, ...because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”

This congregation started in 1832 with a small group of faithful people seeking to study the Bible, worship and pray, and bear Christ’s light and love in this New River

Valley. We have sought to build upon the work that God began here in 1832. We have sought to continue the grace and service of this church, exhibiting the kingdom of heaven within these walls and stretching as far as we can go. We have sought to ground our lives in worship. We have worked to promote Christ's healing and hope, joy and justice in this place and spreading that love and light into the community and around the globe. I only want to say THANK YOU for the privilege and honor of serving with you and among you, for the opportunity to add to this church's great legacy, for the joy of sharing the ups and downs of life across these years, and working to "share the gospel from the first day until now."

This life together in Christian community is about growing in faith, being changed in every way, becoming more and more who God makes us to be. It is also about living as God's people in the world – caring for the needy, extending hospitality, opening our hearts and our doors to all who would come. It is knowing that our lives are for God's work in the neighborhood and the world. Christian community at its best is about centering life in God, giving our lives to God in faithful service, and acting as God's instruments of love and light, healing and hope in our world. This is what we have been striving to do together across all these years.

And these years have been full of highlights. Some of those highlights were very hard. While we might smile in amusement about them now that they are behind us, there was not always much smiling back then. Within the first year that I was here, there was a lawsuit by the former janitor, AND a heresy trial because of a Smyth lecturer, Marcus Borg, who had come and shared with us, AND other things to deal with. There were days that I was not sure how to carry on with these challenges. You know what I did? I kept the files for those different cases in a file drawer in my desk. When a circumstance arose relating to either of those cases – from the civil courts or from the church courts – I would deal with it and then keep it in the file and the file drawer. I worked real hard to keep those subjects in their proper place within Christian community. Because in the scheme of things, that is where they belonged – in the drawer. We were here to be God's people, to worship and serve God together, and those lawsuits and accusations needed to stay in their proper place, not front and center. I am not even sure I realized what I was doing, but in retrospect, I think this was one key to helping me, and help this church get through those challenges. It is important to keep things in proper perspective, and often that may mean leaving certain things in the drawer, out of sight, off the front burner of our common life. As you have heard me say even in my first sermon in this pulpit – the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. And it is very tempting to let other things become the main thing – it is easy in our life and marriages, in our work and relationships, and especially in the church - but our task and privilege in Christian community is to keep focused on life together, on loving and encouraging each other, on growing in faith and worship, on extending ourselves in care and commitment to the world.

What in your life has taken centerstage and may need to be placed in its proper place, maybe in a drawer somewhere, so you can carry on in faithful love and service as God's own? Maybe it is a new diagnosis,....or a recent and devastating loss,....or something else that consumes most of your energy and attention,when really God has other intentions for you?

What might emerge on the front burner in this church, and threaten to steal the focus from the essential things of this church? Various things will come along, but always worship, growing in faith, supporting one another in genuine fellowship, and reaching out to the needs of the hurting community and the complex world are the things that deserve energy and attention. These are always challenges. And the church's task is to be the church – a place grounded in God, increasing trust and devotion to God, and a place working to embody God's light and healing, love and hope in the world.

So many of the highlights from my tenure here are so very good too. Through the last 11 plus years, I have had the wonderful privilege of being with so many of you through so many things. We have worshipped regularly together in this great space. We have studied and prodded each other on Bible questions, faith issues, and challenging social issues. We have had many meals, and many prayer moments, and many parties together. This is why pastoral ministry is such an unbelievable privilege. It has been such a privilege to have been here when your children were born and baptized, to have been with you through sickness, and treatments, and challenges, that have come your way. I have been here through illness and death of your loved ones. We have been through celebrations and funerals together. We have been through building projects and growing pains together – the Columbarium, and the recent major renovations. We have been away together – on Confirmation retreats when we hike and cook and stay up late talking about God and playing games, on church retreats, to conferences, on missions to Appalachia and as far away as Malawi.

We have been through national tragedies like 9/11 and Katrina and others. We have been through the most difficult tragedy right in our town that called forth the best from every one of us. I will never forget the impromptu ecumenical worship service in this sanctuary on the night of April 16. No one knew what to do or where to go on that day. We were mesmerized by the ghastly details and deaths of students and professors. We were glued to our televisions. Others of us were racing around. I was with the police and rescue personnel. I was at the hospital. I was at Norris Hall. But at 7:00pm, we had the chance to gather here and worship, pray, sing, hug one another, come together in God's presence, because we knew that was all we could really do.

And in those following days April 16, 2007, I will never forget how this church family rallied. This congregation hosted two huge funerals for members of our community. You stepped up with Christ's love and hospitality and care for the whole town and world. You sacrificed and served. We were embodying Christian community. And all I can say, and what I will always say, is "I thank God every time I remember you,...because of your sharing of the gospel from the first day until now." This is what we have sought to be about – keeping the main thing the main thing, and living as faithful Christian community, bearing love and light in our neighborhood and our world.

And more than that, you have embodied God's love and been there for me and my family too. When we have had our own heartaches and challenges, you have been Christ's loving care around us. When we could hardly pray for ourselves, you were there with prayers and support, with energy, love, and encouragement. When Ginger's father died, when we have faced trials and tribulations, when I had a stroke in 2001, when we were going to doctor after doctor and doing test after test, you were sincere Christian community for us. You have helped us grow in faith. You have helped us trust God

more. You have helped us know the truth – whether we live or whether we die, we belong to God. You have put up with me when maybe I was not there for you, or when I messed up, when I could have done things better or differently. You have helped me become a better pastor and leader, and to serve God. For all that, and more, I am only grateful, so very appreciative. I thank my God every time I remember you.

So in these coming days, also with Paul, this is my prayer – “that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best” – so that this congregation can keep on serving God in love and faithfulness, can keep on growing in worship and devotion, can continue to extend the hope and hospitality of Jesus Christ in every sector of community life and world. There is the building debt on the recent renovations. There are always going to be challenges – there always have been challenges as we seek to be the church. But by God’s grace and favor, and by your love and devotion, this is a great and healthy church, with strong leadership and ability, with a great staff, with lots of youthful energy and commitment. You have Susan to help guide you. You will soon have a capable interim pastor to give leadership and direction. And there is not telling what this congregation can accomplish or become in the future. But it is about keeping the main thing the main thing – grounding life in worship and fellowship, loving and supporting one another sincerely, and reaching out with compassion and care to the community and to the world with God’s light and hope, peace and purpose. May you keep doing that, and continue to bring glory and honor to Jesus Christ our Lord.

I love you. I thank you. I will keep praying for you and pulling for you as you carry on in joyful, faithful service! Alleluia! Amen.

This sermon was preached during morning worship on Sunday, November 16, 2008, the final day for Alex Evans to serve as Pastor/Head of Staff at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA. This is a rough manuscript.