

“Cake, Candles and Commitments”

Hebrews 12:1-3

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First Baptist Church

Frankfort, Kentucky

August 28, 2016

I was asked this morning how long my sermon would be. “It will probably take a while to recount two hundred years of history, even if you only hit the highpoints,” a somewhat anxious church member said to me while munching on a muffin and thinking about sticking another one in his pocket for the service.

“Yes, it will take a while to cover everything,” I told him, “but don’t worry. There will be an intermission.”

“That may be an intermission to you,” he quickly replied, “but to us it will be a benediction!”

There are many important dates to cover in our church’s history, but two are especially noteworthy today.

On January 28, 1816, an organizational meeting was held in the home of Simon Beckham to discuss the need for a Baptist Church in Frankfort. Approximately one month later, on February 25, 1816, messengers from three nearby Baptist churches met in the State Capitol to voice their approval for establishing a Baptist church in Frankfort.

On that historic day, ‘The Baptist Church of Jesus Christ in Frankfort’ was constituted with thirteen members, six men and seven women. Four of these individuals were reared in the home of a preacher, and they would prove to be valuable in the months and years to follow because of their awareness of what current and future needs would be.

While John Taylor, one of the Charter Members, preached almost every time they gathered that first year, he refused to become the pastor. He owned a farm some

distance from Frankfort and felt he could not adequately attend to the daily needs of the parishioners. Early in 1817, Henry Toler was called as the church's first pastor.

I want to believe these thirteen pioneers know what we are doing today, along with all the members of First Baptist who are now in heaven. Maybe this great cloud of witnesses has assembled so they can have their own celebration. Perhaps their voices have blended with ours, and together all of us have sung these glorious hymns of faith.

It is my hope the members of First Baptist whose faith has become sight and now dwell in God's eternal presence know of our deep love for them and appreciation for their dedication and hard work. I pray they are aware our time together today has included telling their stories and recalling their faithfulness.

In addition to remembering those who paved the way for us, what else do we want to do in this service? What is our purpose as we gather in this historic sanctuary?

I pondered this question for several weeks and believe it to be this: We have come to celebrate what God has done through First Baptist to make hope visible, to reconnect with friends who have been with us on this journey of faith, and to recommit our lives to God as we move into our third century of Christian ministry.

First and foremost, we have come to celebrate the many ways God has worked through our church to make hope visible in Frankfort, Franklin County, our Old Kentucky Home, our beloved nation and the world God so dearly loves. Our focus this morning is not upon us but the God who has brought us together and guided our steps.

Our story needs to be shared not because of what we have done, but what God has done with and through the dedicated members of our church. It was for the glory of God our church was established in 1816. It is by the grace of God we have been sustained. With grateful and humble hearts, we say thank you to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On this special day, we have also come to reconnect with friends who have joined us for this celebration. Some of you have traveled a great distance to be here. Others have come from nearby communities.

It was important for you to interrupt your routine to be in this sacred place at this hour. It is important for us to let you know how much your presence encourages us and lifts our spirits.

“The purpose of religion is to build community,” Rabbi Harold Kushner once told a journalist who interviewed him. I wholeheartedly agree.

Jesus instructed his disciples to make circles of friends everywhere they went. Then he showed them how to do this by walking those dusty Palestinian roads so he could listen to people’s stories and respond to their needs with compassion and grace.

A sanctuary full of current and former members this morning affirms the importance of community at First Baptist. For two hundred years, our church has been a welcoming place where strangers are quickly turned into friends, the kind of friendships that last a lifetime.

It pleases me to say that each person who is with us today has helped to create this loving, affirming, accepting and helpful community. You have made First Baptist a home away from home, and for some, the only home they really know.

Down through the years, you have contributed to the health and vitality of our church. You have made us who we are by investing a portion of your life in the grand and worthy endeavors of this church.

Thank you for what you have done and continue to do. Our story would be incomplete without you.

The pages you have added have shaped and formed us into the likeness of Christ and helped us to achieve God’s dreams for our church. I am indebted to you and grateful for you.

On this historic day, it is imperative we renew our commitment to God to continue the work of making hope visible. This morning, we embark on our third

century of ministry as Jesus' disciples. As we move forward, the opportunities and challenges we face will require our highest level of commitment.

