



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“LIFE IN TRANSITION”

Scripture Lessons: **Philippians 4:4-9**

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, April 26, 2009.

If this is a time of transition in your life then today's sermon is intended for you. And in case you didn't know it, it also means you are very much in vogue. In my reading in recent weeks it seems as if nearly everyone and everything is “in transition”. It is a time of transition in the economy. It is a time of transition politically with the new Obama administration. Our relationship with Cuba is in a period of transition. So too is education, communication, the media, healthcare in America, the military, family life and religion “in transition”. I also read that lawyers, women and baby boomers are going through a time of transition. Just Google “in transition” and discover how fashionable this is.

Now Webster defines transition as “passage from one state, stage, subject or place to another.” That being the case, everyone and everything is in some degree of transition, save for the Almighty who alone “is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.” Everything else, however, is in some state of change. There is change about us and change within us all the time. And these changes are replete with possibilities for pain and pleasure, sadness and joy, hope and fear, growth and decay. And that is why transition or change is both thrilling and threatening. And often it is impossible to distinguish the one from the other.

When we were bringing four children into the world my wife wanted me to be personally involved so we took Lamaze classes together and I was present for all of the births, except for Natalie who came into the world before I could park the car and get back up to the delivery room. At any rate, during that process of birthing babies I learned the real meaning and power behind the word “transition”. When a woman in childbirth enters what is called transition --- well, everything is about to change dramatically and none of old rules apply. Expectant mothers are not to be held responsible for anything they say or do during transition. Fathers would be well advised to shut up, stand back, and for the sake of all that is holy turn off the videos and get the cameras out of sight. What is about to happen maybe miraculous and thrilling but it is not necessarily something you want to preserve for all posterity. For that matter you may choose not to remember it the next morning.

So new parents know all about being in transition. They know how thrilling and threatening childbirth is and parenthood as well. Later they will confess that God was very much at work during their time of transition but it was not obvious in the moment. Transitions are often that way.

Life is full of transitions. People lose jobs or accept new positions. They move from one community to another. They get married, their children enter school. Their children graduate and leave an empty nest. A separation or divorce is a time of transition. A death to be sure throws one into a time of transition. In his book Ministry by William J. Bausch he writes that “As they were being driven from the Garden of Eden, Adam remarked to Eve, ‘My dear, we are entering into a period of transition.’” And their descendants, including those of us here this morning have been in transition ever since.

From cradle to grave we are constantly at the beginning of, in the middle of, or completing a time of transition. This is not only true for individuals, but for families, communities, businesses, churches and nations. Our church is about to enter a time of transition because, God willing and the Board of Architectural Review approving, we will be demolishing and moving out of most of our facilities in June. Thankfully our sanctuary and the space attached to it will be available and so this will be our stabilizing factor. But the period of demolition and construction will definitely be a time of transition for all of us and each of us.

Now while some transitions in life are predictable and expected, many catch us off guard and they require major adjustments and creative coping skills. It is imperative that we look for creative and faithful ways to cope which can help us reduce our fears and resentments and thus face the future with courage and conviction. And what I would say to you this morning is that our faith can be a wonderful resource in these seasons of transition. Let me share how God's word can assist us in coping creatively and faithfully.

The passage from Paul to the Philippians read this morning was written by the apostle to the church that he perhaps loved the most. The church in Philippi was the first church established on European soil. This was the church's first penetration into Gentile territory and it was in uncharted waters. The letter was written during a time of transition in Paul's own life and in the life of that church. The apostle is writing from a prison cell, probably in Rome, though some have suggested Ephesus. At this point in his own life the future is uncertain and the course of his ministry is unknown. But the same could be said about the church in Philippi. This church had allowed itself to depend too much on the apostle Paul, whom they loved, and they wondered if they would be willing ever again to find the guidance, the encouragement, and the correction that he provided to them during their infancy. The believers of Philippi feared the pagan hostility of Rome as well as the threat of heretical Judiazers within their own ranks. So the church was threatened by forces within and without.

And so it is that the apostle Paul writes tenderly and affectionately to these believers. On the surface he is thanking them for a gift they had sent to him in a time of need, but he writes even more to assure them and to give them courage and confidence amid all the changes and challenges that they were facing.

