

Treasured Friends

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov - January 29, 2012

For my final Sunday service as the minister of St. Andrew's Brandon, I have chosen the closing chapter of Romans as my text. As we are about to hear, the passage is a long list of names; which likely won't mean a whole lot to most of us, but, would have meant a whole lot to the Apostle Paul.

The reason these names were important to Paul, was due to their special contribution to his life. Over the years as he traveled across the world, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, these special people had listened to him, encouraged him, and supported him. As a result, lasting memories had been formed in his mind, filling it like a treasured photo album.

As he wrote the closing sentences of his epistle to the Romans, Paul's mind was refreshed with these treasured memories and the list we are about to read was born. In this list, he provides greetings to old friends and he provides us with an opportunity to browse through some of his favorite mental pictures from his years in ministry. While the experience of listening to this list may not be as vivid as looking through a photo album or scrolling through posts on facebook, try and imagine the people who Paul is remembering as we read from Romans 16:1-16. Let us hear the Word of the Lord.

Romans 16:1-16

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. 2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. 3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. 4 They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. 5 Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. 6 Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. 7 Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. 8 Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. 9 Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. 10 Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. 11 Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of

Narcissus who are in the Lord. 12 Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. 13 Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. 14 Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. 15 Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them. 16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings. Thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word.

As I read Paul's list of treasured friends, who helped him along the way in his ministry, I am reminded of the treasured memories that I have of my eight years here at St. Andrew's and the friends who will remain in my heart forever. When I arrived in Brandon, Manitoba, in March of 2004 I was invited to stay in the home of Rev. Dale Woods and his family. My first week here was spent in the Wood's residence during which time I secured a place to rent in the Sheridan apartments, which allowed me more time to look for a house. Within a month, I found my home and by May I became a proud East Ender.

Starting out in ministry, there were a lot of things I had to learn that I was not taught in Seminary. As a result, I was truly grateful to have such a capable minister, like Dale, who belonged to the same faith tradition, lived in the same city, and knew the people of St. Andrew's. While he was here in Brandon, Dale was a mentor to me, and his wisdom and willingness to help made a great difference in my ministry.

Continuing with the memories, the first funeral I ever conducted was for Marg Darvill. As I met with the family to offer my condolences and prepare for the memorial service, I had no idea what I was doing. Fortunately for me, Marg had filled in the pages of a diary given to her by her grand daughter. The brief, heart felt reflections she wrote in that diary about key moments in her life formed the basis of the eulogy that I read at her funeral. Those reflections also gave me a clear vision of what I wanted to achieve in a funeral service and every service I have done since then can trace its inspiration back to Marg's little book.

My second funeral was for Shirley McMullan. For better or for worse, the stories about the food that I inherited from Shirley after her death has become a part of the congregational memory. While I am pleased to say that all of what Shirley gave me eight years ago has been either eaten or thrown

out, I still have one last container of lemonade crystals from her home. Given that they are as hard as a rock, I am not sure if they will even get used for their intended purpose, but, I may keep it as a memento of my time here and use it as a conversation piece when people of St. Andrew's come to visit me in Ontario.

When I came to St. Andrew's in 2004, my dream was to turn this little church into the rock'n roll Presbyterian Church of Manitoba. While I have a strong appreciation for Presbyterian theology, and our form of church government, I must confess that I love the electric guitars, and the pounding bass and drums used in many of the evangelical churches. I know such sounds would be considered as obnoxious "jungle music" here, but, I love it.

That being said, it didn't take too long for me to figure out I wouldn't get very far trying to bring the sounds of the jungle to St. Andrew's. This experience provided me with the occasion to consider the question whether it was a worthy goal to try and change people into clones of myself and force people to adopt my preferences and insist that they appreciate my tastes.

In the end, I came to the conclusion I would serve God and the people of St. Andrew's much better if I understood who God made this congregation to be and if I learned to celebrate the strengths of our church. When I adopted this approach to ministry, I gained a whole new appreciation for the members of St. Andrew's and a greater awareness of the ministry that we do here.

As I mentioned in my sermon last week, over the years, when I talked to people outside our congregation I have taken a great amount of satisfaction in listing the many achievements of the people of St. Andrew's. Your example of community service has been an inspiration to me and it has played a big roll in shaping the focus of my ministry here over the last eight years. Like many of the people here today, if I were to list all the things that I am involved in, in the community, I would fill up a whole page.

While these forms of ministry that you and I participate in are unlikely to bring people to the pews of St. Andrew's there is no doubt that what we do in the community makes a big difference in people's lives. For example, for the last several years, I have been carrying an RHA pager twice a month during the evening hours. Most evenings that I carry the pager, I get called. And when I get called it is usually at 2 in the morning and my job is to sit

with strangers and be a calm, comforting, and supporting presence as the doctor delivers awful news.

During the hour or more that I am with the family, getting them a drink of water or a sandwich, listening to their grief, or saying a prayer for them; they have no idea I am from St. Andrew's church, let alone that it is through the generosity of this congregation paying my salary that I am able to be there and offer what ever help I can. During the hour or more I am with the family, my ministry won't compel them to become regular church attenders, let alone, members of St. Andrew's. During the hour or more I am with the family, my contribution to their lives is very small, but, I can assure you, that it has made a difference.

In a similar manner, the money that you raise for charity, the flowers that you plant, the dainties that you bake, the people that you visit, the committees that you serve upon, the special events that you organize, time and time again; year in and year out, does make a difference. The community of Brandon would not be the same without the people of St. Andrew's quietly working away, helping out in ways that will not directly benefit us, but, will make the world a better place to live in. You have certainly made a difference in my life. I have been inspired by your example, and I know that the lessons I have learned during my time here will serve me well for the rest of my life, wherever I go.

Some other legacies that St. Andrew's has made on my life include my passion for the game of golf. Prior to moving to St. Andrew's I had played three rounds, tops, in my life. However, once Marj, Opal, Vi, and Garnett started taking me out, I became an avid player. Had they not taken me out every Tuesday and Thursday morning my first year that I was here, I doubt I would even own a set of clubs, let alone play the game.

Another lasting memory that comes to mind when I think of my time here at St. Andrew's is the beef suppers. For the rest of my life, I don't think I will ever be able to attend a church dinner without comparing it to the ones I have experienced here. While I expect that other churches I will serve in will have good cooks too, I wonder if I will ever witness the well oiled machinery that exists here. To get so many people in and out in such a short period of time is an achievement I have never seen anywhere before and I may very well never see again.

Of course the greatest memories I will have of St. Andrew's is of the people. I will always treasure the friendship you have offered me. Thank you for the kindness you have shown, inviting me to your homes during the holiday seasons, putting food outside my door, sending me cards during Christmas and buying me chocolates.

Thank you for you sharing your stories. I have been shaped by them as much as I have been by your actions.

Thank you for your patience; when my sermons may have put you to sleep, or when they failed to speak to your heart, or say anything of value, or connect you to God. Thank you for your patience; when I have through ignorance or neglect failed to offer the kind of pastoral care that becomes a minister of the gospel of Christ.

Thank you for all the things you have done for me during my eight years here. I will always remember you. If you are visiting in Southwestern Ontario, please drop in. You will always have a place to stay. Again, thank you for the privilege of being your minister. May the blessing of God be with you as you continue to serve Christ and the community of Brandon. Amen.