

**Sermon**

**“More of the Same”**

June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Psalm 103:1-18 and Acts 2:42-47

**SCRIPTURE:**

**Psalm 103:1-18**

<sup>1</sup> Let my whole being bless the Lord! Let everything inside me bless his holy name!  
<sup>2</sup> Let my whole being bless the Lord and never forget all his good deeds: <sup>3</sup> how God forgives all your sins, heals all your sickness, <sup>4</sup> saves your life from the pit, crowns you with faithful love and compassion, <sup>5</sup> and satisfies you with plenty of good things so that your youth is made fresh like an eagle's. <sup>6</sup> The Lord works righteousness; does justice for all who are oppressed. <sup>7</sup> God made his ways known to Moses; made his deeds known to the Israelites. <sup>8</sup> The Lord is compassionate and merciful, very patient, and full of faithful love. <sup>9</sup> God won't always play the judge; he won't be angry forever. <sup>10</sup> He doesn't deal with us according to our sin or repay us according to our wrongdoing, <sup>11</sup> because as high as heaven is above the earth, that's how large God's faithful love is for those who honor him. <sup>12</sup> As far as east is from west—that's how far God has removed our sin from us. <sup>13</sup> Like a parent feels compassion for their children—that's how the Lord feels compassion for those who honor him. <sup>14</sup> Because God knows how we're made, God remembers we're just dust. <sup>15</sup> The days of a human life are like grass: they bloom like a wildflower; <sup>16</sup> but when the wind blows through it, it's gone; even the ground where it stood doesn't remember it. <sup>17</sup> But the Lord's faithful love is from forever ago to forever from now for those who honor him. And God's righteousness reaches to the grandchildren <sup>18</sup> of those who keep his covenant and remember to keep his commands. [*Common English Bible*]

**Acts 2:42-47**

<sup>42</sup> The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. <sup>43</sup> A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were united and shared everything. <sup>45</sup> They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. <sup>46</sup> Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. <sup>47</sup> They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved. [*Common English Bible*]

**OPENING PRAYER:** Almighty God, now that the scriptures have been read aloud, let the fire of your Spirit shed new light on your Word. May we find a breath of fresh air, a word for our hearts, and a clearer vision for the continuing journey ahead; and let all God's people say ... Amen.

### Milestones of Life and Faith

During the two previous Sundays, as we've celebrated Pentecost and the Trinity, we've talked a lot about the Holy Spirit and how God's wind blows where it wills! And, recently, God's Spirit has been blowing my thoughts toward a theme of milestones.

For example, I have friends in North Carolina from the years I lived and served churches there, and I'm aware that they finally finished their school year a couple weeks back, and now I can see from different people's Facebook posts that youth groups are off on mission trips and families are taking vacations. As a matter of fact, by this time every year, even the states with school districts that don't end until mid-June have finally started their summers, and kids of all ages and grades have celebrated the milestone of being formally "promoted" to the next grade level. Of course, for young women and men completing the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, that translates into the grand milestone of high school graduation, which we celebrated as a congregation on Youth Sunday back in May.

But, the end of a school year isn't the only time of year that people recognize milestones—in fact, we acknowledge and celebrate them throughout the year and throughout our lives. Personal milestones like birthdays are certainly celebrated (well, mostly), as are anniversaries (whether they be related to work, dating, marriage, surgeries, or whatever). Reunions of various kinds and groups are planned and attended. Even more, though, as a congregation and as people of faith, we tend to have our own list of milestones that we celebrate during a year's time, for example:

- At some point, young children get old enough to stop going the nursery and instead come to worship for a short time and participate in the *Word for Children* (children's sermon)
- Then, at some other point, these older children get old enough again to stop participating in the *Word for Children* ☺
- Then, for rising 6<sup>th</sup> graders, they are invited for the first time into the strange

- and wonderful world of the youth group
- Then, eventually students are invited to participate in Confirmation, which culminates in their being welcomed into active membership in the church
  - Even more, we periodically welcome new members from outside these walls to be part of this family of faith as well
  - Then, all of us together participate in a variety of “community of faith” milestones throughout the year, such as the election of new officers to serve as elders on the Session—a task made primarily possible by a group of folks who serve together as a *Nominating Committee*
  - But, occasionally, a Presbyterian church has cause to form a special nominating committee to search for the next permanently installed pastor of the church (permanent as compared to temporary, which is the nature of my role as Interim Pastor)—and this special group is called the *Pastor Nominating Committee* (or PNC)

