

1st Words at First Church

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On this Sunday of our history, I reflect on my history with you, almost eleven years now. A good history, I believe. I think my first sermon words to you were consistent with the first principles that were at the start up of this church. What were, and are, those first words?

I take pause to consider first words in the Bible. The first words of the whole book – “In the beginning.” Not just words grabbed out of the air or that could be considered throw away words. Or the first direct discourse of God, “Let there be.” How about his first words to man. The first written words of the New Testament? The first spoken words of Jesus? What does Jesus say first after rising from the dead? I’m curious about first words.

I’d be curious, if we let it simmer, what you think that good first words from a pastor might be for the beginning of his ministry with a church? Or theirs to him? What would you suggest as good first words?

I’m thinking that I could say that I am so pleased and hopeful about me and you and God. I could say, “You be for me and I’ll be for you.” I could say some of my job, when you think about it, is to stretch you and that could be uncomfortable here and there. It is for me. So maybe I should say, “Hang in there,” ahead of time! I could say I’m probably not everyone’s cup of tea but I’ll try to be a fair and good pastor to as many as I can as best as I can. What else? I could say I love the Lord Jesus and I want you to. I could say if I step on your

toes, come speak with me rather than someone else. I could say call me Pastor Jeff, whatever you feel most comfortable with. I could say thank you for the smiles and love and help you have shown to me from the get go. I could say all these things, and you know what? I did ... and will again.

Steven Covey wrote the book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. He also wrote a book entitled *First Things First*. He would completely agree with, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Let's have some of our first, and anniversary words, what do you think, have to do with first things, main things? And the main thing about a church, always has been and always will be, is to connect people to God ... you and me and those out there, connected to Him in a meaningful way. I help you. You help me. We help them. They help us. Our mission statement here is to know God and make him known. Same thing. Get connected, stay connected, connect others. That's our business.

Someone once said that every organization needs to constantly ask two questions. One, what's our business? Two, how's business? In this meditation together let's consider our business (getting ourselves and others connected to God) and how can we can keep doing well in it. Let me read this passage and then suggest three words to help us keep doing well together.

Galatians 6:7-10 A man reaps what he sows. [8] The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. [9] Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. [10] Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

The text is that we reap what we sow. The text tells us that the reaping may take some time so don't give up. It will come. Our progress as a church has come and it will continue to come as we keep sowing. And I think as we keep sowing with three particular words in mind – Commitment, Commission, and Commandment.

Commitment. Commitments are those things we say “yes” to (and “no” to), those things we set ourselves to do, those things we muster our will power to accomplish, those things we promise in deep sincerity to carry out. And they are important because they, not completely but significantly, define who we are. It is very true that we become what we are committed to. If I commit to playing the piano, I play for a set time every day, if I organize my intentions about that and organize my plans for that, then I become a pianist. I am a pianist.

The major commitment in my life has to do with Jesus Christ. I've made other commitments over my life as well – as a husband, a father, and a pastor. These commitments significantly define me. They influence my prayers – what I pray about. They affect my priorities and order my steps.

The church, our church, is the company of the committed, those who have said “Yes” to God. Listen to this proclamation that was written by an African brother in Christ.

MY COMMITMENT AS A CHRISTIAN

I'm a part of the fellowship of the unashamed.
I have Holy Spirit Power. The die has been cast.
I have stepped over the line. The decision has
been made. I'm a disciple of His. I won't look back,
let up, slow down, back away, or be still.

My past is redeemed, my present makes sense,
my future is secure. I'm finished with low living,
sight walking, small planning, smooth knees,
colorless dreams, tamed visions, mundane
talking, cheap living, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity,
position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity.
I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized,
praised, regarded, or rewarded. I now live by
faith, lean on His presence, walk by patience, lift
by prayer, and labor by power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven,
my road is narrow, my way rough, my companions
few, my Guide reliable, my mission clear.
I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured,
lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed. I will
not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in
the presence of the adversary, negotiate at the
table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity,
or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up, let up, until I have
stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up,
preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple
of Jesus. I must go till He comes, give till I drop,
preach till all know, and work till He stops me. And
when He comes for His own, He will have no problems
recognizing me- my banner will be clear!

*--Written by a young African pastor and tacked
on the wall of his house.*

Did you feel the commitment?? We do well as we commit ... to Jesus Christ.

The second word to focus on is Commission, namely the Great Commission. Could you be greatly committed to Jesus and not be committed to his agenda? You know what the first words of the risen Jesus are? Go and make disciples. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John he says this. Connect people to God. Know God and make him known. (Could I just say that these are not independent? You can't do one without the other. We know God as we make him known. We make him known as we know him.) Our commitment (first word) is to the Commission.

I remember seeing David Letterman, the night time talk show host, go into a store that had signs all over it that said, "Nothing but lampshades." It had many signs in many sizes and they all said the same thing, "Nothing but lampshades." He went in and asked if they had overcoats. They said, "Nothing but lampshades." Then he asked if they had canned goods. They said, "Nothing but lampshades." Then he asked if they had garden rakes. They said, "Nothing but lampshades." It was funny. But the store understood their bread and butter, their core business. Ours has to do the with the Great Commission.

The third word is Commandment. Here I mean the Great Commandment, Love God and Love Neighbor. The commandments all come down to loving God and loving others— i.e., passion for God and compassion for others. When you think about it, we might most practically say, "Love God by loving others." That's how Jesus was. That's why he healed, fed, embraced. So we commit to Jesus and his agenda ...and his method. We do Jesus' work in Jesus' way, the mission of Jesus in the manner of Jesus.

Two stories of the Bible that join to teach us at this point are the Mary and the alabaster jar and the Good Samaritan story. Jesus' dinner company was filled with protocol and social standing. Into that came Mary who wept at his feet and anointed them. Passion. The Good Samaritan took care of someone not only as he would want to be treated but as that person would want to be treated. Compassion.

So here are first words for our foundation time together today at First Presbyterian, Sebastian -- A Great Commitment to Jesus Christ and his Great Commission and his Great Commandments makes a great church.

Let's go in this meditation into prayer. "You, in your heart, where you are sitting in this sanctuary, reach out to the Lord. Look with him at the commitment gauge in your life. You may not know how it got high or low. But will you ask him to help you connect to him and be fully committed to him? Ask him to help you not be afraid of such a prayer but to see it as a wonderful thing. Now also ask him to show you ways you can help someone today and this week else connect to God. In Jesus' name. Amen."

A missionary named Frank Laubach prayed such a prayer. His life was changed. He went on, without any particular training, to see the plight of illiterate people. He taught them to read. He is responsible for teaching more people to read in the 20th century than any other. Literacy people know about his Laubach method. Who knows what little ... or big thing God just might do through you as you connect and commit to him. The word of the Lord.

Loving God by loving others involves committed giving of time, prayer, and money. May God enliven our commitment, and make this moment worship, by giving our tithes and offerings.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message
or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you,
the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.
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