

SERMON: November 20, 2011 - Farewell & Godspeed service

TEXT: Matthew 13:44-46

TITLE: "Faith, Hope and Love"

Dear friends in Christ...let me say that again, dear FRIENDS in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This afternoon I get to say a few things that I haven't got around to saying in the past many years, and I get to say again what I will remember, and I hope what you remember, too.

All of my thoughts this afternoon are centered around the core of our life together: Faith, Hope and Love

FAITH

I have placed two new signs in our sanctuary. Did you see them? You will have to turn around to see. (Sorry choir in the balcony, you will have to just believe me in this...) As you see, the sign says, "Servants Entrance." And that, indeed, is what those doors are. They are our entrance into God's world where each and every one of us has the privilege to Live God's love in the World. That is a life we live by **faith**.

It is through THOSE doors that great servants pass. Never forget that while we gather to worship and praise God...while we gather to be nurtured through Holy

Communion and the preaching of the Word...it is not in here where our lives of faith are lived, it is OUT THERE. In God's world.

The short Gospel passage I chose for today are two of my favorite parables. (Obviously, I wouldn't have chosen a text that wasn't a favorite...it even says this is my favorite on our website!). The simple parallel parables are this: someone inadvertently stumbles upon a great treasure hidden in a field. They weren't looking for treasure, they just found it. And upon finding it, hid it...so no one else could find, and then liquidated all of their assets to purchase the field (where presumably the owner of the field has NO IDEA of the hidden treasure) and buys the field.

The second parable is of a merchant in search of fine pearls, and upon finding one, he too goes and sells all he has to purchase the ONE.

The typical interpretation of these parables is that we are supposed to go and sell all we have, give everything we own to purchase our passage to the Kingdom of Heaven. I don't think that is the point at all. In fact, I believe it is the exact opposite. It is not that WE are supposed to give all we have...rather GOD ALREADY HAS given everything, spent the life of the innocent Son of God, Jesus Christ so that **we** can be God's. You, me, WE are the treasure that has been purchased at a great price. You, me WE are the pearl of great price.

AND there is a whole world out there in need of servants to tell them and show them how much God loves them. On your way out to live God's love in the world, remember you are exiting through the Servants Entrance.

Another facet of faith is hear and believe the Biblical admonition, "Do not be afraid." Seventy times...that is Seven-Zero times throughout the Bible is the admonition "Do not be afraid."

I won't speak for you, but for me just being told "Do not be afraid!" doesn't always seem to do the trick.

Kathy and I have forged deep and lasting friendships over these years, and those friendships have shaped us for the better. To leave those friendships not only makes me sad, but afraid.

There is much to fear about a future that is promised but often seems dark and uncertain.

So, amidst the darkness, in the face of fear, we ultimately walk by faith.

Something else about faith...have you in faith entrusted your gifts and blessings to God? To be more specific, have you remembered St. John's in your estate planning? I

am serious. Have you remembered St. John's in your estate planning? Being good stewards of our resources has been a consistent theme here at St. John's, and I just want you to think of being a good steward with all of your time, all of your life and all of your assets. Over the past twelve years while inflation has risen 36%, pledges and general fund giving has increased 65%. If you add the millions of dollars given through the Building and Organ fund, we have more than doubled our giving to the mission of God through St. John's over these past 12 years. And these have not always been robust economic times. On the contrary, these have been difficult economic times for many. BUT, because of your faithful stewardship, the mission of St. John's has expanded in its breadth and depth.

But there is more mission to share with God. So, I ask, have you remembered St. John's in your estate planning as another way to be faithful? There are many places to which you can give, the Trust Fund, the Operational Trust Fund, Scholarship Fund, Building Fund, Organ Fund, Memorial Fund. It is your choice. And, for those friends here today not part of the St. John's community, there are plenty of other avenues for you to consider with your estate plans, too. But St. John's can use your estate, too. I urge you to remember St. John's in your estate planning. Kathy and I have. It is an act of faith and of living God's love in the world.

A final word about FAITH -- Continue to dream God-sized dreams.

Daniel Burnham may or may not have said: "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will not themselves be realized."

I like to turn that phrase around a bit...I don't want to be part of anything so small that I can do it by myself...I want to be involved in God-sized dream, God-sized plans and God-sized visions. If we can do...whatever... without God, count me out. BUT, but if our dreams can only be realized by, with and through God, then count me in. THAT is exactly what God has done in our midst over this past decade. Through FAITH God-sized dreams have been realized before our eyes!

God-sized dreams include the restoration of this space. Through hours and hours and hours...and hours...of prayers and discussion, through comment and controversy this congregation showed itself as a mature community of faith, able to talk passionately about items that are held dear to our hearts. And, through those passions and by faith we reached a decision to restore THIS space. This is God's house. Not ours. We are stewards so that THIS space might be a place where ALL are welcome, where ALL can worship, where ALL can find a measure of God's grace. This is God's

house. Not ours. But it is the community of St. John's responsibility to see this is a centering space and a launching place for living God's love in the world.

But there have been other God-sized dreams...other places where we have stepped out in faith...