### **Milestones of the PNC**

And, throughout the weeks and months that a PNC works together, they experience their own variety of milestones along *their* way—all related to a process and timeline they have agreed to follow. Of course, depending on the circumstances and tediousness involved, some milestones along their way may bring more of a sense of relief than excitement. But, then there are definitely the milestones that bring all kinds of joy and enthusiasm and hope and excitement with them ... such as this past Tuesday when I got an email from Sam Hay, leader of the PNC, and in the first line of the email there was the magic word of the week—“milestone.” Now, on that particular day, I was at Lake Jackson spending time with the Thornwell kids visiting the Boteler’s, and Sam was contacting me about the PNC update he shared with all of us at the beginning of the service today. And, when I read his email I darn near fell in the lake ☺ ... not just because of the content of his message about the update, but also because the Spirit put that idea of “milestones” in front of me yet again! And, so here we are, all of us, ready to embark on whatever next steps lay ahead, which has me also thinking lately, given the occasion, about some possible words of wisdom I might be able to share.

And, those thoughts take me right back to where I began this sermon, thinking about the milestone of graduation ... because, by and large, one of the grandest and

most recognizable milestones of them all is the achievement of graduation—high school particularly, but any graduation is definitely significant. And, with it comes all kinds of build up—anxieties are felt, decisions are made, wardrobes are chosen, and it all usually culminates on one particular day or night sometime during the months of May and June! Ceremonies are attended, speeches are given, and wisdom and advice are shared. It’s a wonderfully exciting time!

### **What Happens Next?—More of the Same**

But, then what? What happens next ... after all the ceremonies and speeches and parties and pieces of advice are in the past? What happens after the caps and gowns are taken off? What happens next, after we consider all that has occurred?

Well, for many years I have been asked by one graduate or another for my answer to that question, “What happens next?” And, I’ve almost gotten used to their sense of disappointment and look of bewilderment when I’ve given my answer ... “let me tell you what happens next ... *more of the same.*” That’s right, more of the same keeps on happening—more of what you were already doing. After graduation or any other milestone, people keep doing the same ‘ole things—and I’m always struck by the ordinary nature of it all. People go back to routines that already existed or to making up new routines that seem eerily similar. More of the same keeps happening—more going to work, more studying and learning (for summer school or college prep or whatever—it never ends!); more exciting times with friends, more spending time with family; more eating meals and maybe more exercise and always more of putting one foot in front of the other toward whatever happens to come next. The biggest difference is that you’ve somehow been changed by the experience of it all—whatever the milestone may be. And, when it comes to something like graduation, those of us who have been there and done that know what this feels like, and those who haven’t been there yet will someday find out.

### **Milestones of the Liturgical Year**

Now, today is the fourth Sunday of June, which normally doesn’t coincide with any sense of circumstance—it’s not the first Sunday of the month, nor the last, and we aren’t even having Communion today. But, for people of faith here at FPC, this year it feels a lot like the day after a huge biblical and theological milestone—like graduation or something similar—and not just because of the PNC update. Allow me to explain ...

Each year after Thanksgiving, we begin the season of Advent. And, from the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent forward, for most all of the seven months between December and June, we experience a whirlwind of milestones related to Jesus' birth, life, ministry, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and more—that's 33 years of life, 3 years of teaching and preaching, 3 days of passion, death, and resurrection, and a lifetime of salvation—all crammed into about 6-7 months' worth of Sundays. Three weeks ago, we celebrated the milestone of Ascension. Two weeks ago, we celebrated the milestone of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And, last week we celebrated the mystery *and* milestone of the Trinity—God in three persons—the theological and liturgical culmination (the graduation, if you will) of all that we study, learn, believe, and proclaim about God every single day of our lives. And, today, on the other side of this whirlwind of liturgical milestones, we gather together to worship the one God, and we gladly lift up these sentiments from Psalm 103 based on all that we know from Jesus:

<sup>1</sup> Let my whole being bless the Lord! Let everything inside me bless his holy name! <sup>8</sup> The Lord is compassionate and merciful, very patient, and full of faithful love. <sup>10</sup> He doesn't deal with us according to our sin or repay us according to our wrongdoing, <sup>11</sup> because as high as heaven is above the earth, that's how large God's faithful love is for those who honor him. <sup>12</sup> As far as east is from west—that's how far God has removed our sin from us. <sup>14</sup> Because God knows how we're made, God remembers we're just dust. <sup>17</sup> But the Lord's faithful love is from forever ago to forever from now for those who honor him.

