

**Psalm 95:1-7**

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed. O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

**Ephesians 1:15-23**

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

**“We Are....First Church”****Rev. Charles Schuster****November 20, 2011**

If you're a visitor today, or new to the church, never been here before, you'll see kind of what we're made of by watching how we invest what we have into what we believe in, and you may wonder, "Who are these people?" Because if you look at the bulletin and you listen to a few things around here, we've got weird ways of talking. Time and Talent card, for example, the bulletin, announcement of the things that are supposed to happen! Strange things on it, like UMW. Are there mine workers here? Or UMYF, and why would they be having a crazy dinner? And why would there be something called Open Doors when it's cold outside? And what's with Crosswalk? Is that an exercise group for angry strollers? And why would a church have a whole group doing ministry to someone named Stephen? And what is Verge? And does Double Nickel have something to do with small coins? Who are these people? We have a particular way of talking. We have codes of conduct. We have languages. In fact our book of rules, we call a discipline. And if you were to ask us what it is we believe, we'd say, "We believe in the quadrilateral." Wow.

We've got a way of talking here, developed a special language. I love the story of the pastor who went to visit the church member unannounced, and the pastor could see through the window evidence that the people were home. The TV set was on, he could hear muffled voices. So the pastor left a business card, slid it under the door and wrote on it, "Revelation 3:20" which if you look it up says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat and be with you." Obviously, some of you have heard this before, there's some cackling going on out there. The next Sunday after the service, a woman in the congregation handed the pastor a note with the word Genesis and the number 3:10. When the pastor got back to his office, he got out his Bible, he looked at the citation that read Genesis 3:10, which most of you already know -- "I heard the sound of thee in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked and I hid myself." Maybe you didn't know that passage.

Who are these people? I've only been to one CSU football game. It was the Boise State game, it didn't work out so well for the Rams that day, and there was a sign that I saw just behind one of the goalposts. It wasn't John 3:16 like I expected, it was a different citation. It was Luke 23:34, and when I got back to my house and went down into the basement, I have a study there, and there are a few Bibles. I looked it up. Luke 23:34 - "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Who are these people? Now, if I were to put up a scripture that would describe my feeling about the congregation, about the church, I would write on a piece of paper, maybe put it up on the screen so you could see it. It would be Ephesians 1:16, which reads, "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers."

And if you are new to the congregation, if you ask me what I think about the church, I would say Ephesians 1:16, for three reasons. We are First Church. That's just our name, this congregation. I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. Because you know religion. You know the function of faith is to give, to give every chance you have, every way you can. The function of faith is to give, and you all know that. Wayne Dyer wrote a whole book entitled *Inspiration*. There was a major part of that book on generosity. He says, "I know I'm inspired when I see evidence of generosity." Generosity and generous actions always are inspirational, and this congregation is a congregation of big givers. Not like the letter that was sent to the Internal Revenue Service several years ago that said "To whom it may concern, I underpaid my tax bill for the last year. I can't sleep at night. My conscience is bothering me. Enclosed please find \$600. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest." The function of faith is not to give because of guilt, but we give because of grace.

About a week and a half ago I was sad to learn that Bill Keane died. Bill Keane was the artist and the cartoonist of "Family Circus." Not terribly funny, but profound. He was 89. He wrote about his family. His cartoons were simple and I think, beautiful, and there was humor in those. Like the little boy who came running out of the bedroom at 10:00 at night after having been in bed for two hours and said, "I don't feel so good. I think I need a hug." That was his first cartoon, and that was his son. The little girl who's in worship and said to her mother, "Churches are smart. They have such pretty windows, but you have to be inside to be able to see them." Bill Keane died ten days ago. His last words to his family were "I love you."

He was asked several years ago what he was trying to do with his cartoon series, and he said, "You know what I want to do? I want my readers to read what I give them with a smile on their face, a lump in their throat, a tug at the heart, that they recall as they look

at that, they've experienced some of the same things with their family." One of the readers wrote him and said, "I'm a teacher. I want you to know why I'm a teacher. One of your cartoons inspired me to be a teacher. It was the one about the little country school that had produced famous great people. God bless you," she writes. "You have a kind heart." Somehow, it's important these days to remember there are people like that, like he was. People who understand that the function of faith is not a common creed, but common sense. It's not greed to acquire wealth, but the grace to share it. It's not how much better I am than you, but how can I, being who I am, help you be better than you are? And when I think of this congregation, I think of the 45-year old gentle giant, 6 foot 4, he is, who loves the holidays, who went trick or treating dressed like a ghost. Knocked on the door. People looked at him and said, "Really?" Who every year, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Halloween, he sends us these little paper things he makes. Pumpkins, turkeys, he just sent a batch of Christmas ornaments. Paper. Gentle giant. He can't wait to see what we do with the sanctuary, and the Christmas tree. He's a kid, 45 years old.