Where other than in the mind of God does an urban congregation in Sacramento, California discover its partner in mission in a Lutheran community in Rukira, Rwanda? If our partnership with our brothers and sisters in Rwanda is not a God-sized dream, then I don't know what is.

A God-sized dream is to create a safe place where 100 junior and senior high school kids have a safe place to listen to their own live music on Friday nights. It is crazy talk for a church to turn a fellowship hall into an all-ages nightclub music venue.

A God-sized dream is to partner with others to serve those in our community who suffer from poverty. And so, we are partners with Francis House, Loaves and Fishes, Family Promise, Safe Ground, Faith and Homeless Families, Midtown Human Services Resource Center.

In faith, Keep dreaming God-sized dreams.

Keep dreaming God-sized dreams...as you live God's love in the world.

And now to HOPE

When I think of HOPE, I hear the Apostle Paul mandates that we are to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” This Biblical truth is a true secret of living. Joy is a decision and I encourage you to continue to make that decision and choose joy even in the face of pain. Our joy, grounded in love is big enough to carrying us through whatever pain, injustice, heartache and struggles we might face. BUT, in spite of, and in the face of all that life may throw at us, there is a joy born of hope not in what we do, but in what Jesus has done and continue to do for us. The source of our joy is grounded in HOPE.

I have lived in amazing hope over these years and together we have rejoiced well and often. Hope and joy are built into the DNA of this wonderful community.

As I reflect back on some of my most jubilant memories...I remember Summer Blast 2006 when Pastor Martin was visiting us from Rukira, Rwanda and he watched with fascination, and a little horror at the adult watermelon eating contest and the sight of a Senior Pastor taking off his shirt to go face first into a quarter of a watermelon. In my biased memory I believe I won that contest, too! (Sorry Dan Maloney!)

On a more recent Summer Blast, as the traditional final day water balloon fight was well underway, some person, still to remain unnamed, managed to get on the roof

of the office and shower down water-balloon on an unsuspecting Pastor Frank. Hmm, I wonder who that was?

Rejoice in the Lord, always. I have rejoiced every day...almost every day...that I have been honored to work with you all.

And when I think about HOPE and joy, I think of baptism and I remember...and those memories of Hope and baptism have shaped me...

I remember an October Sunday in 2003 when Kathy and I stood right there, in front of THAT font and Kai was baptized. There were years when Kathy and I never thought such a day would come...but it did. I almost made it through that baptism without crying...almost.

I remember other baptisms, too. There was Bobby Cloninger's baptism. Bobby's full name is Robert Sebastian. He is named after his Great-Grandfather, Robert Sebastian Romeis. Pastor Romeis was Senior Pastor here at St. John's from 1943 to 1983. And after that time served as Pastor Emeritus. It was my great joy to know Pastor Romeis, and a great sadness when he died. But since Pastor Romeis' death, it has fallen to me with the privilege to baptize his great grandchildren. I remember holding little Bobby in my arms...walking him down the aisle...and the tears streaming. Those

were tears neither of joy or sorrow, rather I was overwhelmed, simply overwhelmed by the power and presence of God. There in my arms was the legacy of faith that is handed down from generation to generation...and we get a front row seat to watch God at work! I held hope that day...just as I have held hope at every other baptism.

Faith. Hope. And finally, we come to LOVE.

Everything we do is grounded in love, a particular kind of love...God's love, the way God loves us, with passion, with abandon and with abundance is the same love which has grasped our hearts and the same LOVE we desire to live and share with the world.

To think of love, I think of Easter; God's ultimate statement of love for us. I remember my very first Easter in 2000. I was walking up the center aisle bringing up the end of the procession. Hundreds of people were clamoring to experience Easter at St. John's, to experience the joy, hope and love of Jesus' resurrection. These pews were filled. The balconies were filled. Ushers were looking for chairs to set. I was walking up the aisle and about there, right about there I saw Mona Jordan smiling at me...and I wanted to stop and weep because of the overwhelming joy, hope and the power of the love of the living Jesus in this space.

I remember our two Easter services at Memorial Auditorium...I especially remember the second Easter worship in 2008. Easter Sunday 2008 was just 8 days after my mom Patsy died. I remember in my sermon quoting a children's book by Walt Wangerin which was a favorite bedtime story book of mine to read to Kai.

"Listen, before the hoot owl cries
Before the monsters roll their eyes
Before you fly above the skies,
Or robbers bother with alibis,
I'll sing you the bestest lullaby
Of all!

♪ Faster than I am, and higher than the stars
Stronger than you are in both of your arms,
Here in your room all night while you're sleeping
Kinder and wiser and best for safekeeping is God.

That's the name My Baby true!
That's the one. Oh, God loves you.

From the brown of the ground to the blue of the sky,
From the golden dawns to the grey of goodbye,
From ear to ear a million years,
And butterflies both your eyes
God loves you; God loves you, even better than I."

God loves you; God loves you, even better than I. That is the promise of Easter!

God loves you; God loves you, even better than I. That is what grounds our
Faith, Hope and Love.

God loves you, God loves you, even better than I is how and why we live God's love in the world...because God loved us FIRST.

Thank you for living out that love, and in so doing loving me, and Kathy and Kai...

Amen