

“Longing to See You”

The title of my message this morning is “Longing to See You,” coming from the words of the apostle Paul in the 11th verse of our text this morning.

This is a great theme for us to focus on as we begin our ministry together in the name of Jesus Christ. It sums up my feelings toward the Forest Park congregation and I know it sums up the feelings of you toward me and my family.

You all have been very kind and generous to us. When we are arrived a little over two weeks ago we came to a “Total Home Makeover.” It is beautiful, we thank you. We came to a refrigerator full of food. As you know, when you move you have to throw away your perishables, so this was a most practical and yummy gift for us. Many people came by the house to do things like put down mulch, put up doors, and install new electrical outlets. Others came by to say hello, drop off gifts, and to say how glad they were that we are finally we are here. It is obvious that we have both been longing to see each other and today begins that journey.

I have Desire to Come to You, But I Have Been Prevented Thus Far (v.13)

In the text this morning, in v 13, Paul tells the church in Rome that he has desired to come to them many times in the past, but because of circumstances that were beyond his control he was prevented from doing so. But now it seemed that the time was right. God was going to bring them together. Paul was going to collect a love offering from the churches that he helped to start along the Mediterranean coast line and he was going to take that offering to Jerusalem to help the mother church there, who was struggling, and then, finally, he would make his way to Rome to minister to the Christians there.

I love the way the events were unfolding because it reflects the providence of God. Finally, the timing was right for Paul to go to Rome. In the past he was prevented from going, but now God was opening the door up for them to be together.

This gives us great hope today because it puts both of our pasts into perspective. Whatever this congregation may have went through these past few years, or whatever we may have went through these past few years, whatever our circumstances and situations were, for better or worse, it was for a reason. Those past events fell into place according to the providence of God. If they did not fall into place as they did then we would not be together this morning. As you know, certain events have to unfold in a certain way so that the timing of things, God’s timing of things, will come together.

So this means that God prevented us from coming together until now because there was more work to be done, or done to us, before God brought us together.

That is what Paul said at the end of his letter to the Romans, “But now there is no more work for me to do in these regions and since I have been longing to see you for many years I now plan to do so.” (Rom. 15:23)

Giving Thanks to God for Their Well Known Faith (v.8)

As Paul anticipated his coming to Rome he gave thanks to God about the fact that the faith of the Christians there was being reported all over the world.

As I have come here I too have heard many good reports about this congregation.

I have heard reports from your previous interim Pastor, Ed Lewis, who, along with his wife Martha, did an outstanding work here.

I have heard them from people in the presbytery who spoke highly of this congregation and the many good gifts that are at work among you.

This faith that I have heard about I have also seen in action, especially with the recent day camp.

I got to participate in that some and I was impressed by the program, the leadership of Nell Schull and all the many volunteers who helped make it happen. It is good to have your faith reported around the world (or in our case the presbytery or community) and I hope that God will build on that reputation in our ministry together.

Praying that the Doors Will be Opened (v.9-10)

Paul also spoke about how he had been praying for the Christians in Rome even before he got there. In v. 9-10 he declares that “God is my witness that I constantly remember you in my prayers at all times and I pray that God will finally make a way for us to be together.

Today we can both rejoice that God has answered our prayers, for we have been praying for the same thing, and God has finally made a way for us to be together. May we both continue to practice the discipline of prayer in our lives so that our ministry may flourish and be in accordance with the will of God.

As Paul spoke of his longing to see the people of God in Rome he spoke of three reasons why he wanted to be with them so badly. There was a purpose, he believed, for which God would bring them together.

It is these three things that I want us to focus on this morning so that we might be encouraged to see them as the very same reason for which Christ has brought us together.

Reason #1: To Impart A Spiritual Gift to the People (v.11)

In v. 11 of the text Paul tells the church that he longs to see them so that he may impart, or give to them some spiritual gift that will make them strong.

This is my desire as a pastor. I come to you this morning, and it is my intent to always come to you, for the purpose of building you up in your Christian faith. That is the role of the pastor, to

be used by God to equip the saints so that they may grow in the knowledge, grace, and love of Jesus Christ.

