

Hopes and Dreams - Sermon by Jim Whedbee
Scripture Passages: I Corinthians 2:6-9, II Timothy 1:7

I have never served a church for more than 7 years. You have never had a senior pastor for more than 7 years. Already, we are one Sunday beyond that 7 years. We are setting a record today! I have never asked to move from a church. I have been blessed. I have never been asked to move. I have been blessed! I have relied on the Lord's guidance for me and the bishop and the churches where I have served. I think I have always left a church stronger than it was when I got there.

This will probably be my last pastoral appointment before retirement. Why would I want to serve anywhere else? I want to be a pastor in my last year or years of ministry with you who can help us move ahead, and I am going to depend on you as we all depend on God. I want to listen to you as we all listen to God.

We are a church that is building on its 184 year history, so we need always to be asking ourselves: Where have we been? What has made us strong? What have we done? What have we not done? I know this has always been a strong church. Judy's and Jay Garrison's great grandfather joined this church over a hundred years ago, so I have heard through her of much of what this church has been through these years.

Through thick and sometimes thin in almost two centuries, we have been the church. Bishop Swanson asked me a couple of weeks ago what makes FCUMC such a strong church. I answered that it is your love for the Lord and the very strong lay leadership that has always been in place. We have served our community; we have preached and lived the gospel; but we cannot rest on our past accomplishments. In fact, we can't rest at all if we are to be the body of Christ.

In the last 7 years, we have seen ministries come and go. Where do we see God in all this? Do we see God in the faces of each other and those who come to us? Or do we see God only in those we already know and love? Our VBS children have placed visible reminders on the altar for today of the many times when they saw God this week. They talked about some of them at the end of each day when they all came together in the sanctuary. If we opened it up here for us to talk about ways in which we have seen God, I wonder if we would be as eager to talk about it as they were. Once we have seen God, we need to ask ourselves: "How will we show God? Will we be willing to make changes, as necessary, in order to help others see and experience God? Will we be willing to welcome people who don't look like us and act like us? Will we be willing to welcome the folks in our community? To go after the folks in our community? Or will we be a church that is content to stay as we are and keep God to ourselves?" I hope not!

Will we continue to be a church that loves each other in spite of our own internal differences? Will we be a church that loves others in spite of their differences from us?

Will we be a church that sees God in our differences? As one of our pastors, I want us to be a church that continues to.

I want us to be a church that loves:

Our little children;
 Our older folks;
 Our middle-aged adults;
 The community's children;
 The community's older folks;
 The community's middle-aged folks;
 The people of the world.

I want us to be a church:

That offers God's word.
 That offers the love of Christ to a hurting world
 That reaches out to all the corners of the world with the gospel
 That is a risk-taking church instead of just a caretaking or undertaking church that is happy to stay as we are here until we languish and die on this valuable piece of real estate in Fountain City.

If we are going to do these things, we need to keep in mind the words of biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann who tells us that we are going to have to listen to the voices of pain and hurt in the hearts of the people and then listen to the voice of hope that is Jesus. Only Jesus' words can bring the ultimate hope and healing we need. We need to be the agent that helps brings the hurts and the hope of Christ together so they will intersect in the lives of each other and others. We are going to have to hear God as God calls us into the grace of Christ and as God entrusts us with the mission to "go and make disciples."

We do not do these things, though, with brashness and crudeness. Will we do them with grace and love? In his book Unchristian David Kinnaman says: "Obeying the command to make disciples does not give us license to offend people, especially when those offenses are actually inhibiting us from fulfilling that very commandment" to go make disciples.

How many of you are familiar with the Riverbend Festival in Chattanooga that is held each June? Hundreds of thousands of people visit the riverside area of downtown Chattanooga for 8 nights in the middle of June, experiencing music, hot weather, and almost anything else you could look for. This article in the Chattanooga newspaper a couple of weeks ago told about a group called "Crossbearers," who travel to events such as Riverbend and Bonaroo, telling festival-goers that they are going to hell for a laundry

list of sins. If people shun their literature, they get a lecture right there on the street. They told at least one young man he was going to hell because of his appearance.

This picture shows a fellow who, with his fist doubled, says: “I go where the people are and try to share the gospel with them.” Do you think this is the way to who Christ’s love? Funny thing, I never have read anything in the Bible about Jesus have his fist doubled as he invited them. The reactions to these young people are not well received by either non-believers or believers.

Now, I have to admire their enthusiasm and their passion for the Lord. But I wonder how many people were more turned away from the gospel than were led to Jesus through this behavior? It doesn’t appear that the Crossbearers were there to listen to anyone but only to browbeat and try to offer “fire insurance” rather than God’s love and healing. Of course, I wasn’t there doing anything for the Lord there, so maybe I can’t say much. But I do hope we will continue to be a church that offers God’s love and grace in loving, inviting ways. If people “accept” Jesus only to keep out of hell, are they really accepting him and his call to discipleship?

