

Kent Townsend
Grace and Gifts to Share
A Sermon for July 23, 2017
First Presbyterian Church, Topeka, Kansas
New Testament: 1 Peter 4:7-11
Old Testament: Isaiah 61:1-6

It is Flip Flop Sunday. I have my flip flops on, and came comfortably dressed in shorts and a polo style shirt. And, probably like many of you, I have never dressed this way for worship in any church. But why not, it was on the calendar and it is the thing to do today. I can remember when, about 20 years ago, we went way out on a limb and determined that it was OK for men not to wear suits on Sundays during the summer and the preacher didn't have to wear a robe. When looked at over a long period of time, we are a church in transition. There have been changes in the past 20 years for sure. But what about the next 20 years. This pace of change may be too slow to sustain First Presbyterian Church. What if we only think about where we might be in the next five years? Is there a sense of urgency? The pace of change will have to pick up if we want to accomplish all that we have said we want to accomplish and for First Presbyterian Church to be the church we have said we want to be.

The background for our New Testament passage today is one of urgent concern for the people in Asia Minor. Peter's letter was couriered to five territories by Silvanus, a faithful servant of the apostles. The Gentiles had begun to feel the pressure and persecution of being Christians. Our New Testament reading today starts out, "The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers." I think in the past 2,000 years we have come to realize, and maybe hope, that the end is not near. We continue to wake up to a new sunrise and new opportunities each day for service to others for God's glory. But what if

the end is near? Are we serious, and have we disciplined ourselves for the sake of our prayers?
What is it we are praying for?

Is there an urgency for us? I think so. Our urgency is in First Presbyterian Church and we are off to the races. Not necessarily trying to step into the Car Talk series Sandra is preaching on, but we are past the starting line and the green flag has been waved. In the past year we have brought in Tom Ehrich, a church consultant, to help define a path for us which your Session has committed to implementing. We are working to finish the kitchen. And THAT is probably more important than we realize. We have organized the finances of the church. We have hired Reverend Brown as our Designated Head of Staff. We have hired Ali Decker as our Director of Family Ministries. We have hired Pat Yancey as our Parish Associate. There are new programs for outreach. Our Fellowship Committee continues to support programs and events for church-wide fellowship. Family ministries offers programs so that families can fellowship together. We increased our giving for outreach this year. And there are more actions that have been taken and that are planned that could be listed.

Now I have had the opportunity to attend one Indianapolis 500 in my life. It was in 2013. It is a unique sporting event to be sure. The energy around the race track before the race is captivating. The displays of power and technology are impressive. And, as the race starts and the cars come down the track and pass us in the grandstands, you could hear the whirl of the high-pitched engines as the cars went by. But, not every car finished the race. The drivers lose control around a turn by not slowing down enough and slam into a wall or they don't following the right line on the track and slide high, spin out of control and take out other cars. Engines blow because of faulty parts or some other mechanical failure. Some rookies don't make it past

lap number one. But, for the driver and team who win, the prize is certainly worth the discipline and fortune to finish.

So, in our race to be the church we are called to be, and being serious and disciplined for the sake of our prayers, what is it we are praying for? I believe all of us have prayed for the continued life and growth of First Presbyterian Church. First Presbyterian Church is in a long race, and it is important that we don't end up out of the race for any number of reasons. This is our urgency. We acknowledged that we don't want to be like so many other mainline churches. We want to see First Presbyterian Church have relevancy for us and our community. We have started making ourselves known in the community. We have laid a strong foundation and we have some visions of what to build on it.

But what do we do with that foundation and how do we address our urgency?

I think our New Testament reading today has the answer. Peter reminds us that we have received God's grace. Grace is God's gift to us, freely given. Because of God's unconditional love for us, he has given us his grace. Have you really stopped to realize what it means to receive God's grace? Peter also reminds us that we have been given gifts from God. Paul, in his letters, has told us much about the gifts each of us may receive: teaching, wisdom, discernment, giving, leading, and compassion, among many. What are yours? After identifying them, the more important question is what are we to do with these wonderful gifts from God?

Peter tells us to "be like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." There you go. God has given us grace and gifts to share. Being good stewards we are to use what God has given us. We are to use them to serve one another. Why? First, because we are a community of believers, just like the people in Asia Minor, we are to work to build each other up to help us stand strong against the influences of the

world. Second, if we are weak at home, here at First Presbyterian Church, we cannot be the church we are called to be. Third, we use our grace and gifts for one another so that we can love ourselves, and thereby grow to love others.

It can be hard to serve each other over a long period of time. We are a close knit community. Stress can happen in close knit communities. Each of us, in our relationships, has probably experienced those times when serving people we are in relationship with is hard. In human relationships we get hurt by something someone does to us or we hurt others by what we do. When we get hurt, we quite often distance ourselves from the other person and stay angry. Yet Peter tells us to maintain constant love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. Hum. Sounds like Peter wouldn't agree with us. Love is active, it is something we do for others, and ourselves. If we have the gift of love and are patient and kind, among the other attributes of love, we will forgive the people in our community. Now, in love we probably need to talk to the person about the situation in which we have been hurt. But more importantly, if we can love within our church community, we learn we can love outside of our church community. And, if we can love and forgive, then we will reap the benefits. For each week we ask that God will "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

As we maintain constant love for each other, we will find ourselves moving out on the service curve and getting deeper and deeper into relationships. We will find ourselves offering hospitality to one another. We have all probably said at one time or another that "I am going to church to do such and such, but I just don't want to do that." It is probably the case where we have gotten into something that we don't have gifts for. We may have said yes one to many times and did not protect ourselves by saying no. But here Peter reminds us that if we are in the situation to be hospitable, we must be hospitable without complaining. J. B. Phillips, an English

bible scholar wrote, “Be hospitable to each other without secretly wishing you hadn’t got to be! Serve one another with the particular gifts God has given each of you, as faithful dispensers of the magnificently varied grace of God.” We are challenged as we mature in our faith and relationship with God to carry his grace and gifts into the individual relationships we have with one another.

Combining love and hospitality with the grace and gifts from God sounds like an unstoppable force for sharing and growing God’s love in our worshipping community. It means welcoming our members and serving all of them. Don’t forget the ones that are not be here today. It means serving each other using the gifts from God to fix meals, to lead bible studies, to help with administration, to sing, to usher, to provide transportation, to be an elder or deacon and more.

This is the Year of the Neighbor, and we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. First Presbyterian Church is well past the starting line for the next phase of its life in Topeka, Kansas. We have all of the necessary resources at our disposal to build up the body of Christ in this church as we come together to serve one another and God. It seems only natural then that as we do these things that we will be ready to take on the community around us. Let us resolve our urgency and be the church that God has called us to be in Topeka, Kansas - together. And then there is nothing we cannot do.

Amen.