The preacher who wrote today's text in Hebrews would certainly encourage us to make this commitment. This sermon, not preached two hundred but two thousand years ago, compels us to stay in the race and run with all our might to the finish line.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."
(Hebrews 12:1-3)

I am not sure what particular event motivated the writer of our text to pen these words and preach this sermon on commitment, but I know what motivates me. I am convinced our community and world need First Baptist Church.

I believe with all my heart our message needs to be heard and our vision of a just and peaceful world needs to be articulated, especially among Baptists. Why do I believe this so strongly? Our message and vision are rooted in God's dreams and Jesus' ministry.

Through study and prayer we have determined to value serving over being served, healing over hurting, sacrifice over self-indulgence, generosity over greed, love over hate, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge and peace over violence.

Like Jesus, we are serious about confronting evil, righting wrong, lifting up the lowly, liberating the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, giving second chances and building bridges of goodwill, understanding, reconciliation and hope instead of erecting walls of suspicion and hate.

We believe this so strongly that we have put the common good above our personal pursuits. Collectively, we use our time, talents and resources to provide services people need to find health and wholeness.

This is why we believe every member is a minister, and we value women in leadership equally to men. The driving force of our lives is to make hope visible wherever we go. It is why our loftiest dreams are not about us but those who live in such deep despair they have quit dreaming of a better way forward.

It is for them we exist, and by reaching out to them we are most blessed. It is for them we have the Mission Frankfort Medical Clinic, the Clothes Closet, the Toy Closet, the Care and Comfort Committee, the Impact Center, the Singing Bridge Academy and the Center for the Arts.

It is for them we prepare meals at the nearby Homeless Shelter and Soup Kitchen, fill Christmas stockings for the Salvation Army, provide Christmas gifts for Second Street students and support the Backpack Ministry at the Second Street School.

It is for them we have the Emma Quire Mission Center in Owsley County and send members to Morocco to work alongside field personnel who are trying to sustain refugees on their way to a safe place to live.

It is for them we partner with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Kentucky, the National Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, Rick's Institute, Joe and Kareene Todd, Sunrise Children's Services, the Baptist Center for Ethics, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, the Marshall Center for Christian Ministry and the Baptist World Alliance.

How grateful I am to be a part of a church that is making hope visible, as Jesus did. It is evident to me the essence of our faith is hearing pleas for help which others ignore or try to silence. This is why we do our best to model our ministry after our Lord's, remembering the sacrifices he made every day along the way.

As grateful as I am our church is a safe place to fall when people's lives are unraveling, I am also pleased it is a safe place for people to ask questions as they

explore the mysteries of life and faith. On our quest to know God, we have discovered that faith is a process rather than a fixed condition or set of beliefs. It is a life-long journey of self-discovery and growth that moves us toward the full development of what life with God can be.

How fulfilling it is to belong to a church that yearns to know God and offers people the opportunity to ask questions in their pursuit of the God beyond their God. How refreshing it is to belong to a church that values exploration over indoctrination and measures faithfulness more by the questions we ask than the answers we memorize. How helpful it is to belong to a church that believes spiritual growth occurs when we suspend our understanding of truth and open our hearts and minds to discover what we don't know.

Baptists have long believed it is through sharing and listening that learning occurs. We are not on this journey alone, and studying together makes it possible for us to see through others' eyes what we cannot see, especially where God is at work through the lives of other believers.

No travelers have the same experience, yet all are part of the community of pilgrims, and the journey of each one can be enriched by the perspectives and insights of others. I know mine has, and I am confident yours has been as well.

Studying with you has helped me to take the words of our text seriously. By listening to your experiences on this common journey, I have identified those things I need to shed as I run my race, and I have been reminded to keep my eyes on Jesus so I shall not grow weary and lose heart. Thank you for teaching your teacher.

Will you make a commitment today to accompany us on this faith journey? Will you join hearts and hands with us as we make hope visible by seeking to know God and to reflect God's nature in all we do? I sincerely pray you will.

I conclude this sermon today by quoting the last of the contributors to the 200th Anniversary Devotional Book, Kara Johnson. She sums up well what I am feeling this morning.

“My prayer for our church is that more people will come through the doors into First Baptist. I want them to feel the love, the fellowship and the strength I feel in this place.

I want them to face a new week having been filled with hope from the Holy Spirit flowing amongst the pews. I would guess that most people—at some point in their lives—struggle with finding God.

I pray they will come to First Baptist. God is here.”

Amen.