

Orchard Lake Community Church, Presbyterian
Orchard Lake, Michigan
February 14, 2010

“I Believe ... in the Church”

Scriptures Matthew 28:16-20, Acts 2:37-47, II Corinthians 5:11-21

I hope, and I believe, this will not be the last sermon that I preach, but this is the last sermon I will preach as Co-Pastor of this Church. And thinking about this just a moment ago I was taken back to the first sermon I ever tried to preach on a Youth Sunday in my Dad’s Church in Grand Haven, Michigan.

My Dad was sitting behind me, and that was worry enough. My Mom was sitting in front of me, as she is again this morning. And that has always been a good thing. But right down in front was my English Teacher. And I knew I was done for.

I don’t know if I am done for today, but I can tell you that I am deeply grateful for the number of you who have made a special effort to be here, for all those, Kay Carpenter and her crew, the Church staff, my family – who have done so much to make this such a very special time in my life.

Two years ago you surprised me with a wonderful recognition of the 40th Anniversary of my ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. That was a very special time – and you surprised me that day.

This day has not been that kind of surprise, because I asked for this day, and you voted for it to happen. But you have still surprised me with the delightful and wonderful heart-touching way you have made the end of Mary’s and my ministry with you such a happy celebration. Thanks to so many of you for kind expressions and words of blessing. All of you have helped make this parting – yes – such sweet sorrow.

There is sorrow here for us. You, this Church and its life and ministry and mission, have been very much the focus of both Mary’s and my life for the past 14 years. You’ve invited us into your lives, to share in your deepest sorrows and joys, and to share with you in some of your remarkable accomplishments as a congregation.

And this very special relationship of Pastor and people ends today. In effect, beginning tomorrow you have a new Senior Pastor. And, Praise the Lord, not as senior as this one. And as right and good as this clean and clear end to our relationship will be for us all, there is sadness in this ending of all of my pastoral and formal ties with all of you.

But parting is still sweet sorrow.

And there is a strange and wonderful sweetness about this day, because of your kindness today, a reminder of your kindnesses to us for 14 years, which will be a sweet, very sweet and good memory for us always, and because of the wonderful way I think, and hope and believe this transitional process has worked, because of the people you elected to guide it, and because of the special grace of the wonderfully good and gifted new Pastor who has been called to lead you into a bright and hopeful and faithful future.

All this brings a sweetness to this parting for us. You are in very good hands with Paul, and Jan, and the staff it has been our joy to work with. And I am comforted, too, by the words on an old sun dial at the College of Wooster – where upon my graduation, and that of my three siblings and my three children, and daughter-in-law, we had our pictures taken. And on that sun dial are these words... *“united in time, parted in time, to be reunited when time shall be no more.”*

That is, in effect, God’s promise to all of us who are joined together in the body of Christ, something we celebrated together last Sunday at the Lord’s Table.

And it is that promise that is ours, because we are Christ’s, that I want to talk about with you this morning. Not about our parting, but about our participating in the body of Christ.

As I began my ministry with you in September of 1995 I shared with you two Sermons. First on the fact that I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I talked with you again in January about my faith in Christ. Second I talked about the fact that I believe in the Church of Jesus Christ, his living

Body in the world.

And that's what I want to talk with you about this morning – God's word about God's people, the Church, the Body of Christ. Thank you for the recognition of my retirement. But now, let's talk about the Church this morning. And let's begin with the words of the Apostle Paul from the 5th Chapter of his second letter to the Church in Corinth.

Scripture: II Corinthians 5:14-21.

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Let us pray.

People – we have met to worship, and adore the Lord our God. Will you pray with all your power while I try to preach the word. Lord – may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, be acceptable to you and your good word to us this day in Christ. Amen.

Paul's words in II Corinthians have been the focus for me – both for my life in Christ and for my ministry. While ministry clearly involves many things that I do, that we do as a church, ministry is not a set of tasks. It is a calling, a vocation. Ministry is God's call to us to be ambassadors for Christ, to take God's appeal in Christ to all people to be God's people, to love God and to love each other with all our minds, hearts, souls and strength.

