

Ann and Pat decided to take an aerobics class. On the morning of their first class, they bent and twisted and gyrated and jumped up and down for over an hour. But then, by the time they got their leotards on, the class was over.

The getting ready time. It's important for aerobics. It's also important for pastors.

The new pastor arrived at First Church. As he was getting ready to set up his new office, he came upon a letter in the top drawer of his desk. Stapled to the letter were three sealed envelopes numbered one, two, and three.

The letter, written by the previous pastor, said, "Welcome to First Church. When things get bad, open envelope number one. When things get really bad, open envelope number two. And, when things get unbearably bad, open envelope number three."

Things at First Church went fine for a year. Then it got bad. So, the pastor opened up envelope number one. It said, "Blame the previous pastor." And, so he did.

On the next Sunday morning, the pastor said, "I know we've been having some problems around here. But it's all the previous pastor's fault. He messed this church up something awful."

The people all said, "Amen, it's all the previous pastor's fault," and everything smoothed over.

Things at church went fairly well after that. Unfortunately though, a year later, things got really bad. So, the pastor went to his drawer and pulled out envelope number two. It said, “Blame the denomination.”

And so, he did. The next Sunday morning the pastor stood up and said, “I know we’re having problems here. But, it’s the denomination’s fault. They’re out of touch with the churches.

The people all said, “Amen, it’s all the denomination’s fault.”

And so, everything settled down, and things went well for another year. After three years, however, things became unbearably bad for the pastor. So, he went to his desk and opened envelope number three and read it. It said, “Prepare three envelopes.”

As I get ready to leave today, it’s time for me to prepare my three envelopes. Not because things are bad. But, because I was temporary from the beginning.

It’s time for me to do this morning what pilgrim people have done throughout the ages. It’s time to break camp and move on. But, before I do, I have a few things to say to you, my fellow travelers, at the corner of Rutherford Street and Stone Avenue, you whom I’ve loved and served these last eleven months.

My life has been transformed while serving as your associate pastor. I’ve had a wonderful and rewarding time. And, I echo William Butler Yeats’s words: “Think

where man's glory most begins and ends; and say my glory was that I had such friends.”

I used to say I'd love to win the lottery. But then, having the opportunity to serve here and some of the others churches I've served, along with having my family and friends, I've realized I've already won it. So, thank you.

This has been a calling for me more than a job; less an occupation than a preoccupation. I leave this morning with high hopes, in a good spirit, with deep humility and great fulness in my heart.

You may know that I've served here while keeping my other job. Someone asked me this week what I plan to do after I finish up here today. My answer: “less.”

The sermon text this morning is taken from Phillipians 1:3-11. Paul wrote this letter to the church at Phillipi. And, what he wrote to them there and then, I say to you, here and now.

3 *I thank my God for every remembrance of you,*
4 *always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy*
5 *for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*
6 *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will*
 continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

- 7 *It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace. . . .*
- 8 *For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus.*
- 9 *And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight*
- 10 *to help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,*
- 11 *having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The church at Philippi was undoubtedly one of Paul's favorite churches, just as you are one of mine. The mutual affection leaps off the pages. The bond of love is palpable.

Just listen to the way Paul talks about the relationship in verse seven: *It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace.*

This phrase, *I hold me in your heart*, is a curious one. The Greek word for "hold" here can be interpreted to mean have, hold or keep. Metaphorically, it can also

mean marry. And that explains why we often use the phrase “to have and to hold” in marriage vows. It’s a tie that binds. *I hold you in my heart.*

I think that’s what Paul wanted to say to the Phillipians, and I know it’s what I want to say to you, today, Triune, *I hold you in my heart.* And, together, we’re held in the heart of God.

With that background, I have three envelopes for you, three messages, this morning. And, the first has to do with the song we sang just before I got up here to speak: *Great is thy Faithfulness.*

Do you know the story of the guy who wrote that song? Tom Chisolm. He failed at just about everything he tried to do. He tried to sell insurance part time. He failed as an insurance salesperson. He tried his hand at farming. He didn’t make it as a farmer. He tried to edit a Christian magazine. Didn’t make it. He tried to be a part time Methodist pastor. Didn’t make it.

But, even after all of those trials, Tom Chisolm took a pen and paper and wrote those words, *Great is Thy Faithfulness.* All that life threw at him, all of his failures, and he was still able to say, “God is faithful.”

Paul put it this way in verse six: *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.* In other words, God is faithful. In the good times. And, in the bad.

But, there's something else in this verse I want for you to see. Notice that Paul is looking to the future: *the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

That's why Bronwyn, when she was preparing this picture of Triune, she left it as a "Work in Progress." We're not quite complete. There's still more for Triune to do. We'll always be under construction.