I think of the Senior Council that put the talent show together to raise money to buy a church van so our youth, when they go on those mission trips, would be save. They'd have one that wouldn't roll over. Some of those do. And I think of that event that happened a year or so ago, members of the church, this couple, called me up and said, "Is there anything that maybe we could help with that the church can't do because it just can't?" I said, "Well, we tried to raise some money for the church van, but we didn't quite raise enough." They said, "Well, you just go ahead and order it, because we'll pay for it." A couple weeks ago they brought in a check for \$38,000, and the van's here. If you go out into that south parking lot, it's the vehicle that's parked illegally in the circle, because I put it there.

I think of the people who organized the auction last Sunday, people who brought their precious valuable things here to be auctioned off to help. We made over \$7,000. I think of those people. I think of the Wesley college students who went into Old Town with sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the homeless. I think of the 40-year-old woman who, six years ago, we had this garage sale. It was in July, it was 100 degrees. You may remember that. And we needed to raise \$20,000. We raised \$12,000, and we were feeling a little dis-spirited about that. This 40-year-old woman, I don't know if she could afford this, pulls me into my office and writes out a check for \$8,000 so we'd make it. And then she said, "Don't tell anybody."

I think of the couple that have given money every year about this time of year. "Give this to somebody in the church who's having a rough time at Christmas, and don't tell anybody who we are." They came by this past week and said, "We're going to do that again." The most generous congregation I've ever seen. Never been a need identified, that we didn't respond to. Always a source of help, even before we ask it, sometimes. This congregation will be looking to build a larger Fellowship Hall. I bet we do it. This congregation will be asked to start another Methodist church in the area. It will happen. This congregation is opening its doors to homeless families. In January, they're coming. We're First Church. This congregation knows the function of faith is to give, because we know how much has been given to us. It's about grace, it's about God.

Secondly, who are we? Ephesians 1:16 -- "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." This congregation knows about the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus, and what that means. I guess the NFL has produced a Bronco jersey with the number 15 on it, and the name Jesus on the back of it. Tim Tebow. Some have thought that's blasphemy, a mocking of Tim Tebow's faith. But you know, there's another way to look at it. It involves hope. It means the game is never lost as long as the clock is running. Think about last Thursday evening. One of the things that's said about that young man by the people who play with him, his teammates, they say again and again, "He finds a way." That's what resurrection means. It means we find a way. It means we do not give up. It means we will not be discouraged. It means we never know what can happen next. Anything can happen, because on the back of our jersey it says Jesus. On the back of our jersey it says Resurrection.

This congregation knows the resurrection, and the meaning of it. Jurgen Moltmann, a young man when he came to the divinity school at Duke University, I was there, I was in one of his classes. I and the others did not appreciate what he gave us at that time. We do now. He told us about growing up in Hamburg, Germany, and how he was conscripted into the German army in the second World War, how he was put on an anti-aircraft battalion. He remembers the bombings, he remembers the invasion of the Allies. He will never forget what it was to be captured, and what it was to be taken to a prison camp in Belgium. He describes his early life as not religious. His parents only went to church on Christmas Eve, and it wasn't a religious event for them, it was a time to celebrate the holy family, and it was a family event, nothing to do about God. He really did not understand Christianity very deeply until a Presbyterian missionary passed out Bibles to the prisoners of war in Belgium. He thought that was strange. He had rather wished for cigarettes or candy. But he got a Bible, and he read it, and he discovered the meaning of resurrection, not just as an event that happened to Jesus, but a reality through Jesus that happens to all of us, if we're open to it. And he discovered hope, and he wrote a theology of hope. In the worst of conditions, in the most desperate of circumstances in human history, he discovered hope. Hope is what resurrection means, if we believe in Jesus, if we understand resurrection we are people of hope. Victor Hugo in *Les Miserables* writes, "The pupil dilates in darkness, and in the end finds light, as the soul dilates in misfortune, and in the end finds God." That's resurrection.

A small child named Kevin never had seen a ballet before. Interested in the way the ballerinas danced on their toes, wondered why. It seemed strange to him. Leaned over to his grandmother and whispered, "Why don't they just get taller people?" If we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, we dance on our toes, and we become taller people. And when I think of the people in this church, I think of the woman who was diagnosed with breast cancer who said, "My mother called me up and said to me, 'Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Deal with it.' And I did, and I can, whatever comes." I think of the man whose wife had died about a year ago, who has found a way to connect with the music that she loves. When he hears that music, he connects to her and to his children, and to his grandchildren. I think of the leaders of our church like the people in this long-range planning group, who are looking at our church in terms of who we will be in ten years.

They are seeing what is not yet, but could become. I see people dancing on their toes. I hear people talk about how life, for us, is graded not on a curve, but on the cross, and the cross is empty, and our hopes are not. I see people thinking about the future as if it were present. We are First Church. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus, and the presence of resurrection in our lives, and we have hope. We are people of hope.

