



“Leaving a Legacy”

Texts: Psalm 119:1-8, Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Mark 12:28-34

a sermon by Elder Steve Wylie

**All Saints’ Sunday
November 5, 2023**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Today we are celebrating All Saints’ Day, which was technically on Wednesday the first of November. Typically, Presbyterians use All Saints Day to honor all the people in our congregation who died during the past year. We also use the day to remind ourselves that we are all part of a continuing communion of saints as part of the faithful of every generation.

We are also recognizing Dedication or Commitment or Stewardship Sunday – depending on what you want to call it – the day that we accept the pledges from our members and friends to support the ongoing work of the church, both here in Evansville and throughout the world. In my research for the sermon today, I came across a lot of names for Stewardship Sunday (which is how Kevin referred to it), but the one I liked the best came from a writer at a website called stewardshipforum.com who called it Celebration Sunday. And we have much to celebrate!

Celebration Sunday is when we receive the commitments of time, talents, and treasure for the coming year. We are grateful to everyone who has submitted their pledge for 2024, and if you haven’t submitted your pledge yet, please do so as soon as you can. The Session has been working on the 2024 budget, and knowing your financial commitment to the church definitely helps with that!

The primary messages in all three of our scripture passages is that we should love God with all of our heart and soul and strength, that we should obey God in all ways, that we should love our neighbor, and that we should share God’s teachings with the world. That seems simple enough. But there is also a passage in the scripture from Deuteronomy that bears repeating: “so that you, your children and *their children after them* may fear the Lord your God as long as you live.” So, it isn’t just about obeying God’s commandments and loving God and telling others about God’s love. We also need to make sure that our descendants do so as well.

Now, I have a slight problem with the word *fear* in the passage from Deuteronomy. That doesn't feel very Presbyterian to me. I was never taught to be afraid of God, and most of the sermons I heard growing up were about a God who loved us – For God So Loved the World, and all that – rather than an angry God that should instill fear in his followers. That certainly wasn't the message Jesus taught us, but back in the time of Moses maybe that was the common thought. But I digress...

Now this is only the third sermon I've ever preached as an adult, and each time I've included some personal story about me. I guess today won't be any different, so here goes... I've always felt like being a Presbyterian was in my DNA. My dad was a Presbyterian minister, my mother's father William Horn was a Presbyterian minister, my maternal grandmother's father Charles Bremicker was a Presbyterian minister. Charles's father-in-law, my 2nd great grandfather Adalbert von der Lippe, was the pastor of a German Presbyterian Church in St. Louis and later served as chair of the Theology department at what is now Dubuque Theological Seminary where Jerusha will be earning her Master of Divinity degree! You can also factor in a few of my grand uncles who were also ministers. So, I come from a long line of Presbyterian pastors, and no, I did not feel called to follow in their footsteps! But I am deeply rooted in the Presbyterian tradition.

What my parents and my ancestors instilled in me was a love of the Presbyterian church and appreciation for Presbyterian theology that emphasizes God's love (rather than God's wrath or punishment or all those other characteristics of a creator that is somehow disappointed with all of humanity). It's a whole lot easier just to *love* God with all our heart, mind, and strength and to teach our children and their children to do the same. That's a pretty easy legacy to leave.

The history of this church is truly remarkable. There are plaques all over the Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall celebrating the contributions of many people who belonged to this church a long time ago. There is even a plaque on this side of the lectern celebrating those who donated it, yet only the liturgist gets to see plaque. In more recent years, we have received special gifts to restore our beautiful stained-glass windows. The portraits in the hallway toward the education wing of previous pastors, Dr. Matthew Cavell who came to First Pres 88 years ago, Dr. Joseph Baus who served from 1960 until 1985, and our beloved Kevin Fleming, are important reminders to celebrate our faith leaders from the past. They have left an important legacy for our church that will carry us forward.

When I think about all the generations of Evansville Presbyterians over the past 200 years as well as the generations to come, there's one common thread that ties us all together. God has always been there. God provided for the members of First Pres so that we could have this beautiful building. Next year we will celebrate the 150th birthday of this building that was built in 1874!

God also provided for the church so that we could add to the building to provide classrooms and our beautiful chapel. God's love helps us to welcome everyone to this fellowship, including the marginalized and traumatized in our community who have felt abandoned by other communities of faith. God continues to provide for us so that we can serve our community with love and joy.

Matthew's gospel makes abundantly clear how God provides for us every day. He writes, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."¹ Jesus is telling his disciples and us that we do not need to worry about anything, because God will provide for us in abundance. What we give back to God is part of our legacy that we leave so that this church may thrive going forward.

So, what kind of legacy will we leave for future generations of members of First Presbyterian of Evansville? Will this church still be around 100 or 200 years from now? Can you imagine what First Pres will look like in the future? Are we doing all we can to ensure the ongoing work of First Pres? These are discussions we will be having as part of our work with the Pastor Nominating Committee so that we can find the right person to be our next permanent pastor.

Ensuring the long-term future of First Pres is a task that we have to confront every year. It's not just about the budget – although that's a significant piece – but about the programs, the membership, and our engagement with the community as well. Right now, we do a great job of engaging with the greater Evansville/Tristate community through our involvement with CAJE and the One God, One Community project. There is more we could do, I'm sure, but that takes the time and talents of many people. I re-read one of Kevin's sermons on the topic of stewardship, and there was a paragraph that stood out for me. "Stewardship is about what we do with what has been entrusted to us. It's the 'how' and 'what' and 'why' of giving and not the 'how much'."²

Many of the *whys* of stewardship are the programs here at First Pres. I'm sure most of you feel the same way I do, that our music program is beyond phenomenal, thanks to the efforts of Robert and others throughout the years. The Wide Awake Band makes amazing and joyful music in the 8:30 service. For a congregation our size, the number of singers in our sanctuary choir is incredible! And I love seeing the younger singers holding their own with the adults. Hearing the choir in the 10:30 service fills my heart with joy every Sunday. The chimes, handbells, and flutes add depth and richness to our worship services. I hope all of the music programs at First Pres continue for many generations to come.

Our mission programs support many worthwhile organizations locally, including Little Lambs, Habitat for Humanity, and Patchwork Central. Our Christian education programs for both adults and youth are growing, and the *Five Practices* book study will be the start of more small-group activities in the future.

Therefore, as we feast together today, we celebrate not just the Sacrament of Holy Communion and the culmination of our generosity campaign, but also the love that God has for us today and every day. We celebrate that God sent Jesus to save us and make us free. We celebrate the Saints of this church who came before us and made it possible for us to worship together. We celebrate the possibilities that lie ahead for us as we look for our next permanent pastor. We celebrate the mission, music, and development programs that have enriched us and our community.

We also remember the members of our church family that we have lost over the past twelve months: Mary Anderson, Martha Bost, Sue Morrison, John Porter, Jack Schriber, Kate Simpson, Michael Thissen, Shirley Weber, and Dan Wagemann. May their memory be a blessing. Amen.

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- 1) Matthew 6:26-27, 31-33 (NIV)
 - 2) Fleming, Kevin Scott. *The Truest Stewardship*, November 11, 2018

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