

30 Years?! What?!  
Philippians 1:3-11  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
August 26, 2018  
Rev. Glen Bell

Thirty years ago on a Sunday evening, a crowd gathered at a small country church outside of Laurinburg, North Carolina to celebrate my ordination. I was fresh out of seminary.

Laurel Hill Presbyterian Church wasn't anywhere close to the largest congregation in eastern North Carolina, but I was theirs and they were mine. Those good people were faithful enough, determined enough, prayerful enough, *foolish* enough to call me as their pastor. So men and women gathered from across the presbytery that August evening to pray over me and lay hands on me, to proclaim me a pastor.

I was in my 20's. Many of the session members were fifty years older than I. I learned that people that age are not old, not at all. They were active, lively, engaged, sometimes jovial, sometimes obstreperous, almost always energetic. I enjoyed all their stories. One faithful member, in her nineties, shared her memories of driving a horse and buggy to church and of the terrors of the Spanish flu in 1918.

I learned that clothes do not make the pastor. Around the time of my ordination, I had gone out and bought a dark blue suit and a dark gray suit. I guess I thought I might fool some people into thinking that I knew what I was doing if I dressed the part. My mother teased me, "Why are you dressing like an old man? You have the rest of your life to dress like an old man!"

That's what I remember the most, perhaps: all the things I didn't know. I didn't know much about weddings or baptisms or funerals. I didn't know much about cancer or bankruptcy or divorce or terminal illness. I didn't know much about leading worship or preaching. Sunday after Sunday, it was *really* clear I didn't know much about preaching!

But week after week, season after season, those men and women and youth and children shared themselves with me. They prayed and taught and gave and listened and laughed with me. They shared their lives with me. They loved me into becoming a pastor. We were a church, together, and I give thanks for their sharing from the first day until now.

Several years later I moved to Indianapolis. Indianapolis! I knew almost nothing about Indianapolis. I remember standing in the kitchen of the manse after one of my first phone conversations with a member of the pastor nominating committee from Faith Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis. I said to one of my best friends, "I think these are wonderful people – but I am never moving to Indianapolis!" A few months later I was their pastor.

The church in Indy had experienced some trouble. A difficult pastor, some difficult elders. They had lost more than half of their members through the conflict, and were only starting to get themselves back together. But I could see something in them. And somehow they could see something in me.

We built a new Christian education wing and welcomed new members. We started small groups and Disciple Bible Studies. We started a LOGOS Program and a contemporary worship service. We built a new sanctuary and added a pipe organ.

In the midst of it all, we discovered something important about following Jesus. There is always more to learn. There is always more to discover as we move ahead in faith. There are always new and different experiences of Christ's love just over the horizon. There are always more ways to grow. And

the living God, who has started all kinds of good work within us and through us, continues to lead us forward.

They were patient with me, very patient, as I grew and developed.

After fifteen years as pastor, I moved ten miles west to Second Presbyterian Church. Second was a big church, with thousands of members, a beautiful campus, and a staff of over one hundred people. The church staff included seventeen pastors when I was serving there. I was called as the executive associate pastor, and I was busy, busy, busy.

But what struck me about that congregation was not the important missions and vibrant ministries and gifted leaders who were a part of that church. No, it is the way they held me in their heart.

They held me in their heart, and asked about Anne and our children. They held me in their heart, and remembered me in prayer. They held me in their heart, and shared God's grace with me at every turn, affirming my gifts and overlooking the other parts.

One of them worships with us every winter, and always has something positive to say about me. One of them sought me out a couple of years ago when he was going through a difficult time. One of them brought her fiancée to Sarasota so that I could marry them in the courtyard here at our church.

By 2012, our youngest child had graduated from high school and all had flown from the nest. And I really, really, really missed preaching. So I started talking with your PNC. There was and is something about your church – its history, its leadership in Sarasota County, its determination to share the Gospel with all kinds of people, its dedication to justice and peace. It all drew me in.

I remember our first face-to-face conversation here in Sarasota, with Carol and Victor and Emilie and Adam and Ellen and Kay and Cord and Marvin and Jean. I remember their excitement about the gifts and strengths and commitments of this congregation. I remember their honesty and openness about the challenges that were ahead. I remember feeling at home with them from the start. They represented you so very well.

All of you have taught me so many things. You have shared in the Gospel with me. You have shown me that our life together is about growing and developing, growing and developing, and that we all have so much more to learn. You have held me in your heart, supporting Anne and me as we cared for her mother, supporting us in and around her final illness and death last year.

But there is one preeminent thing you have demonstrated, and I am so grateful. You have shown me the compassion of Jesus Christ is the bedrock of all we are and all we do. We send resources to Puerto Rico and Houston and Wimauma and Immokalee, after last year's hurricanes. We partner with Brentwood Elementary, a Title 1 school here in Sarasota, loving and nurturing their students. We demonstrate our deep concern for restorative justice and affordable housing through SURE, Sarasota United for Responsibility and Equity.

We love our children and youth. We pray with and for the sick and the dying. We do it all because we are not a club, not a self-centered group. We exist to demonstrate and share the compassion of Jesus. I give thanks for all that I am learning from you – elders and deacons and staff colleagues, Stephen Ministers and church school teachers and Caritas volunteers, all of you who live from a heart of compassion, a heart of giving and sharing and forgiving.

I thank God as I remember all you have taught me. I thank God for your sharing in the gospel. I thank God that the Lord will work within us that our love together might overflow more and more with greater knowledge and deeper insight. I thank God for the compassion of Jesus, through which we ordinary people are empowered to do extraordinary things.

I thank God for you.