By the way, this art is a commissioned piece that Bronwyn did especially for today to go along with this sermon. So, thank you Bronwyn.

Unquestionably, it was the fight of the century. Yet, it was only the first of many to come. The World Series of 1903. That was the first World Series in baseball history. A contest between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Boston Red Sox.

And, you know what? For the first ever game in that historic battle between the National League and the American League, the Red Sox manager sent to the pitcher's mound, of all people, Denton Tecumseh. And, the record book now confirms he was the losingest pitcher of all time. Why Boston decided to start him against Pittsburgh, well that's something as significant as the World Series itself.

You see, Denton Tecumseh's theory of baseball pitching was a pitcher should let a batter hit the ball as often as possible.

"That way," Denton said, "your arm won't get so tired."

And, it seemed in that first game in that first Series, Denton's theory was working out. Sort of. Pittsburgh's first two batters did get some wood on the ball. They did go down in order. But then, almost literally, the game was over.

Because, that second out was followed by a Pittsburgh triple, a single, a stolen base, an error, a double steal resulting in a run. And, the score after one inning was Pirates four and Red Sox zip.

"You've got to hold them," Denton was told as he went to the mound in the top of the second. And, he did his best. The first batter was Pittsburgh's Beaumont. Denton actually struck him out. The next batter, Clarke, hit a single over right. But, he got overconfident and tried to stretch a double and he was thrown out.

Two down. The third batter, Leach, flied out to right. So, it appeared that Denton Tecumseh had turned things around. But, then in the third inning, Pittsburgh's Bransfield blasted a triple off of him.

Then, Sebring singled a right, scoring Bransfield. Now, it's five to nothing. The Boston's pitcher's peril continued in the seventh. An RBI. And, then a home run. Now, the Red Sox were done.

Oh, they did manage, they did manage to squeeze out a couple of runs in their half of the seventh, and one more in the bottom of the ninth.

*And yet, the defeated Boston team, at the hands of a supposedly inferior National League Club. The defeat, the ignominious defeat was charged to Denton Tecumseh, who was to lose more games on major league mounds than any other player in baseball history. (Paul Harvey, *The Rest of the Story: Cy Young, The Losingest Pitcher*).*

Tough times. It's easy to sing and to say *Great is Thy Faithfulness* when things are going your way. But, what about when the chips are down? When you feel as if you have nothing but losses in your life?

Even after all of the failures in Tom Chisolm's life, as an insurance salesman, a farmer, a Christian magazine editor, and as a Methodist pastor, after all of those failures, in one of the lines of *Great is Thy Faithfulness*, Chisolm wrote, *Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow Blessings all mine with 10, 000 beside.*

My second envelope concerns our Triune community. And, what we can do to strengthen it. I say to you what Paul said to the Phillipians in verse nine: *this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight.* How can your love *overflow more and more*? There are lots of ways. I want to talk to you about just one.

I've never been racially profiled. I've never been without food or housing. But, over these last eleven months, I've listened to and prayed, time and again, with some

who have. And that experience of getting close, that proximity, that's helped me better understand and identify with those who've had such different experiences than I.

I, like many of you, used not to eat after church downstairs on Sundays. Why? I'm going to be honest and vulnerable. Because it made me uncomfortable. And, can we be truly honest with each other this morning? I'm betting some of you could confess the same thing. But, why?

It's not that I can't talk with others. I do. Get me going and you'll have an incontinent flow of words. My Mother has gone so far as to suggest I like to hear myself talk. But, as Chatty Charlie as I am, I found making conversation difficult.

Fortunately, though, or perhaps I should say blessedly, when I began serving as your associate pastor back September last, I somehow came up with an introduction and a couple questions that I now use in just about any situation in which I'm meeting someone for the first time. Whether it's here or somewhere else. It works as well at a reception with lawyers and judges, and professors and students, as it does downstairs at our Sunday lunches.

Here it is: Hi, my name is Jeff. I'm one of the pastors here. What's your name? What's your story. Feel free to copy it.

And when someone is brave enough to share their life story with you, you be brave enough to support them and love them, even if you don't totally understand

them. By opening up our heart and our mind, we can become much more understanding and tolerant and compassionate of those who've had such different experiences than our own.

And, compassion, and tolerance and understanding is what makes Triune and the world a better place. I sincerely hope you'll take us up on our invitation to lunch for today. And next Sunday, too. And, the Sunday after that. All of you. Proximity. Getting close. That's the goal.

I know I've shared this story with virtually every congregation I've ever served. And, it's still one of my favorite stories.

On a certain street, there were four shops that sold donuts. It happened that the owner in one those shops placarded a sign in his window one morning, "Best donuts in town."

The manager of the shop not so far down street saw that, then put a sign in his window, "Best donuts in the country."

