

Benediction II Cor. 13:11-13 2/27/22

One Sunday morning, a mother went in to wake up her son and tell him it was time to get ready for church, to which he replied, "I'm not going."

"Why not?" she asked.

"I'll give you two reasons," he said. "First, people there don't like me, and second, I don't like them!"

His mother replied, "I'll give YOU two reasons why you will go to church this morning. First, you're 59 years old, and second, you're the pastor!"

Fortunately, over almost 30 years of ordained ministry, I haven't had too many Sunday mornings when I felt like that... but there have been a few!

As I thought about what I'd like to say on my last Sunday with you, I was drawn to the idea of a benediction, which is a fancy word for a blessing. St. Paul's letters almost always end with a benediction. He usually recalls the work that God had done among them when Paul was with them, he gives them some final instructions, and ends with a benediction. Here's an example from Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, Greece. *11 Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the*

God of love and peace will be with you. ¹²Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

13 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. (II Cor. 13:11-13)

Prior to these verses, Paul recalled several parts of his ministry with them before launching into this typical ending to his letter. So I thought I'd follow Paul's pattern this morning. We'll recall some of what God has done in our 12+ years of ministry together, I'll give a few final instructions, and then a benediction.

When I started listing some of the good things God has done here at GPC during our time together, I was a little overwhelmed by it all! God has certainly been active here! For example, we now have a child protection policy in place which we use to protect our children. We have a security committee looking out for our safety when we gather on Sunday mornings.

We launched a capital campaign a few years ago which was oversubscribed, raising well over \$800,000! This morning we are benefiting from some of the projects done in that campaign: a new furnace and roofs (We're warm and dry today!), a beautiful and much more useful Eisenhower lounge and MacAskill Room, as well as improved sound and live-stream capabilities here in the sanctuary, which we've really needed

the last couple years! Then there's the portico. And the purchase of the Wall St. property and its conversion to parking spaces, some of which we've leased out during the week to provide income for our ministry. And we gave \$80,000 of that campaign money to mission projects, which built a well and water purifying system in Hidalgo, Mexico among other things.

In the area of missions and outreach, we've sponsored many mission trips, and given well over \$1,000,000 to local, national, and international missions. We started the Mexico mission trip and family mission trip. We were instrumental in starting the Gettysburg CARES homeless shelter, the Ruth's Harvest feeding program, and the new Afghan refugee family support group.

We've established a regular presence at community events like the Halloween parade, the Gettysburg Christmas Festival, and the first-year walk from the college. We have worked with college students through speaking regularly at the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and hosting students for meals in a variety of ways. We've also increased our outreach to the Hispanic community by hosting after-school programs, an evening program, and various social events.

We have continued strong adult education offerings, some now via Zoom, and have added more small group fellowships. And we have added

a Faith Community Nurse to support the most vulnerable members of our church and community.

In music, we have added a nice Steinway grand piano in the sanctuary and are undertaking the first major renovation of our pipe organ since 1963. And, we added the Youth Praise band, now known as the Omega Band!

We celebrated our 275th anniversary together, and then worked very hard to sustain our ministry over these last two years of the pandemic! I believe that God has blessed our time together, and I am grateful for your partnership in the gospel here at GPC.

Now preachers are supposed to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable! Reflecting on our accomplishments counts as comfort. Now, like Paul, we go on to some final instructions, which may not be as comfortable. I've got three requests for you.

First, remember that this is a difficult time for churches. Before the pandemic hit, a survey found that church membership in the US dropped 20% in the last 20 years. 20%! Our own denomination has shrunk from a high of 4.1 million members in 1965 to our 2020 membership of 1.2 million. That's a loss of almost 3 million members! Other mainline churches have suffered similar losses and evangelical denominations are now declining as

well. There are many reasons for these losses, but clearly fewer people are interested in what we're offering. The kinds of things we've gotten very good at doing no longer appeal to as many people. Unfortunately, no one has discovered a magic solution to turn this around! The best advice I've seen suggests that churches will need to experiment, to try new things and see what works, knowing that many things are likely to fail!

You will soon have a new pastor. He will work with you to find some of these new ideas. So, be open to trying new things! Be patient and gracious when you may not be excited about new directions. Pray for him and your elders and lend them your ideas and support.

Second, keep outreach and mission at the forefront. Tom Kolmer, our new elder for mission, has expressed his concern about a lessening of excitement about missions here at GPC. That may be linked to the loss of mission trips like our trips to Honduras and South Dakota, and the loss of all our trips these past two years. But mission is more than just mission trips! We can do local mission work, and many of you do. And we can continue to financially support God's work here in Gettysburg and literally around the world. Missions has long been at the heart of what it means to be GPC. Do your part to make sure that continues!

You're probably aware of the names for different groups of animals. A herd of deer. An army of ants. A gang of bison. A clowder of cats. A murder of crows! Do you know what a group of alligators is called? A congregation! That's right, a congregation of alligators. Please don't be a congregation of alligators!

Instead, in the words of that great theological treatise, "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure," "Be excellent to each other." I could go all biblical on you with this and echo Paul's plea for unity and kindness and compassion and forgiveness, but "Be excellent to each other," sums it up pretty well! So do it! "Be excellent to each other!"

When I arrived at GPC, one of our elders came to our house to welcome us. He told me, "Dave, you're going to need to be patient with us. We're a little slow to warm up to outsiders, but if you give us time, we will." That was great advice! I hope you'll quickly open your minds and hearts to your new pastor. Keep in mind that they will be leaving a place and people that they love, so that this will be a difficult transition for them as well. Be sure to demonstrate your love and care for them soon!

So, those are my closing instructions: Recognize that new ideas and ministries must come, and embrace them as best you can. Continue and

strengthen GPC's emphasis on outreach and mission. And, be excellent to each other.

And that brings us to the benediction, or blessing. Paul wrote, "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*" (II Cor. 11:13) That's a pretty good blessing, isn't it? Now, after tomorrow, I will no longer be your pastor. That means I won't be attending worship, conducting weddings or funerals, etc. That is as it should be. But I want you to know that I will greatly miss you and I will miss being your pastor! And, I wish you and this church God's very best in the coming months and years. May God continue to bless you and keep you!