Ministry is this calling to a way of life, and we all share it. We are the body of Christ. And – yes – Pastoral Ministry – the work you called me to do, and Marjorie, and have now called Paul to do, is a particular experience of ministry, of the call to serve for Christ.

You've heard them before, but these words put it very well for me – .

*I heard him call.
Come follow; that was all.
My gold grew dim,
I followed after him.
Who would not follow if they heard him call?*

We've heard him call. Ministry, serving for Christ, calls us all, and demands a new priority in our living. Christianity is a way of life. And in the Church, this is especially true for Pastors.

As a preacher's kid I knew that being a minister was not 9 to 5, and was more than Bible study, preaching, teaching, baptizing, marrying and burying. I knew it was about late night calls, and bedside prayers, and graveside tears. I knew that serving the Church, being part of the body of Christ in the world, was about spiritual things, but also about physical things, about budgets, and clean bathrooms, and city ordinances, and about remembering Lincoln's quote that you can't please all the people all the time.

And remembering that the one to be pleased is God.

And we please God by being ambassadors of God's love to God's people. We please God, each of us, if what we do spreads the good news of God's love in Christ, and brings people into the living Body of Christ – the Church.

And so, above all else, the Christian's life, and Pastoral ministry, is about people, God's people. It is about serving the good of the living body of Christ, the Church, and all who are and can be members of it.

Jesus only used the word Church, *ekklesia*, twice. But finally its creation was at the heart of his life and ministry. For the word means, *gathering of people who have been called out*. And that's what Jesus did, and that's who we are. We have been called out to be a people Committed to the highest truth, to the love of God in Christ, and to the love of one another.

This is why the cross is the central symbol of our faith and of the life we seek to live – and on the cover this morning. It is a constant reminder of the two directions of the Christian life – love God who is above us, and love one another.

It was Jesus last word to his disciples. His first word to us. It is the call, the command to us, to be the Church –

All authority in heaven and earth has been give to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.

That's heavy stuff. What a challenge. And it is a constant reminder of Christ's life, and of his call to us, of who we are to be, and what we are to do. In the Cross of Christ – we glory.

We find the heart of our faith poignantly and powerfully displayed. God so loved the world ... Go make disciples.

And what Jesus voiced, and lived out in his life and ministry, Peter, bold Peter, bad Peter, but finally brave Peter, pronounced to the world. Jesus called the Church into being, and Peter, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gave the Church its shape and form. He said ...

Repent and be baptized, devote yourselves to the apostle's teaching, and fellowship, to breaking bread and the prayers. Come to the living stone, chosen and precious, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house ... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own.

You are the Church – that's what Peter said. Avery and Marsh put that thought to music and words some years ago –

*I am the Church,
You are the Church.
We are the Church together.
All who follow Jesus,
all around the world,
Yes, we are the Church together.*

That's the Church I believe in. People. Jesus People. Followers. Disciples. Ambassadors for Christ.

And ... and ... I know – it doesn't always look like that has happened, or is happening, or that it ever will happen. Does it? 14 years ago a news reporter interviewed me and shared her own bitter disappointment in the Church – all the battles and different parties, the church fights she saw, the failed leaders.

I did not try to argue with her, but because I believe in the Church, I challenged her to do two things. First – to take a longer larger look at the church – at the remarkable record of good that has been a part of the contribution of the Christian Church to human life, in spite of every human flaw and sin, and the imperfect people we are.

And Second – with some boldness, and I confess prayerful hope, I challenged her to look at this Church, at its history, and at what this Church would be doing in this community.

I challenged her to look at the long history. Yes the marks of our sinfulness are there to be seen. Crusades and crooked Popes, and failed church leaders, and crosses worn as decoration with no dedication to Christ. Yes.

But here's the point: we admit all of this. We confess our sins. And we Presbyterians in particular, we confess that the Church is far from perfect.

We know that we must constantly be changing, improving, reforming, and growing more and more into the likeness of Christ, whose name we bear.

And in all the humanness, weakness, and sinfulness, there has been, there is, a wonderful winsomeness, a goodness and grace in the life of the Church, in the caring and compassion of Christ's people, in their passion for justice and truth and goodness, in their spirit of forgiveness and love for the least and last and the lost.