Finally, who are we? Ephesians 1:16, "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." We are First Church. We believe in the God of love. We believe in reconciliation. Reconciliation means we stay together even when we don't understand each other. Did you ever find yourself driving like on College Avenue, and you can't decide whether you're going to turn left or right, you know the cameras are up there, they take really nice pictures. And so you'll hesitate a little bit and the person behind you gets annoyed and they start honking. Then they pull up beside you and roll down their window and they say things to you, not nice things, about your mother. And then they yell at you, "What's your problem?" And then they speed off. They really aren't interested in your problem. They left. William James said, "Many people think they are thinking when what they are doing is simply re-arranging their prejudice."

Thursday Night, Miroslav Volf was here and we heard his story. Born in war-torn Yugoslavia, father a pastor of a church, his brother killed by a soldier, spent his life trying to reconcile the world that he knew and the feelings that he had, concluded, "We believe in the God of love, and we have the love of God and it is more powerful than the evil in the world. And the only way to take back power from the one who has wronged us is to forgive them. The only way to deal with exclusion is to embrace. That is at the core of the Christian faith," he said. "Because the life of God is the life of self-giving and other-receiving love." God is in us. We are in God, in mutual indwelling. If we believe in the God of love, we know as the cross demonstrates that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim. We discover other people's humanity and we imitate God's love for them, and we find it ourselves.

After Professor Volf spoke, a panel of religious leaders responded, a rabbi, a Christian theologian, and Muslim leader. The sanctuary, as I said, was filled - Jews, Muslims, Christians. Reconciliation. The love of God, Thursday night. Thursday night there was a disturbance in the narthex. So I went back to see what it was. A car had blocked a neighbor's driveway, and the neighbor was angry. This neighbor was going to call the police, and then he was going to have the car towed. At a church meeting and the subject is reconciliation, and a neighbor was at war with us, and I could have said, "That car doesn't belong to us." Or I could have said, "You can still get your vehicle in the driveway." "I could have said, "You know, you ought to get a life," and returned to the discussion where the subject was reconciliation. "My wife is really angry," he said. I said, "Would you like me to talk with her?" He said, "No." I said, "What if we bring you some traffic cones and some tape? So that in the future, and I would say Christmas Eve, you stretch that out across that driveway, and none of us will park there, and if we do, you call me. And I'm sorry for the inconvenience." See, we have a right to invite people to our church. But that neighbor has a right to have access to his driveway. This congregation

more than any other I know works as hard as it can to have conversation, to hear opposing views.

Race car driver Richard Petty's father gave him advice once. He said, "Win the race, son, as slow as you can." To which we add, "In debate, it's not always right to be right, and sometimes, when we think we're right, we're not. Be firm, but go slow. Spend more time listening than speaking. Martin Luther King said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." When I think of this church, frankly, more than any other I've served, I realize the diversity of thought with the desire to be in conversation. I recall the willingness to sit at the table with people who will never see eye-to-eye, but who are willing to stand arm-in-arm to do together what is needed to be done. If you can look at the classes we have, if you can come to the discussions, we have passion for our opinion and compassion for each other as we disagree, but yet are agreeable. Political views differ. Sometimes heated discussions happen, but we walk out together. And more importantly, we come back.

Reconciliation means I will witness to my faith, and I will be present while you witness to yours. Reconciliation means I will not judge another as wrong, but I will try to understand why their view seems so far away from the reality I know, until I can know what is real for them. Reconciliation means I will defend their right to be wrong, and be open to the chance that they're right. We believe in the love of God. That's what I think of this church, Ephesians 1:16. "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." And today I just feel the need to say it.

Why? Years ago, the Minnesota Vikings had a quarterback named Fran Tarkington. He called a play that required him to block a defensive end. NFL quarterbacks are usually small. NFL defensive ends are massive. Quarterbacks never have to block defensive ends. They could get hurt. They could get killed. The Vikings were losing the game. A surprise play was needed. Tarkington called that play, and he had to block the defensive end. The Vikings as a result won the game. Watching the game film with the team the next day, Tarkington expected the coach to shower him with praise. It never came. After the film session, Tarkington approached coach Bud Grant and asked him, "Did you see that block, Coach? How come you didn't say anything about it"?" And Grant replied, "Sure I saw the block. It was great. But you always work hard out there, Fran, and I figured I didn't have to tell you." Tarkington looked at his coach and said, "Well, if you ever want me to block again, you do."

I do not cease to give thanks for you. I remember you constantly in my prayers, and I just know it -- Every now and then you have to tell people. You have to tell them what you think about them. I just did.

O God, we bring our pledges to the front, as we make our promise to serve. We seek to continue to be your church and creed, indeed, as people, as a congregation. I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. Everybody is somebody here. Amen.

