

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
September 10 & 11, 2016  
John Crosby  
Faithful | Romans 8:22**

Not all churches have this...lots of young people, lots of kids running around, lots of old people together. As a matter of fact, people are very concerned about the state of the church. There's an Anglican bishop, Lord Carey, and he introduced this phrase: "The church is always just one generation away from extinction." You look at all these beautiful buildings, and they can be empty. You see all these people, and they can go away. Carey was very worried about the faith of the British Empire in the year 1147, so it's not new. The church has always been just one generation away from extinction. And especially now when we have a rapidly changing society and culture. We're so worried about the millennials, you know, are they going to come back to the faith? So some churches decide they are going to do whatever they can to get these people back. It's a wonderful desire to want to reach out to the next generation, and so they fill the stage with smoke machines, and they become a hot spot for the Pokémon thing, and they make it so it's like, "Come on! Come on Sunday! You won't even know you're in church. We'll make it intelligent, and it'll be good. Trust me, it won't be anything like church." And, some of those are working, but a lot of them are not.

One of my intellectual mentors, William Willimon, was the chaplain of Duke University. Bishop Willimon said, "As people leave the modern American church, the temptation is to blend in, to make talking about God as natural as ordering a pizza. Well, we shouldn't try to make Christianity so accessible that people do not have to learn the language of a new Kingdom, the language of faith." It's not a secret handshake, he says. It's not a secret handshake...it's not *we're good, you're bad*. It's a new way to live and to talk. So, when this old Bible—two thousand years old—is translated recently by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, he takes the same old story and he doesn't get rid of all the faith things, he just scrapes the barnacles of religion off so that people can learn. Listen to what he does, for people who are just coming to know about Jesus, in Romans Chapter 6, verses 1-11:

If we have left the country where sin is King...

In other words, if we've become a Christian. What an interesting notion...

If we have left the country where sin is king, how can we still live in our old house there? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life.

Something new has happened.

We are no longer at sin's every beck and call.

I love that phrase—we don't have to live the way we used to—and never again will death have the last word. That 99 year-old lady I talked about...she's alive. Never again will death have the last word. Then Paul says this,

When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us.

And then this is the part that I wanted you to get—this phrase here:

From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue.

The tongue you were born to learn; the language you were born to speak.

God speaks your mother tongue and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God.

That's the language we need to learn. Part of being the kind of church we just talked about with those values, is that we are a language school here. We are a language school for new life. The temptation frankly, for all churches, is to turn the language school inward and make it an immersion classroom, where the only people you ever meet are people from your own church. They learn the language, but I believe that God wants to teach you a new language for life and send you out there into that place that desperately needs to hear this language.

This is the 60<sup>th</sup> autumn that people have met at 70<sup>th</sup> Street, and we are going to spend the time exploring our foundations—the pile of rocks. We want to know where we have come from so that we know what our future is. Our foundation leads to our future. I believe it happens as a community, but I also believe that it is true about you. Each week we want to talk about your past, and we want to

challenge you about your future. We are calling the series “Faithful” and we’re saying it’s about our past.

You have to start somewhere, right? We picked a place where the people of God started. In the Bible story, there was a time when the people of God didn’t have a place to call their own. It is right after the time when Moses frees all the Israelite slaves out of Egypt. Remember that...Charlton Heston, the Red Sea, all that kind of stuff? He comes to the Red Sea and the sea splits. They walk across, and Pharaoh’s army is killed. They are going to the Promised Land. The problem is they mess up—like we all mess up—and they spend forty years out in the wilderness. God keeps them alive, but they spend forty years wandering about this Promised Land, and then Moses dies. The new leader is Joshua, and God says *just the same way I was with Moses, I’ll be with you Joshua. Watch. The same way that I had Moses split the Red Sea, you’re going to walk to the edge of the Jordan River and put the ark of the covenant in and the Jordan River is going to burst in two and you will be able to walk into the Promised Land. Watch. Let the people see.*

That leads to the book of Joshua, Chapter 4. It says,

After the whole nation had gone across the Jordan River...

the river splits; they walk across on dry land.

...the Lord spoke to Joshua: “Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe. Tell them to get 12 stones from the middle of the river, right where the priests stood with the ark of the covenant. They must carry the stones over with all of you. And they must put them down at the place where you will stay tonight. There will be as many stones (12) as there are tribes in Israel. The stones will serve as a reminder to you. In the days to come, your children will ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ Tell them that is where the LORD cut off the flow of water in the Jordan River when the ark of the covenant of the LORD went across. The stones will always remind the Israelites of what happened there.” So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them, and Joshua also piled up 12 stones in the middle of the river. He piled them up right where the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant had stood. And they are still there to this very day. [Joshua 4:1-9 as paraphrased by John Crosby]

