

## **Rev. Troy T. Howell Installation Address October 28, 2018**

Thank you, Josh and Ed for those readings; I've been telling people throughout the districts, as we've had church conferences that Ed is my 'training wheels'. He's my right wheel and my left wheel. And I think he's sort of kept me out of trouble so far and most of all I say to him repeatedly: "Ed, check me for grace. For if I don't have the grace in these responses, I think Paul said something about that in 1 Corinthians, thirteen; so, thank you. Those of you that know me or have carried with me for more than just exteriorly for a bit of a season, you know that I'm someone who has a depth of emotion. And I think I process it and present is pretty healthily most the time. I can't make any promises today. This has been a journey of pain of loss, and I'm surely not the only one who has experienced those seasons. And I'm not talking about the District Superintendency appointment. I'm talking about life. Life, but the thing that I have ever known, and I think I remember saying this to you, Bishop, at about quarter to ten at night Thursday night, January fourth. A day that lives in infamy, I think I remember saying to you, 'I don't know much, the older I get, the more I realize I don't know much. But, I know one thing, God is faithful. My life, my history, is littered with God's great faithfulness. And, I thank those of you who have had such an important part in that. Would you join me in prayer?"

Lord God, as we pause in these moments, we are a people sometimes need to have our heads dropped to the dust to be reminded that without it the breath of life that you freely give without our asking and most certainly without any of us earning it. We are but dust. Breathe in us by the power and the promise of your Holy Spirit. That in these moments when we prepare to come to your table, that we might be refreshed, revitalized, that we might be convicted; where we need the perfect accountability of our only perfect parent. Comfort us when we need your healing balm; and convert us more completely to be the offering you intend for us to be, in Jesus Christ be praised. Amen.

I confess I'm not the sharpest tool in the box and I'm not the smartest person in the room. Larry, my buddy from seminary, reminded me of that when he said: "What are you thinking?!" (I don't know if he said I needed my head checked, but you implied that anyway.) "You just scheduled a church conference right before this."

I didn't think much of that until we were processing and (I thought) 'I haven't really even looked at this message I prepared.' Or God prepared for me, so, I have the advantage of asking for your grace and forgiveness because I've never offered the proclamation at the installation of a district superintendent. So, Bishop, I'm not sure how you do this, but I'm just going to offer what God's laid on my heart. I don't trust it may be, beggars for God's grace, we'll be assured that God is speaking to us. I chose Psalm 126 and I thank you, Reverend David Simon, for sharing that. I chose that because, back in seminary, I had to do an exegetical paper on Psalm one twenty-six and I fell in love with it once I learned the history in this story. it is a Psalm of people who have lost what they thought they could count on. The shining city of Jerusalem where they knew God dwelled. and they were taken by the Babylonians into captivity. They were made to sing songs of torment there and to yearn and wonder in their minds 'Could they ever go home?' and 'Will God ever restore us?'

That song, I'm not going to go into, as much as I'd love to. An exegetical explanation of it, that's just a fancy church word for all the background; I'd love it because in that song is the tension of unbridled joy

at their return to Jerusalem, even though the temple was destroyed. And their deep, deep sorrow of the reality of the human condition when we've lost that which we thought was rock-solid sure. You sang the rejoicing part, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with... (Congregation: 'Joy.')

And then, the other one, is: "For the night weeping may carry with the morning light comes... (Congregation: 'Joy.')

God is faithful. Lamentations, I chose that passage, or hopefully, God brought it to me, it's attributed to the prophet Jeremiah by some, we don't really know who penned it, but, the writer is crying out to God; in chapter two we hear this:

That God is so disgusted and upset with the sin and the separation of God's people that God strips the Tabernacle. He made the assembly a ruin. Kings and priests were scorned, The Lord spurned his own altar, He laid a curse upon on his own sanctuary, for those of us a little too caught up in our buildings it's like a good reminder right now. And yet, in the midst of that, the remembering, the sadness the loss, the nostalgia, the pain, the prophet is drawn home by God's great faithfulness. New every morning are God's mercies. Great is thy faithfulness, o God.

If I had been born years ago, and I'm not making light of this, I'm sure I would've been diagnosed with some ADD or ADHD, I'm saying that respectfully because my mind has all these things going through. As we were in the early portions of worship, so many images of so many of you it's brought to mind those key intersections in my life of God's great faithfulness. That's how we can carry on, Church. The God who is and was, is still present, is still speaking and still at work. And it leads me to the passage that I want to offer today. It really was introduced to me as a pastor, it was a key passage for me when I served Messiah Church, Shippensburg; I'll say more about that in a brief moment. But, first I wanted to see if I can share with you it's Romans twelve and it's from Eugene Peterson's offering of 'The Message'. I usually have it committed to memory, because it speaks so much to me.

