

Last Sermon(s): What I Love About This Church (Part 2)

1 Peter 5:1-3

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.

This past Sunday, I started my last sermon. I'm doing it in the tradition of a last lecture given by a college professor. She prepares a talk guided by the question: "If this was your last chance to give a lecture to students, what would you say?"

This is my second-to-the-last chance to preach for you, so, what should I say? After 19 years as your pastor, there's a lot I could say, but what's most important? I decided to focus on this church's heart and soul, it's identity and purpose, the things I love most about this church.

Last week I preach from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian and how I love this church's work of faith, labor of love and steadfastness of hope. If you weren't here, I emailed a link to that sermon video or you can also watch or read it on the church's website.

Today I want to continue preaching on this topic. But I have to do so with a confession. One of the things I love most about this church is that it's Presbyterian. And my confession is that I'm biased for Presbyterians.

I'm a cradle Presbyterian. I was born, baptized, confirmed and raised at First Presbyterian Church in Midland, Texas. I grew up in that church, went to Sunday School and worship, sang in the Boys Choir, attended youth group, and worked as a janitor in high school.

My call to ministry started at Camp Chimney Springs, a Presbyterian church camp down south in Mayhill, NM. I went to two Presbyterian colleges for my undergrad degree. I worked a youth director at a Presbyterian Church in Houston before going to Union Theological Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA.

I met, dated and married Libby, a cradle Presbyterian. Our wedding was at her church First Presbyterian in Fort Worth, TX. Our two sons, Aaron and Daniel were born, baptized, and raised in Presbyterian churches. I have served as a Presbyterian pastor for 37 years working in three different churches, one campus ministry and presbytery staff, plus 19 years here in Jemez.

Yes, I'm biased when it comes to Presbyterians. And because of that, I believe being Presbyterian is a benefit. It's not just part of this church's DNA, it's also what will sustain and guide you through the changes to come.

One reason I love this church is Presbyterian because we value shared leadership and decision-making. Our polity - how we govern ourselves - is reflected in our name. Presbyterian comes from the Greek word "presbuteros" which means elder. This word occurs 72 times in the New Testament, including our passage from I Peter.

"I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly."

In our system, pastors don't run the church. We are a church governed by presbuteros or elders. They are women and men called by their congregation to share in leadership. We don't have popes, cardinals, bishops calling the shots. We have a flat hierarchy where decision making happens in and by a group, where elders, like James, Susanna, Miguel, Dee and Diane plus many others before them, work with the pastor to guide the church.

Yes, I love our church's polity and I love our connectionalism. You and I are part of a larger Presbyterian family. Our congregation is part of a web of relationships called governing bodies at the local level (Presbytery of Santa Fe), regional level (Synod of the Southwest) and national level (General Assembly of the PCUSA). Each governing body is composed of equal numbers of elders and pastors who share leadership and decision-making.

Our connectionalism is one of our greatest strengths, especially when a church like ours is going through a time of transition. Beloved, you are not going to be alone when I retire. Your sisters and brothers in other congregations and governing bodies will pray for you as you prepare for the future.

Santa Fe Presbytery's Commission on the Ministry (or COM because we Presbyterians love anacronyms) is made of up local elders and pastors who will provide support and encouragement. The Rev. Frank Yates, who will be with us next week to help say goodbye, is our liaison to COM. He has already met with our elders to explain the process of searching for new pastoral leadership and he will be a resource in the coming months.

Your elders have been at work already laying the foundation to prepare for the transition following my retirement. As James said in his email to the congregation, the Session has secured the services of our own three retired Presbyterian pastors to be the interim pastoral team.

Laura, Shannon and Jeff, or a I like to call them, "the unholy trinity", will be doing the things I have been doing like creating and leading worship, preaching, teaching, moderating the Session, meeting with task groups and committees, making pastoral calls, praying for and with you, and the infamous "whatever comes up category". Know that you will be in very capable hands and will be hearing great preaching too.

Another thing I love about this church being Presbyterian is that we have a very clear process to follow when searching for a pastor. This process has proven beneficial by thousands of congregations over the years. In fact, it's the same process that was used to call me to be your pastor nearly 20 years ago.

Presbyterian congregations usually elect a committee to search for a pastor. It's called the Pastor Nominating Committee or PNC. In consultation with the Presbytery's Commission on Ministry, the Session and congregation, the PNC writes the church's resume called a Church Information Form (CIF) to be distributed to pastors looking for a new position. The PNC also reads pastors' resumes called a Pastor Information Form (PIF) in seeking a match. I told you we love anacronyms.

When the PNC finds some potential candidates, they usually do preliminary interviews and narrow down the pool of candidates. If the interview process is positive for both parties, the PNC invites the candidate to meet in person.