God has not given up on the world. Neither should we. God is creating anew in the church, in this church? God is continuing to give us opportunity to be the body of Christ on earth, spreading the love of Christ; and I don’t want us to ignore the opportunity. Theologian Harvey Cox is about to come out with a book that tells us that regardless of what we read and hear in the news, we are seeing today a continuation of a resurgence of religion that has already gotten underway and a vast array of changes not known since the fourth century. I want us to be a part of that resurgence! I want us to be a part of the Body of Christ that helps each other and others connect to God in life-changing ways and, in that then, to help change the world.

I want us to be a congregation that will respond to the Lord’s call with courage and trust and grace. I want us to be ready to be surprised by what God can do. Our epistle lesson for today reminds us that no mind has yet figured out what God has prepared for us. God has surprised mankind throughout history and will continue to do so. I want us to let God use us in carrying out God’s surprises. I hope we can be united in our wishes and efforts to be used of God. That’s what makes us such a strong church. I want us to be as one people, serving our one Lord.

I want those who believe in liberty and justice for all to be able to sit beside those, if there are any among us, who believe in liberty and justice for only a few. I want those who can worship only with pipe organ to be able to work beside those who choose to worship with guitars and drums, and you and I both know we are already doing that. I want lovers of contemporary worship and lovers of traditional worship to love God more than the style of worship we might choose. If we love God, what difference does it make to God how we worship – as long as we worship?

I want folks who have diametrically opposed beliefs about any matter to be able to sit beside one another because we all love the Lord. We are sisters and brothers in Christ. And you know what? I believe we are already doing that, not just sitting beside each other in study and worship but working with one another. And you know what else? We all need Jesus!

The thing I want us to do regarding worship is to make worship the highlight of the week for all of us and to let that be the guiding force behind everything we do. We come to worship the God we love and who loves us. We must be a people who will build everything else we do on our weekly worship of God.

You have heard me say this before, but I want to emphasize again that I think the time we spend together in worship is the most important, valuable hour of the week. So I want to say that if you are not experiencing God's presence here through one of our worship services, if you do not feel you are able to worship God here, if you feel it is more important to be involved in recreational pursuits or to mow the yard or to check your Facebook page or your Tweeter feed than to be in worship, please help your pastors to know what we can do to help this church be a place where you want to be week after week because you love the Lord more than anything else.

If I left this church today, one of my biggest disappointments would be that in seven years, our average worship attendance has increased by only about 100. It is my hope, prayer, vision, dream that by this time next year our average attendance will have increased by at least another 100 or 150, not just through new people but also through our present membership becoming more attentive to the opportunity and obligation to worship.

At the end of the last week, our income exceeded our expenses for the year by only \$2,000 for the year. That's close! That should not be. Let us not give out of a spirit of fear or timidity but out of a spirit of hope and courage. I get tired of saying, "No, we can't send flyers out to the community inviting folks to our church like our neighboring churches are doing. No, we can't buy worship equipment or supplies. No, we can't increase our efforts to become a green church because we don't have the money. No, we can't" Because we can! We must learn to let loose of fear and grab on to hope. And we will, with God's help.

We have two marvelous young pastors with whom I have the opportunity to work week after week. We talk, we pray, we agree, we disagree, we pray, we talk, and we love the Lord and one another and you. I want to be able to listen more clearly to them and them to me. I don't believe a church could have three pastors who love their church anymore than the three of us do. While most young pastors are eager to get out and serve "their own" church, Melissa and Don are more than eager to stay here and serve "their own" church here. I want to be open to their ideas (or some of them), and I want them to continue to appreciate my ideas and respect my 40 years of experience as they do. But,

more importantly, as our epistle lesson for the morning reminds us, we need to listen to God's wisdom that goes deep into the interior of God's purposes.

I am going to have to remember that we can only get off our plateau by doing some things differently. In his column this morning in the Knoxville News-Sentinel, Sam Venable said: "Merchants can't stay stuck in the present if they intend to do business in the future." Friends, it works the same way for the church. We can't stay stuck in the past or the present if we want to continue to be the church.

We want to hear your hopes and dreams as we seek to reach out and offer the gospel of Christ. Your pastors agree that it is time that we organize another vision team to begin to map out a program of action for the next five years. Maybe we can organize some in-home meetings in the fall to share with one another. Meanwhile, let's all be dreaming and praying and working and praying, building on the biblical truths that we claim. Some of these truths that Kinnamon states in the book I mentioned earlier are these:

Jesus Christ lived a sinless life.

God is the all-powerful and all-knowing Creator of the universe and God still rules today.

Salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned.

A Christian has a responsibility to share his or her faith in Christ with other people.

Let's take these and run. It's important that we do it as one body, loving and serving the one Lord.