The Apostle Paul says; "Here's what I want to do. God helping you. Take your everyday, ordinary life." (Anyone have an everyday, ordinary life?) "Your sleeping, eating, going to work, walking around life and place it before God as though it were an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well-adjusted to the culture that you begin fitting in to the culture without even thinking about it. Instead, focus your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside-out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it, for unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out in you. Creating a spiritual maturity in you. Now I say these things to you with great gratitude for all that God's already given me. especially as it relates to the responsibilities I have with you."

Paul's words. God is alive and active, and I feel in our brief moments here, it I'd like to share the video and then just give you a couple insights to God's great faithfulness in an ordinary life. I had a preaching professor years ago who said, the more specific you can be in an example, the more universal its application by the Spirit. And may your ears and your hearts be open to the ways God is speaking to you about that faithfulness in your journey and God's call for you going forward. Me too, to be that agent for Jesus.

How many of you have had concerns about "Where is this world headed?" "Where is our culture going?" "My goodness, our churches are struggling." Anyone have any of those concerns? Hear God's great faithfulness. I share that, not to draw you into my great nostalgia, but as a living witness that God is faithful. God's got this, Church. God had it back when the lamenter was crying out in Lamentations, God's got this.

The question is, when God says to me is: "Troy, are you willing to give your heart, and your mind and your soul again and again and again?" And that's a struggle for me, but it's the call of the gospel and of the cross. I want to take these concluding moments and just talk with Thanksgiving to God for the way God has continued to grow me beyond my brokenness and my sin condition. Because of the power of the church triumphant in my life. When I went to Trinity Church in New Cumberland and Dawn and I and the kids began attending there, I was involved in a variety of ministries and I taught Sunday school for the men's Bible class they were a nostalgic group, 'Those were the days back then...' At the end of one Sunday school lesson, Rev. David Long came to me he said "Troy, have you ever considered ordained ministry?" and I said, "No." He said, "Really?" I said, "Never." he said, "Well, I've been observing you for a couple years and you have gifts and graces. And I just wanted to say that."

I was in the state capital working in my office about Wednesday that week, I went home and told Dawn, and I figured she would slam the door for sure. And she said, "I could see you doing that." That Wednesday, I was in the office working and suddenly I remembered that I had lied to David Long on Sunday. What I remembered was, when I was about eight or nine years old and I could see myself in the chair at the table in the Sunday school classroom. I can remember being there and, I don't know if we were in prayer or they talked about what you do with your life, but I remember thinking; 'I wonder if Jesus would want me to be a Reverend.' And immediately, I knew the answer – "No." Because I wouldn't be good enough. You see when I was growing up, "The Reverend was here" and when the Reverend came in the room, I was smart enough and savvy enough to know that people's behavior and language change. So, I had done my own computations and was like, "No." So, I went in and went home and told Dawn, I said that I lied to David Long, I just remembered this. So, I went in that Sunday and said, "Hey David, I lied to you. I lied to a Reverend."

And David, with this great flock of white hair, he said, "How do you figure?" I told him the story and then he said, "You know Troy, sometimes God insists on an external voice speaking what's going on in you. So, you know that it's God. So, you can be bold enough."

When David Long died, Vida said "David wanted you to have his robe."

There are people who are waiting for the external affirmation of the internal stirring of the Spirit in your life. Maybe it has nothing to do with being a Reverend or a Pastor. Maybe it has everything to do with knocking off the nonsense and the dissonance and the hatred and the works of the flesh. So much at work that the works of the Spirit, we act like they're a law against it. Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Gentleness, Generosity, Faithfulness and Self-control.

God is faithful, do you see why I believe that? Then I went to Chestnut Grove, Dillsburg. And I was dangerous there. Larry was in seminary with me and we were probably both dangerous. I started thinking, "I've got to get this place revived or whatever..." Well, that's a major mistake for any of us.

My grandmother, back there, Grandma raise your hand, she's going to be ninety-nine in February. Grandma often times would say, and she'd be a millionaire if she had a buck for every time she said this: she'd say, "Troy, you're getting a little too big for your britches."

Chestnut Grove, it took me a couple years and then I started thinking, "I'm pretty good. I can do this. I know all the magic, the latest church growth stuff." Those things are great, but if they aren't grounded in Christ, 'noisy gong, clanging cymbal.'

One week in seminary I don't know what it was, Larry, but I kept having the sense, "There's so much brokenness in me and in the church that I am serving that do we need to make it safe for people to own it?" That might lead us through. And I kept having this sense, I did the message, I preached on anointing and the balm of Gilead. And that Sunday morning, I went into the pianist Carolyn Myers and I said "Carolyn, I'm going to do an anointing here, inviting anyone that wants to claim their brokenness and God's restoring wholeness to come forward." And, she said "I wonder how that's going to work?" Anything that smacked a little bit of Roman Catholicism, at Chestnut Grove was considered 'don't go there.' She said, "What are you going to do if no one comes forward?" I said, "I'll kneel and anoint myself. Because they need to know their pastor is broken." I said, "Play 'There's a Balm in Gilead.', you probably only have to play it a couple times through."