From hospitals to the care of orphans, in the fight for emancipation from slavery and rights for women, for an end to segregation, for public health and public education, some part of the Church, some members of the Christian community, have taken the lead in every great human cause.

Time and again the Church has demonstrated that it is, as Elton Trueblood called it, *the company of the committed* – a people called out to be for Christ. Not to be just the best we can be in our own poor strength, but to be the best we can be through the strength we find in Christ.

Yes, the Church of Christ is also made up of particular churches in particular places. And, of course, I do remember the places where I have been pastor, and the spaces where I've been privileged to work and to preach. What a special place this has been.

And in a wonderfully strange kind of way, the places I've served have all been connected in some direct way to water. Born in Chippewa Falls; lived in Sheboygan, Milwaukee, Grand Haven and Chicago, all on Lake Michigan; served Churches in Newaygo on the Muskegon River, and in River Forest, and Battle Creek, and, yes, Orchard Lake.

Some, not so kind soul, said it just proved why I was all wet most of the time.

Maybe so – but in deeper truth, the places I've served have reminded me again and again that the Christ I serve provides for us the living water of life.

And that our call began in our baptism. We have this reminder, the reminder that we are forgiven, cleansed, by God's love in Christ and freed over and over again to be new people – Christ's people.

That's part of the wonder of the Church I believe in – the Church of Jesus Christ. It can, it does, respond to God's will and God's call, and constantly reforms and reshapes itself – let's itself be renewed by the Holy Spirit. Because the Church is the people.

See the Church and see the Steeple. Open the doors and see all the people. We are the Church together. And God is working in our lives – not with all the same intensity in all of us at the same time. Not with all the same clarity of purpose in all of us at the same time.

But God is at work in us and through us, all the time, and that strengthens all of us – all the time.

And as I close out my formal ministry and retire, suspecting, believing and trusting that there will be new ways that I will be able to serve in and for the Body of Christ, I have great hope for, and confidence in the future of the Church of Jesus Christ.

I have such great hope and faith because of the people I have been privileged to know down these 42 plus years. I believe in the Church of Jesus Christ because I believe in what God has done, and is doing, and will be doing in the lives of people who truly do seek to walk in the way of the Lord.

Far more than the places or spaces where I have served in ministry – far more even than this incredible place on the shore of Orchard Lake – I remember most the faces, the persons to whom and with whom I have been blessed to serve.

The deepest sadnesses and joys, the toughest times and richest moments in my ministry have all been about the people of God, with whom I've been privileged to share the journey of faith. As I looked back over the years I looked hard for some over-arching dramatic theme. But I kept finding myself thinking about people more than events or causes or programs.

The faces of people who have allowed me to be apart of their lives; of their faith journey. People

who have taught me how true it is that God is Good – all the time.

I shared with you the special moment from my previous trip to South Africa. We are asked to pray with the people after they had seen the doctor and been treated. And when I asked one distinguished looking elderly Zulu man if I could pray for him, he said, in perfect English, *Young man ... (and that sounded like a blessing) Young man; let me pray for you.* And he did.

And he reminded me that Pastor, and people, we are in this together with God as our guide and strength, our final hope. I pray my prayers have meant as much to others as his did to me.

And I remember Eva Rich from this Church and her words to me near the end of her long struggle with breast cancer. I went to see her wanting to comfort her, and she comforted me. *Pastor, she said, win or lose in this struggle for life, I win. We win. In Christ we are victors.*

People. I believe in the Church because of the people – God’s people, called by name, whose lives of faithfulness mark the most precious of my memories.

People and their faith. A seminary classmate suffering from Cerebral Palsy, who became a chaplain to handicapped children at Illinois Children's Hospital School. How Tim loved to parody that All State Commercial! He would hold out his badly shaking hands and say with a smile –

You're in Good Hands, with – God.

I can still smell the fresh bread that Roxy somehow found a way to bake – and have ready for me when it was my turn to bring to her humble rural cottage where she was nearly bed bound the taped sermon. And she would deliver to me a lesson in real faith – up close and personal – of sharing. And I would race home in my Volkswagen so Mary could share in the taste of that great warm bread.