It's a wonderfully exciting time indeed!

### **What Happens Next?—Again, More of the Same**

But, as people of faith we must ask ourselves, now what? What happens next ... now that we live on the other side of Jesus' own life and resurrection—now that we live on the other side of the Pentecost experience? What really happens after the milestones are all remembered and the footsteps of Jesus have all been followed for another year? What happens after we look back and take stock, and we consider all that has occurred—not just in the past 6-7 months, but in the past 2,000 years? And, how are we changed by knowing that the Lord's faithful love is from forever ago to forever from now? People of faith have been seeking answers to these types of questions for as long as communities of faith have existed.

Well, let me tell you what happens next ... again, *more of the same*. More of the same keeps on happening—more of what we were already doing. Just look at our reading from Acts 2:42-47 today—after the enormous milestone of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the birth of the church in the world, people of faith kept doing the same ‘ole things—and I’m always struck by the ordinary nature of it all. They went back to routines that already existed or they made up new routines that seem eerily similar. More of the same is what people of faith have always done—back to going to work, back to studying and learning (it never ends!), but this time about the apostles’ teaching and faith and God and Christ’s mission in this world; back to being part of a community—more exciting times with friends and more spending time with family; back to eating meals and sharing God’s blessings and praying for each other, and more of putting one foot in front of the other toward whatever happens to come next. The biggest difference is that, as people of faith, they were somehow wonderfully changed by the experience of it all—by all the milestones of our loving and faithful God—and “they praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone” from that day forward.

Even more, today we are also celebrating the PNC’s milestone of completing the *Ministry Information Form*. They’ve been working hard since February to get to this point, but in many ways the real work is just about to begin—the work of discerning among dozens and dozens of applications whom God is calling to serve as your next Senior Pastor. So what happens next ... now that the prep work is done and the tool for finding the next pastor is ready to launch? What happens to the PNC at their next meeting together? What happens to the rest of us as we eagerly await however many more months this process may take?

Well, let me tell you what happens next ... yet again, *more of the same*. More of the same will keep on happening—more of what we were already doing. Just as I described moments ago, people of faith will keep doing the same ‘ole things—and maybe we will all be struck by the ordinary nature of it all. The PNC will keep doing their routines that already exist or maybe they will make up new routines as circumstances require. Because more of the same is what people of faith must always do—so they will keep meeting together, and they will study applications and learn what they like about different candidates (and they will come to think, this never ends!), but they will sense God’s Spirit and get excited about possibilities. And, the

rest of us will keep being part of this beloved community—we will share more exciting times with friends and more spending time with our family of faith; we will keep eating meals (cause we're Presbyterian!) and sharing God's blessings and praying for each other, and we will all experience more of putting one foot in front of the other toward whatever happens to come next. The biggest difference is that, as this family of faith, we will somehow be wonderfully changed by the experience of it all—by this and all the milestones to come in the search process—and at the end of this journey together, the PNC will have accomplished their task and fulfilled their calling. And, all of you—the saints of this church—will keep on praising God and demonstrating God's goodness to everyone from that day forward.

**What Happens Next at FPC?—More of the Same!**

And, then one day when the next Senior Pastor asks someone around here what happens next ... you'll hopefully remember to say, *more of the same* happens next—more studying the apostles' teaching and broadening our faith and being part of Christ's mission in this world; more of being part of this family of faith—more exciting times with friends and more spending time with family; more eating meals (cause we're Presbyterian!) and sharing God's blessings and praying for each other, and more of putting one foot in front of the other toward whatever happens to come next—and all of it will happen in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!