So, we started and I said, "Anyone who wants to claim their brokenness." About three years earlier, there was about fifty people in worship. That morning, maybe a hundred. And she's in the second time through of, "There is a balm in Gilead.." No one is coming up and I'm thinking, "Lord I didn't hear you right, so I'll anoint myself."

And about that time, Cheri Miller, I saw this young lady stand up, she's one of God's special daughters she stood up and was fighting with her Dad, come on up Cheri, she was fighting with her dad, do you remember that Butch?

She said, "I hurt my arm, I'm broken and I want healed." Cheri Miller came up that aisle, and what happened? The church followed.

Almost everybody came up that morning claiming their brokenness, Cheri, I love you because God taught me not to get too big for my britches for you.

Cheri: "And I love you too."

I knew every morning of God's mercies. Then I went to Messiah Church, Shippensburg, I didn't want to go anywhere that the Bishop sent me. But after I spent time there, I never wanted to leave. God is faithful. And Messiah Church Shippensburg had the giant pillars and the best music ministry around and I say that with affirmation. A beautiful sanctuary, stained glass windows, a great history. I was privileged to follow a great pastor Jerry Reese who laid a great foundation. I followed Jerry and we just prayed, 'How would you want us to take this?' and God brought to mind, 'I want you to go deeper and wider as followers.'

It was there that I really adopted the Romans twelve passage. The denomination, I don't know if it was the Board of Discipleship, they sent us a letter one day on fancy stationary that said, "You've been cited and identified as a Romans 12:1 church." And I thought "What's that?" And then I read the Peterson passage: "Take your everyday, ordinary life..." and I thought "Wow." God grew me there, and us. And then Aldersgate. Aldersgate had some division and tension going on and I didn't want to be there either, but God said, "Troy, I've got this. Stop trying to be the best, stop trying to be the brightest. Stop trying to get the numbers and just relax in meeting the world and it's woundedness."

Jesus was raised with wounds for a reason. Reach in them.

Reaching into the world God so loved, they started divorce care, single parenting, grief share. Men's Timothy studies, they ministered with Daystar and spiritual recovery for addicts. And because we were willing to be led, by the Spirit of God revealed in us our brokenness.

And when we look at our own brokenness, we see the majesty of Christ's wholeness. The preschool there; I loved when kids and families of diverse faiths and backgrounds, said "we are going to teach you the love of Jesus."

Kathleen Blasey, the director used to come to my office and say "Troy, it happened again! You know that Muslim family I was telling you about? Or that Hindu family?" The Mom just said, "Why do you people do this? We didn't think Christians acted this way."

Talk about a damning indictment.

It's been my great privilege to journey wherever God has placed me.

I don't really have an answer for the future, other than 'I'm willing to walk with people here.'

I will tell you one final story about me being too big for my britches. If we could put a photo up here. This person is Dana Reiss.

And that was Dick Trosar, our SPRC Chair at Chestnut Grove Dillsburg, Dana was quite the gentleman. About five years into my ministry, Dana developed dementia and ended up in a secured safety unit in Carlisle. And oftentimes, Dana wouldn't know who I was. He wouldn't remember me. One time I prayed with him and he said "I don't remember you, but you don't sound like a Presbyterian. You're good, I hear the Spirit in your prayer."

But when Dana was confused I was just starting to sing and he always knew the words to the song. When it was time for me to leave I'd say "It's time for me to get up the road, Dana, but I shall return." And he'd say "OK, MacArthur." Some of you might remember that. "I shall return."

Time after time, I would promise to wave goodbye to Dana when I got outside that nursing home. But I was often too big for my britches. I would go down the hallway in that nursing home and until I got to the car, I had a "The Great Pastor To-Do List". Where I was going next, and how good I was going to be.

I got up Interstate 81 about two exits beyond the Walnut Bottom Road exit in Carlisle. And it dawned on me one day that I forgot to salute Dana from the window.

And I argued with myself the next couple miles, "He's forgotten by now...He's not going to be there." Something kept tugging at me saying "Troy, you've got to be someone of your word." I got off the exit and moaned and groaned the whole way back. "He's not going to be there...this is a waste of time. Keeping me from doing the good things that I am going to do." When I got back there, this is what I saw.

See his hand up in that window? And then a closer shot, you still can't really see him, but there was Dana. When I pulled back (into the parking lot) he was there! And in that moment, I was on holy ground I said, "Lord God, I will never doubt that you're always ahead of me."

Church, God's got this. We have difficult decisions to make sometimes about buildings, sometimes about renewal and revival, sometimes letting go of our lamentations to see His mercies, that God's got this, Amen?

That's the good news of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.