So it wasn't just one pile of rocks, it was at least two. This becomes a pattern for the people of God. Later on, the prophet Samuel is going to be in Israel where the Philistines are just about to crush him like a grape. And in their despair, the people cry out to God, and God saves them from the Philistines, who all run away, and they are saved. So Samuel the prophet takes out a huge stone and sets it on the road between Mizpah and Shen, two little villages. Huge stone. And he said, "This stone is called Ebenezer. This stone is called Ebenezer because the LORD has helped us every step of the way." So, language school for new life class 101; first word: Ebenezer. When you say Ebenezer, you speak not one word of Hebrew, you speak two words of Hebrew. You speak the word "ebhen" (ebhen means stone) and "ezer" (ezer means help). Ebenezer is a stone of help; it is a stone that reminds us where God helps. The old hymn says, "Here I raise my Ebenezer. Hither, right here, by thy help I am found. And I hope, by thy good promise, safely to arrive at home." I believe that we need Ebenezers. We need to be reminded of the power when only God could change the course of the river; only God could help my life, only God could pull us together, only God. I also believe that you don't need another long sermon to tell you that. As a matter of fact, I've been struck this summer by the power of pith. When we say something is pithy, it is brief and to the point and powerful. Probably the most popular newspaper at the beginning of the century was the *London Times*. It was the paper of the British Empire. To show they were the smartest, periodically on the front page of the *Times* the editors would have a contest. They would say that if you can answer—in this column—this question, you get 100 pounds—a lot of money back then. The problem was, every time they ran it, the same guy won. So after a while, people said *well, I want to see what Chesterton says first*. His name was GK Chesterton, and the paper would ask, for instance: Look around at all the troubles in the world. What is the major problem in the world today? People wrote all these scholarly pieces about politics and race and economics. And in one sentence, GK Chesterton said: *The major problem in the world is me*. Out of my broken heart, fall all the troubles of my life; out of *our* broken hearts, fall all the troubles of this world. The problem of the world is me. Then, the paper comes up with another one, and they ask: If you are stranded in the South Pacific on a desert island, and you are all alone, and you could bring just one book with you, what book would you bring? And everyone says their own thing. The scholars say they would bring Plato's *Republic*. The literati would say, "No! We are the people of Shakespeare. Bring *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* and understand love and terror and triumph." And of course, all the religious people said to bring the Bible...you would bring the Bible because God would speak to you. And Chesterton said: *Well, I think I would bring Morrison's book on how to*

*build a ship*. So sometimes it's not the spiritual answer that wins, it's the short, correct answer.

I want to give you one of those. We learned what an Ebenezer is; I want to connect it to the Gospel. The second word of God's mother tongue—the Gospel. A magazine I recently read, it's for pastors, did a survey of seminary presidents and big-time pastors. They asked: How would you describe the Gospel in seven words? They got hundreds of responses. I don't know if it was the best, but the one I like the most was from one of my friends who is the president of Princeton, Craig Barnes. Craig said he didn't need seven words to describe the Gospel; he could do it in four. What's the Gospel in seven words or less? It's this: **We live by grace**. If someone asks you *what is the center of the Gospel?* It is to live by grace. Craig goes on and says,

By grace we're created in the image of God. When we corrupt our lives with sin, the grace of God in Jesus Christ forgives us and makes us fully alive again. By grace the Holy Spirit binds us to this savior, includes us in the church, moves our chaos over to create beauty and interrupts our plans with God's dream that we too become gracious. Along the way the holy image re-emerges in our lives.

What's the Gospel in seven words? We live by grace.

So that's key #1. My Ebenezer is that we are a people who are called together to live by grace. When people drive by CPC, I don't want them to see a big building, I don't want them to see a little pile of rocks...rather, I want them to see people who live by grace—the gracious love of God. Not the people who have the best parking lot in the Twin Cities, not the people who have the biggest budget in the Twin Cities, not the people who do the most things all around the world, not the people who look the best, sound the best, try the hardest. The pile of rocks that God wants to put down here is about amazing grace—what God has done for us. The stones of help. And instead of talking to you, I'd like to show you, in about three minutes, what that looks like at 70<sup>th</sup> and 100.

[Link to video shown: <https://vimeo.com/182336992>]

We had to pick from hundreds that we could have used. Hundreds of your stories of taking little rocks of grace and putting them down. Just so you understand, when she talked about Mosaic, that's a special needs service we do where kids with special needs actually lead the worship. It's a holy time. The other one

talked about Sankofa. That's a trip that we take, matching up an African-American person and a white person, sending them off on a trip where they both learn together. And the last guy who talked about extending the grace has been in charge, this last weekend, of a very special time. This is a holy place, a holy place. And do you know why it's holy? Because this last week, God allowed us the privilege of bringing in the homeless here, giving them shelter, and meals, and love. We got to do that.

I wanted to ask you, what's your Ebenezer? When you slow down, what would you point to and say *God was here, thank God?* Or maybe some of you feel like, *I want that, but I don't have that. Would somebody show me how I can get that grace? I'm just trying harder and harder and I'm not getting better.* If that's the case with you, as we go out into the Great Room after worship, why don't you just stop over here in the Prayer Room? We would love to just pray with you and talk to you about the difference that grace can make for all of us.

But for now, I'd like to close by talking about what makes us one church. It's not new. It's from a five hundred year-old confession that the church made back then. It could have been written yesterday. I'd like you to stand and join with me in saying is this the kind of church that you want to be a part of? Tell me if you want to be the kind of church that describes itself this way. Let's say together:

I believe that the Son of God, through His spirit and word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community, I am and always will be a living member. Grace to God.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*