I remember the faith and courage of two families – the father of one hit the mother of the other in a blinding snow storm, and both died. And the community and the church gathered and celebrated life in Christ and taught me the meaning of the words of one of our confessions ... *Our hope is this. In life and death we belong to God.*

I remember the dairy farmer teaching me to milk cows and muck out stalls – the two do go together. And I remember his telling me why he thought a good God allowed so much evil to exist – that we might be free to choose – free he said, to love God, to truly trust and obey God. In a perfect world who needs faith? In an imperfect world, who doesn't?

And I believe in the Church because of its mission – and the sense of mission that continues to be so much a part of this church, of what you are about as a Congregation, as ambassadors for Christ.

My faith in the Church is about the privilege and excitement of being part of this Church's first international mission trip to Mexico, where the group we commissioned will soon be going to provide living water. It's about using the gift of a lot of money for others and not yourselves. It's about Reach Out Days to local missions; It's about the Faith Enrichment Center and how it has led to your engagement with more people from the community, and about Building to Share dollars – now up to 140,000 – that you've given for Habitat Homes built in Pontiac and Detroit, and sent to build cisterns in Mexico, and rebuild homes on the Gulf Coast, and add to a children's home in Uganda.

It's the Grief Recovery Meetings held here; the Homeless welcomed here; It's the Career Transition Group that has been meeting for over a year with people now from all over the community, supporting, encouraging, guiding people through what we know is one of the toughest times there can be; It's Communion Sunday gifts for the Open Door, and outpourings for the Haitian People, and.....

That's the Church – the Church of Christ I believe in. Tougher to be a Christian these days? Yes. So many temptations to other, and not bad things, just not the very best things. It means choosing.

Needing to choose to study God's word, that the good Word and not just our own whims and wishes, will guide our living. To choose to pray, to worship regularly, renewing faith day by day and week by week. It means a greater willingness to give and to share, more than others are willing to do.

Not all are willing to choose – to be Christians, disciples, followers, ambassadors for Christ.

But, yes, some are willing to choose, to give, to live in new ways. Some have heard the call, some

have responded with new devotion, new care and love for neighbors, with new appreciation of God's plan – that some of God's people would be ambassadors for God – would in word and deed share the good news of Jesus Christ, and his way and truth and love, and so bring light to the world.

That's the people you are. That's the kind of people Pastor Paul will continue, in new ways, to lead you to be – people caring for Christ and his word and his truth and his power, and caring for each other – in times of sorrow and joy, and yes, caring for the community and world you live in, being ambassadors for Christ

I was outside in the clear dark cold the other night and was able to find the North Star – at the very end of the little dipper. And I remembered that in a couple of weeks I will be in Australia and able to see the Southern Cross.

Both stars are direction pointers. And the words of the psalm rang in my inner ear –

O Lord, Our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

And I prayed that even as God can guide our lives by northern and southern stars, that this God who has blessed me with God's call into ministry, and blessed me in very special ways with the call to this ministry with you here, I prayed that as you move into a new time in the life of this church, and so in your life of faith, that you will continue to be guided by God's call to you in Christ to be his living body, to be the Church. That you will support and challenge Paul to lead you into a deeper and richer understanding of God's word, and into ever more faithful ways of showing and sharing God's love to others.

You have 138 years of history behind you – and great needs for your ministry all around you. And you have heard the call.

My wife Mary has always liked this poem, this way of hearing the call –

*It was God's plan all along,
to bring you here to serve God,
by using your gifts to minister to others,
for such a time as this.
God has given you the grace to reflect the love and character of Christ,
to be a light in a darkened world,
for such a time as this.
You have a unique place to serve in God's kingdom,
touching lives as only you can do,
for such a time as this.*

That's God's call to us in Christ. It will never change at all. It is to be the Body of Christ, the Church, ambassadors for his way and his truth and his love.

Yes, I believe in the Church. And I believe in you.

Thank you for helping me to see more clearly what it means to be an Ambassador for Christ. Amen.

David W. Robertson
M. Div., S.T.M., D. Min.