

Last Sermon(s): What I Love About This Church

1 Thessalonians 1:1-3 (NRSV)

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The “Last Lecture” is a tradition at many universities. A professor is asked to prepare a talk guided by the question: “If this was your last chance to give a lecture to students, what would you say?”

A famous Last Lecture was given by Randy Pausch in 2007. He was a Carnegie Mellon University professor in his early 40s with a wife and three children. The circumstances were both tragic and ironic because it literally was Randy’s last lecture after being diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. He could have said no, but he chose to use the opportunity to talk about living life to the fullest.

Randy’s last lecture is a memoir, a celebration of life, and a testament to the power of childhood dreams. It is filled with ideas and observations that he wanted to share with his three young children.

He said, “These are the things I won’t get the chance to tell them over the next twenty years. I’m trying to put myself in a bottle that will one day wash up on the beach for them.” Randy’s last lecture became a YouTube sensation and a best-selling book before he succumbed to cancer in 2008.

In the tradition of a last lecture, I want to share with you a last sermon or I should say sermons. This final sermon will actually be in two parts because I have a lot to say and I don’t think anyone wants to listen to me preach for 45 minutes to an hour.

Today, and next week, I want to preach on what I love about this church. After 19 years as your pastor, there are many things I have come to love. My hope is this last sermon will lead you to reflect on and talk about what I believe is the heart and soul of this congregation. I also want to encourage you to listen to what God will be saying to you about your identity and purpose as you navigate the changes and transitions ahead.

Our scripture is Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. The text begins: “To the Church at Thessalonica.” It is also addressed to us today. Thessalonians is the first letter Paul wrote. It came before the rest of the New Testament writings, including the Gospels or Acts or other letters.

This is the first time someone sat down, put pen to parchment and wrote the word church. “To the church,” Paul writes, “I thank God for your work of faith, your labor of love, and your steadfastness of hope.”

This triad of faith, love and hope is a common theme in Paul's letters. They are the primary forces by which the church as an alternative community is sustained. They are also the things I love so much about our church.

Paul begins with giving thanks for the faith of the church. Faith is the foundational orientation of trust toward God. Such trust is seen most clearly in Christ, who even in the face of death on the cross, trusted God.

But Paul gives thanks for more than just faith. He rejoices in the Thessalonians *work of faith*. What does he mean? Well, like Christ, faith is not something we just think or believe. Faith is something we live. It's something we do.

This church has always been good at the work of faith. As we learned last Sunday, Rev. Perea worked long and hard to spread the gospel in this valley. As a Presbyterian he put his faith into action by helping to opening churches, schools and clinics.

Mission teachers like Mary Harris who opened this church as a school 140 years ago today, put her faith into action by teaching children and adults how to read, write and converse in English.

We put our faith into action today by feeding our hungry neighbors. We used to do food baskets at Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter and upon request. But then Diane Lewis and others decided to open our pantry on a monthly basis. Over the past 15 years, hundreds of children and adults have been fed because of this church's faith and hunger relief work.

We put our faith into action whenever AA meets in this building. Mike Dole and others before him have faithfully showed up on Sundays and Tuesday evenings to provide a life line to people drowning in addiction. The number of people who attend has waxed and waned over the years, but 12 Steps and prayer have been faithfully offered week after week, year after year, and people's lives have been changed.

We put our faith into action by providing counseling services to people in this valley. Courtney, Lewis, who was raised in this church, wanted to provide a much-needed service to adults and children. So, we made Small Steps Counseling, a ministry of the church. Courtney and her staff faithfully served folks up and down the valley for several years.

Now we have Sally Hunter following in their footsteps. She is counseling with adults almost everyday of the week and, like us didn't stop during COVID, but went online and Zoomed with her clients during that difficult time.

There are other examples I could share, but like the Thessalonians, our work of faith is more than evident. And that's what I love about this church. Our faith is not just something we believe or think. It's something we do. Jesus isn't just in our heads or hearts, but in our hands and feet.

Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians' work of faith and then their labor of love. Have you ever thought of love as labor? Moms probably understand this metaphor better than dads. The Christian faith teaches that love is not just something we feel.

Our culture or society says love is first a feeling. We hear it expressed in music and poetry. We see it acted out on the TV or movie screen. We all know how powerful the feeling of love can be. But love is not just something we feel. It is, in the words of that great theologian Clint Black, something we do. Love, like faith, is something we practice.

One of the things this church is really good at is loving people back into God's kingdom. You may not know it, but that's one of your super powers. It happens naturally and without much effort.

Rob Mohr is one example of someone who experienced this church's labor of love. He's the son and grandson of pastors and a sibling of two brothers who became pastors. Rob was born and raised in the United Church of Christ.

As a PK (preacher's kid), he was at church whenever the doors were open. When his parents divorced in his teenage years, his mom didn't make him go anymore. As he says, "I became the black sheep of my family."

Rob avoided church for most of his adult life until he ran into Charlie Allen on the Cebolla. Rob was fishing. Charlie was scouting turkeys. Charlie invited Rob to church and he came to the community sunrise service and Easter pancake breakfast.

He eventually started coming to worship and you loved Rob into joining the church. Later folks in the church loved him into serving as a church leader. Rob started serving as church co-treasurer back in 2011 and in 2013 he became a church officer – an elder.

Rob is only one of countless other people you have loved back into God's kingdom. It's one of the things I love about this church. Like faith, you put your love into practice and people are touched by God.

Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians' work of faith and labor of love. Then he gives thanks for their steadfastness of hope. In spite of being surrounded by idols and the threat of the Roman imperial empire and society, these early Christians remained steadfast and hopeful.

Such hope takes life seriously. It is not about living in a Pollyanna world that shuts its eyes to everything ugly. It's not about wishful thinking or cheerful optimism.

Steadfastness of hope means having confidence in God despite evidence to the contrary. It's means believing and acting like God will have the final word in life and in death, and everything in between.

Steadfastness of hope is one of the things I love most about this church. Over the past 19 years, we've struggled, we've experienced pain and heartache, we've known despair and sorrow, but this congregation has also remained steadfast and hopeful.

Over the years we've had plenty and want in terms of people, money and leaders. During one of the lean times, we had only two elders for seven years. There was no one else to serve. It was challenging, and those two people were ready for a break when it ended, but we remained steadfast and hopeful.

During that same time period, we struggled with fewer member and friends. Participation was down as well as people's energy levels. It was discouraging, but we took heart whenever Emmett Cart reminded us that when he was a kid growing up in this church, some Sundays it was only him and the pastor. It was hard, but we remained steadfast and hopeful.

When I got sick in 2016 and 2017, we didn't know if I would be able to continue as your pastor. My brain tumor surgery and recovery were frightening and depressing. But you remained steadfast and hopeful for me and I was able to weather that storm. On top of that you put your steadfast hope into practice and raised \$10,000 for my medical expenses. I will always be grateful for your generosity and support!

Beloved, steadfast hope doesn't depend on the strength of our own spirit. Hope operates best when our optimism fails, when our emotions are drained, when our spiritual strength leaves us broken and vulnerable. Our hope doesn't come from within. Our steadfastness of hope always comes from God.

Your steadfast hope in Jesus Christ is one of the things I love about this church. I believe it will continue to sustain you in the changes ahead. I believe God will give you the sheer dogged endurance you'll need to face the transitions to come. Yes, I believe God will give you the strength to continue as you seek and find a new pastor.

What I love about this church is your work of faith, your labor of love and your steadfastness of hope. These characteristics make up heart and soul of this congregation. They are part of your identity and purpose. I know they will empower you to be the Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church now and always.

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David Whiteley, Pastor

Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church