If we aren't growing in our Christian faith, then what good is our faith? If I am not willing to be used by God to help you grow in your faith through my preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and ministry of discipleship, then what good is my ministry?

I have come to you to impart a spiritual gift to you, to build you up in the faith. May God give me the grace to do this in spite of my own sinfulness and shortcomings. And may you always pray that I would make this my aim in my ministry. I must never lose focus of this goal.

Reason #2: That We Mutually Encourage One Another in the Faith (v.12)

But it is not just about me building you up in the faith. In v.12 Paul tells the church in Rome that desires to come to them so that he too may be built up in the faith. "That is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."

Our coming together is not a one way street. You are priests too.

One of the great Bible doctrines from the Protestant Reformation is that all Christians are priests before God and man. We call it the priesthood of all believers.

This doctrine stood in contrast to the idea in the Roman Catholic Church that only the Priest could read the Bible, lead worship, pray, preach, and administer the sacraments. No, this is not so, Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man and because of his ministry on our behalf, he is the one who gives us **all** direct access to God so that we all can serve as his ministers. Is not just a ministry of a select few. You, good Christians of Forest Park, have been called by God to be ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ and you have been called to minister to me, your pastor, in the Christian faith.

I come to you this morning- my family comes to you- desiring to be built up by you in the faith. Pray that God would give you the grace to impart to me and my family good spiritual gifts that would build us up in the grace, love, and knowledge of Jesus Christ. We need your ministry.

Reason #3: To Reap a Harvest (v.13)

All of this has a purpose. There is a reason Paul wants to come to them to impart to them a spiritual gift and there is a reason that he wants them to build him in the faith. The reason is so that a harvest may be reaped among the people.

Paul wants to see God-fruit produced in the lives of the Christians in Rome and he wants to see new people coming to faith in Christ. He wants to reap a harvest, a crop, amongst the people in Rome. That is why he wants to build them up in the faith and that is why he wants to be built up by them, so that more people can be reached, so that more people can be saved, so that more people can be brought into a living, real, and true relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

When we are both built up in the faith we are equipped and empowered to be the light of Christ to the people whom God brings into our paths.

We become strengthened, encouraged and confident enough to speak about our faith in Jesus so that others- whether they be our neighbors, co-workers, friends, or our children- may come to know him through our witness. This is the kind of harvest that Paul is talking about in the text, a harvest that builds up God's people and empowers them to reach others with that same power.

Conclusion: "I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel" (v.16-17)

The key to all of this is the gospel, and this brings us to the conclusion of our text this morning.

Paul says to the church in Rome that the reason that I am so eager to preach the gospel to you is so that: (1) I might build you up in the faith (2) you might build me up in the faith (3) so that a harvest might be reaped among you. This is the reason I am obligated to both Jews and Greeks, the wise and the foolish. The gospel is the key. This would be v. 14-15.

The gospel is a person, his name is Jesus and I am not ashamed to proclaim him to you.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." (v.16)

My proclaiming him to you and you proclaiming him to me, and we proclaiming him together to others is the key to (1) you being built up in the faith, (2) me being built up in the faith, and (3) us reaping a harvest through our ministry together.

We, like Paul, must not be ashamed to preach this gospel.

Not long after we got to Statesville I saw a street preacher preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ new the Wal-Mart intersection. I could tell by the color of his skin and his accent that he was from a different country, probably from the continent of Africa. You may not know this, but the foreigners from African and Asia who were evangelized by American missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries now see America as the new mission field. They will be increasingly coming to us to return the favor as Americans continue to drift into a post-Christian culture.

This may not be the preferred method of evangelism for Presbyterians and it may not even be the most effective method, but at least that young man was not afraid.

We must not be afraid to share our faith, both in word and deed. This I have come to do for you, and have done to me, so that we may reap a harvest from God in the life of Forest Park Presbyterian Church.

This is why I can say, along with the apostle Paul, that "I am longing to see you."

Amen.