There is great wisdom, divine wisdom if you will, in the message of Paul and it seems most applicable to people and churches in transition. I suspect that I have shared Philippians 4:6-7 with more people in the course of my ministry than any other passage of scripture: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

I learned the power of that verse in my first church. They had granted me study leave to go and use a fellowship for further study in Edinburgh, Scotland and one of the elders was facing major surgery. I wrote him a letter and shared this passage with him and after his recovery he wrote me a long letter thanking me and telling me of the amazing comfort and peace this passage had provided during a stressful and uncertain time.

What does our scripture lesson this morning have to offer to people in transition? To begin with it encourages us to rejoice. Why? Not because everything is going to turn out as we want or hope. Joy is something quite distinct from happiness. Joy is deeper and much more profound. Joy comes about not through life's circumstances, however blessed, not by individuals, however

wonderful. Joy comes from being “in the Lord.” “Rejoice in the Lord” Paul says. Joy is the believer’s assurance that despite life’s circumstances, “the Lord is near.” The same Lord whose grace is sufficient for every trial is our constant companion. The same Lord whose love in Jesus Christ is unshakeable and indestructible, as Paul wrote to the Romans, this same Lord who is sovereign over the world and who rules and overrules in the lives of his servants is achieving his purposes in us and through us though we may not recognize us. Paul understood what the Philippians and the Charlestanian need to understand in times of transition, and that is that a loving God is in charge and is nearby. Our anxiety, therefore, serves no good purpose. Despite our failings and despite our inadequacies God will bring to completion the work he has begun within us and among us, as Paul had told the Philippians earlier in chapter 1.

With this first assurance in mind Paul next encourages the people of Philippi who were in the time of transition to pray, to let their requests be made known to God. I believe that the Lord wants us to pray with all candor and conviction, to share with our God our deepest felt needs and our fervent desires, to lay before the Lord our struggles, our decisions, our requests for guidance and grace. I cannot tell you how prayer works but I can tell you that it does. Those matters about which I pray seemed to have a way of being resolved, some times in way I could never have imagined.

When we pray over decisions and struggles an internal peace often floods our soul. It is as if we turned the matter over to the Lord who knows best and we can leave the results in God’s hands. Have you not found this to be true in your own life? When you honestly and truthfully seek the Lord’s guidance, when you look for his will in the person of Christ and the Holy Scriptures, and in the advice of trusted friends you have the peace to make a decision and leave the results to the Lord.

Too often in times of stress and transition we forget what a friend we have in Jesus and what a genuine privilege it is to carry everything to him in prayer. We have no greater means for coping as people of faith.

And so in times of transition we can first of all rejoice in the knowledge that the sovereign Lord who loves us and who works with us for good in all things is nearby to sustain us and to equip us for whatsoever may come. Secondly, we can share our concerns and struggles with the Lord in prayer and discover a peace which passes all understanding. And thirdly and finally, we can in the midst of every transition look for and accentuate the positive.

Norman Vincent Peale was well known for his Power of Positive Thinking. But Paul was on to this long before Peale. In fact, I had a Bible professor in college who was fond of saying that while he found Paul appealing he found Peale appalling! I am not so sure about that, but I do know that in every change and transition of life we can look for things that are positive and good and potentially a blessing we will ordinarily find them. By the same token, if we look for the worst, if we nurse our fears, if we focus on our suspicions, our regrets, and our resentments, we will discover more of the same. We all have a way of finding what we are looking for in life and in times of transition. We also tend to find what we are looking for in people, in churches, in communities, in preachers, in programs and in all of life’s circumstances because expectations often become self-fulfilling prophecies.

An example of this occurred this past Friday. I was with a group of people who with me were bemoaning the devastating fires in Myrtle Beach, which had claimed so many homes and so much property. A man in construction then offered up the thought of a possible long term blessing. He said that with the poor economy and so many in the building trades out of work, at least people in construction would now have some much needed work rebuilding and repairing. So look for the positive in the negative.

Now Paul doesn't actually say to accentuate the positive. What he says is this: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

We can indeed find peace in the midst of life's transitions but it may require of us that we remind ourselves continually that the sovereign Lord of love is with us in every circumstance of life, that we turn to the Lord in prayer sharing our concerns our fears and our hopes, and that we remember to look for the positive and the virtuous and the good in every situation that confronts us. In doing so we too can discover that peace which passes all human understanding in the mist of life's turbulence. Amen.

Prayer:

Oh God, our God, you are never far from any of us and it is your pleasure to use us and to bless us and to equip us to face every challenge that comes to us. Give us the grace to realize this and to discover your peace and your purpose in all of life at its various stages, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.