I came to Jemez in the summer of 2002 to meet with this church's PNC. Dick and DH Ford picked me up at the airport in Albuquerque and took me to Quarters BBQ on Yale. We ate and visited before driving to Jemez Springs. I stayed at the Laughing Lizard next door for the weekend.

On Saturday, the PNC gave me a tour of the church and the valley and we had more in-person time together. On Sunday, I preached for the PNC at Immanuel Presbyterian Church's early service in town. Then we drove back to Jemez for lunch at Los Ojos.

I was told that there might be some other folk from the church there. I was supposed to be Charlie's cousin visiting from out-of-town. We walked into the back room of Los Ojos and 12-15 people from the church were sitting around a long line of tables pushed together.

Charlie introduced me as his cousin, but everyone there knew who I really was. I sat at the end of the tables and visited with folk while they sized me up as their potential new pastor. By the way, the PNC was not following standard practices.

I must have made a good impression because the PNC offered me the call and the congregation, after hearing me preach a "candidating sermon" for the church, voted to call me as their first installed pastor in over 100 years.

Of course, in the midst of all that process, there was a whole lot of prayer and discussion and soul searching. Calling a pastor is a very intense, intimate and relational experience. We believe the Holy Spirit works in the midst of all of it and God guides both churches and pastors in finding each other.

One final thing I love about this church being Presbyterian is that you are open to change and doing new things. This includes finding a pastor who will, no doubt, be different than me. Our denomination's motto describes us best: "The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God." These infamous words remind us that the process of transformation and change is ongoing and God is the one who makes it happen.

When I think back on all the changes and transformation we've experienced over the past 19 year, I'm amazed. Three months after I arrived, we started a Sunday school for all ages - children, youth and adults. We had more kids in those days. We also changed our Sunday morning schedule and added a fellowship time between Sunday school and worship.

In the summer of 2003, we left the building and started our tradition of an outdoor worship and potluck picnic at Camp Hummingbird or church member's home. We went down by the riverside once during the summer for 10 years. Then we started worshipping and picnicking once a month during the summer, weather and fire season permitting. For many it's our favorite worship services and potlucks of the year.

We tried something new by partnering with the Jemez Fine Art Gallery and hosting two Faith and Art Shows. On Good Friday 2010 we had The Seven Last Words of Christ: A Meditative Exhibit of Art & Faith. Local artists made beautiful expressions and visualizations of the seven last words of Christ on the cross. After Easter, in April 2011 we had another Faith and Art Show called Resurrection Stories: Images of Rebirth & Renewal. Both were very moving spiritual experience for folk in the church and community some of whom had never darken the doors of our church.

In 2015, we went through the New Beginnings process and discerned a need for an after-school program. We applied and received \$24,000 in grants to fund that new ministry. Many people in the community supported us with their talents, time and money. It was one of the most creative and generative community outreaches we've ever done. It operated for 18 months and may have continued if

I hadn't gotten sick. We used the remaining funds for two fun and informational summers programs for teens - The Best Week and Best Day Ever. Everyone involved, kids and adults alike, were blessed.

In June 2019, I shared the idea for a "pryground" in the sanctuary with the church officers before we had any kids coming. It took much pray and several months of conversation before we took out two pews and created a sacred space for kids in worship. People donated items, Scott built that beautiful set of shelves, and we repurposed old kid's furniture. Now I can't imagine our sanctuary without it. Can you?

In 2019 we hired a youth director and started the Jemez Mountain Youth Group. They created a youth lounge downstairs with bright paint and used furniture and the ministry took off. But then the pandemic hit and the youth group fell apart much to everyone's dismay. But for one bright shining moment, we were doing something new and different and kids in the community who didn't come to church. I know Dee would love to see us revive that youth outreach in new and different ways.

In March of 2020, I became a TV evangelist and we started worshipping on Zoom. The technology held us together during the most trying time of ministry in recent church history. We all adapted to being the church online for 14 months before coming back together.

Now we're changing again trying to offer hybrid worship so that we can maintain our online and in person worshippers. It's going to take a lot trial and error and practice, just like it did for me at the beginning of the pandemic when I was clueless about Zoom worship. But you will get there and I know it will be engaging and meaningful for all.

Of all the things I love about this church, the fact that it's Presbyterian might be what I love most. But then again, I'm biased. I love y'all being Presbyterian because we value shared leadership and decision-making. I love it because we are connected as the Body of Christ. I love it because we have a great process for calling a pastor. I love it because we have been and will be always trying new ways of being the Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church! Thanks be to God! Amen!

July 18, 2021

David Whiteley, Pastor

Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church