Whereupon the third fellow, seeing the two signs in the windows of his competitors put one in his window, "Best donuts in the world."

The fourth fellow, I like him most of all. Seeing those other three, he put up his sign, "Best donuts on this street." Not bad, is it?

That story points to your chance to be the best Christian on the square foot of real estate on which you stand. And, up in the air, too, if you're up in the air. To be the best Christian, as verse nine puts it, such that *"your love may overflow"*

My third envelope concerns living out your Christian values, your Christian morals. Like the Apostle Paul in verse ten, my prayer for you is that God will *"help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless[.]"*

What really matters? Lots of things do. I want to talk about just one. As a church so involved with social justice issues, this is so important. It has to do with the state of our country.

And, allow me to be honest with you again and admit that, these days, I struggle to be optimistic that, in our country, a better day is coming. And, I know, from my conversations, that many of you do, too.

I read this week of a poll, released last Sunday, that showed concerns about our democracy surpassing concerns about the cost of living and the economy. A plurality of voters named threats to democracy as their top concern.

Given our country's current state of affairs, as I said, I struggle to be optimistic. But sometimes, the struggle doesn't quite make it. Everything that's not nailed down seems to be coming apart.

As a country, we're clearly heading to a cliff. Now no, I'm not prepared to say that we're going to go over that cliff. It's not like that scene in *Thelma and Louise*. But I don't see any immediate way to avert it.

Perhaps though, the more people raise the alarm and do so with some sober reasoning, explaining why we're in danger, the more possible it becomes to say, "Well, it's not too late." And, this November, everyone of you must vote, and all of the November to come.

Again, this is so important in a church such as this one that is so inextricably tied to social justice issues. Voting changes lives. Literally.

Lots of positions are up for grabs. If enough people say that our democracy is too precious to just give up on, then perhaps the most hopeful scenarios can come to pass. At least I have to think that way to keep going and believing in this country we live in, and a federal government, which I have served as one of its attorneys for over twenty years now.

As I've said before, your faith ought to help you to determine your position on all of the issues and how you're going to vote. Voters tell us who they are by who they vote for.

Vote your Christian values in November. In addition, live out and do all you can to support your faith-informed values. It really does matter.

Keep up with how your representative vote. And, if they vote against your values, then return the favor and vote against them when they're up for election again. It's as simple as that.

Volunteer. Donate. And, vote. Your Christian faith will *“help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless[.]”*

If you forget everything else I say about Denton Tecumseh today, I want for you to remember two things. First, he was the losingest pitcher in all of major league history.

But then, I want for you to remember one thing more. I'm going to give you a new perspective. Later this season, awards bearing his name will be passed out to the best pitchers in baseball. You see, not only did Denton lose more games than any other pitcher in history, a total of 313, he also won more games as well: 511 of them.

*And, it's this latter record for which the sports world hails him a hurler who was actually two in one: a hero and a failure. Denton Tecumseh Young, whom you know as Cy Young. And, this year, when the Cy Young awards are passed out to the best of the best of the pitchers, you'll remember this story. (Paul Harvey, *The Rest of the Story: Cy Young, The Losingest Pitcher*).*

This morning, I talked about how God “*began a good work in you[,]*” how we are a work in progress, about “*your love . . . overflow[ing]*” and your “*determin[ing] what really matters.*” And, I hope all of those good things for you.

But, you know and I both know life is not just about those good things. There are bad things and bad times too. We all also have our failures, just like Tom Chisolm and Cy Young did. But, neither Tom Chisolm nor Cy Young were defined by their failures. We need not be defined by ours either.

Do you remember in high school, reading the classic by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Scarlet Letter? There’s Heather Primm, in that little New England village. She conceives a daughter with a man to whom she is not married. And so, they make her wear a Scarlet letter “A.”

And, she lost her identity because she was simply the woman with the Scarlet letter “A.” She was defined by the weakest and the worst moment in her life. We do that to people, don’t we?

We take the weakest, the worst, the least, the hardest thing about them. And we hang it around their neck and we label them with it. We take the worst moment of their life and we define them by it. That’s a cruel thing. But, we do it. There goes that addict. That alcoholic. That bi-polar. That felon. As if that’s the only thing about that person.

There are several take home messages from this sermon. But, here's the one I want for you to remember if you remember none of the others: we seek to define folks. But, Jesus seeks to redefine them.

Again, as Bronwyn titled our art piece this morning, we're all a "Work in Progress." And, like Paul, *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

The good news of the gospel is this: when people have tried to categorize you, define you, stereotype you, belittle you, defame you, present you in false light by making your identity the weakest and the worst moment of your life, Jesus comes and he touches you, and redefines you, and makes you whole.

THIS IS THE GOSPEL.

THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS.

AND, IT'S TRUE.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

AMEN.