

My Hope for Salem's Future
Romans 12:9-21; 15:5-6, 13

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May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Rom. 15:5-6, 13

This morning we begin in earnest the work of closing out my pastorate in Verona. So today I am starting something I am calling a farewell sermon in three installments. The sermon title for today, as you can see, is "My Hope for Salem's Future." Next week's topic will be "How to Welcome Your New Pastor" and two weeks from today I will offer "My Song of Grateful Praise." Just now our theme is "My Hope for Salem's Future."

It is not right for me to propose any ministry initiatives you should undertake or to prescribe any future programs you should develop. It is not my place to do either of those and it would be wrong if I tried.

But it is appropriate for me to share with you some hopes I have for this church that has been at the heart of my life for a full thirty years. I have four that I will name this morning.

Remember your history.

An old-time missionary once said, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."¹ This church has a long history of attempting great things for God and succeeding.

During the Great Depression and in November, no less, right before Christmas, Salem's people voted to buy its first church home, the little white church that once stood at the corner of Main and Church Streets where people now park to shop at Miller and Sons.²

Roughly thirty years later, the people of this congregation voted and endeavored to purchase land and build this building, larger than what was needed and on property that was then on the far outskirts of town.³

During the 1970s, when the wounds of the Viet Nam war were still raw and when Asians were distrusted if not despised and certainly discriminated against, the people of this congregation voted to sponsor here in Verona a refugee family from Viet Nam, supplying what they needed until they could get their feet on the ground in this country.⁴

¹ Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham: New Hope, 1992), p. 32.

² This was in 1932.

³ Four acres of land were purchased in 1960. Construction on the new building began in 1964.

⁴ This was in 1979.

Just over ten years ago, in 2010, when the country was still feeling the effects of the 2008 economic downturn, the people of this congregation saw the need to renovate this building largely to make it handicapped accessible. The price tag looked enormous and the work and the expense of a capital campaign seemed daunting. But here we are!

And four years ago, after completing the work of making our church outwardly and visibly accessible, the people of this church made the moral decision to become officially what it already was in spirit, an Open and Affirming Congregation.

“Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” That is more than a quotation from a missionary of old. It is Salem’s own history as a congregation. My hope for you is that you will remember that history in the months and years to come so it can guide you when you face your next daunting task and lead you to strive for big goals with hope-filled courage.

Be at peace with one another.

A congregation of God’s people has some of the characteristics of a family. It is an understatement to say that the members of the same household do not always agree with one another. Even the tamest of subjects can lead to testiness. Discussions about when the Christmas tree should come down or where the thermostat should be set can get a little dodgy in some families. Congregations have the same dynamic.

St. John’s United Church of Christ, the congregation in Belvidere, Illinois, I served for nine years before coming here, was established in 1901 as a congregation of the German Evangelical Synod of North America. Those people built their building in 1908. They were Germans and until World War I all their church records were in German. We had some of those records translated and we all laughed when we came to an entry written by Rev. Edward Pinckert, the minister who served the church when the building was being planned and built. Pinckert wrote, “We discovered that many people make for many opinions!”

Do not expect it to be any different here. As a matter of fact, it may accentuate in your new situation. There may be some who, with good intention, will see change on the horizon and want to race to embrace it. Others, with equally good intention, will prefer to preserve the past. Still others will feel caught between the two and be torn over which is right.

My hope is that through it all you will maintain an attitude of being at peace with one another. Don’t be afraid of conflict, but don’t be conflicted either. Don’t be afraid of disagreement, but don’t become disagreeable. Practice gentleness, patience, kindness, and understanding.

Chris Richards invited me to his house one afternoon and told me he was dying. In typical Chris fashion he chuckled as he said he was glad to know his three kids would not fight over who got what of his stuff; instead, he laughed, they’d fight over who had to take his junk! I’ve told our kids that if there ever comes a day they are at odds with each other, not speaking to one another or something like that, I will come back to haunt them until they straighten up and work things out. Know this: if there ever comes a day you start breaking up into factions and fighting one another, I will come back to haunt you, too. And Jesus will let me!

Go ahead and disagree. There can be health in that. But don't become disagreeable toward one another. Be at peace with one another even through disagreement.

Have realistic expectations.

Many congregations do not have realistic expectations and that is their downfall. Guard against it.

As an example of unrealistic expectations, I recently had occasion to read the church profile of an area congregation. A church profile is a multi-page form that offers a description or resume of a church; Salem will eventually work at preparing one to use in searching for its new permanent pastor. The church profile I read recently indicated that that congregation wants to grow, especially by adding children, youth, and young families to its active membership. It also sees that it is an aging congregation with several members who are quite elderly and it wants its shut-ins cared for, seen to, and visited. The kicker is that the congregation wants the pastor to do this work on three-quarter's time. It doesn't take much to see that what they really want is full-time work at part-time pay.

There is much that is wrong with that congregation's set of expectations. No pastor can do all that on a part-time basis. There isn't time. No pastor can do all that on a full-time basis. There still isn't time. What is more, no pastor should be expected to be the church and do all the work of the church. The pastor should not be aloof, of course, but the congregation needs to be the church and do the work of the church, work that includes reaching out to new people and caring for its current people.

My hope is that you will bear this in mind in the future as you have in the past and set for yourselves realistic expectations.

Seek the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is not some Shangri-La to come at the end of time. It is not some sanctuary of escape away from the world. The kingdom of God is the rule of God in the lives of people.⁵

Another way to say seek the kingdom of God is to say keep Christ always in view. Make it your aim to please him. Make it your goal to serve him. Let the living Christ be your constant focus.

Remember that page of the New Testament that tells of the time Jesus came to the disciples walking on the water (Mt. 14:22ff). They were in a boat out at sea, the water was rough, and the wind was against them. It was night and they were afraid. Just as the new day was dawning, Jesus came to them, walking on the water. Peter, almost always the boldest of the bunch, asked if he could come out of the boat and onto the water, too. Jesus welcomed him. And Peter walked on the water. But the moment he took his eyes off Jesus he began to sink.

⁵ Andrew W. Blackwood, "Mark: The Gospel of Service," typescript, Box 1, Mark folder, The Andrew Watterson Blackwood, Sr. Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary.

Notice that walking on the water means leaving the safety of the boat. It means standing in the midst of the waves. It means braving the contrary wind. It means being out in the world. It means being in the turbulence at the invitation of Christ. But it can be done if you keep your focus on Christ first and foremost.

No matter how strong the wind against you may be, no matter how rough the waves, no matter how rocky the boat, keep your focus on Jesus. Make him your model and priority. That is seeking the kingdom of God. That is seeking the rule of God in your own heart and in the heart of the church's life. Do that and power and purpose and productivity and peace will be yours.

Well, next week our theme will be "How to Welcome Your New Pastor." For now, these are my hopes for Salem's future. Remember your history. Be at peace with one another. Have realistic expectations. Seek the kingdom of God. Do this and you will be a welcome sight in the eyes of any pastor just as you have been to Sherrol and to me.