

August 1, 2004

"Grace to You"

2 Corinthians 3:1-6; 4:7

Preached by David C. Fisher

My son-in-law, William Younger, is a pastor. His first congregation was a small church in Montgomery, Illinois. Montgomery is not far from Barrington, Illinois, site of one of the largest churches in America. That church, Willow Creek, has 12,000 worshippers on a bad Sunday. Billy's church had 50 on a good Sunday.

It's tough living in the shadow of a giant. People in the congregation wonder why their church can't be big. Pastors wonder too.

One Sunday evening Billy went to Willow Creek. It was their annual meeting with thousands in attendance. They talked about the growth over the past year and celebrated that their income was more than a million dollars over budget.

As Billy drove home, he began to weep and sing to himself the Taize song you may know, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He wondered if God or anyone noticed his life and ministry there in shadow of the giant.

Well, how do you measure success in the church or in ministry? Because we're Americans, we usually use objective, measurable standards. In church circles you hear pastors measured this way, "He grew that church from 150 to 2,000." That's a compliment that makes you desirable to churches. I've heard pastors ask each other a question I'm still trying to decode, "How many are you running?" One of the first questions the clergy or laypeople ask us is, "How large is your church?"

In America, size matters. Hundreds of seminars and thousands of resources are available to teach how to make your church larger. All are taught or written by pastors of large churches. You don't read blurbs on book covers or advertisements for seminars that say, "He grew such and such a church from 3,600 to 2,300 in five years"!

My son-in-law got the attention of a denomination leader. He heard that Billy's church tripled in size in three years. It wasn't true. It's the kind of gossip that fuels church talk. Instead, his church had three times their regular attendance one Easter.

The leader came to visit and recruit Billy. When Billy corrected the flattering rumor, the man quickly became disinterested and told Billy he wasn't the kind of guy he was looking for.

So, how do you measure success? Or, to put it another way, what are the proper credentials with which to commend a minister of the gospel?

Two thousand years ago, there were no big churches. But, human nature being what it is, first century churches demanded ministerial credentials. The church in Corinth is a case in point.

Corinth was a vital and important city just a few miles from Athens. The Apostle Paul started a church there. From the beginning the congregation was an energetic and, at the same time, troubled church. Just about everything that can go bad in a church did go bad in Corinth.

And, from the beginning, the church had problems with Paul. To put it mildly, it was a troubled relationship. Paul wrote them at least four letters and made a number of visits to straighten things out.

Second Corinthians is one of those letters. The burden of the letter is Paul's defense of himself and his ministry.

The church was deeply divided. Factions developed around leaders. Some supported Paul. Others thought Appollos, an early Christian leader, was a better choice. And some thought Peter the Apostle was the proper leader for the church. The very pious party maintained they followed Jesus, no human leader.

More to the point, apparently, teachers came to the church who disparaged Paul and his missionary labors. They brought with them, letters from important apostolic figures as credentials. They pointed out that Paul lacked letters of commendation from the powers-that-be in the early church. They said Paul and his teaching had no credibility.

Paul responds with a powerful, sometimes defensive, defense in Second Corinthians. In our text, he puts it directly and simply, "I don't need letters of commendation from you or anyone else," he writes. "You are my letter of recommendation. You are all the credentials I need. You are in my heart, a letter written in flesh that is read by the world."

In other words, "When I travel and people ask me about my ministry, I tell them about you. So, look at yourselves. Look at each other. Look in my heart. God did what you see. Your faith is the real thing." The people in the church at Corinth were all the resume Paul needed.

Now, I've lived long enough to have a resume some people think is impressive. I've earned some credentials. I have letters of recommendation. I've had the honor of being a pastor in some significant parts of God's kingdom, Colonial being one of them.

But at the end of the day and at the end of a lifetime of ministry all that doesn't mean much. You can't reduce a person's life and lifetime of ministry to an 8 1/2 by 11 piece of paper. Credentials and resumes are not the real story of a church or a minister.

You, the people of Colonial Church, you are my real resume. When people ask me about my life and ministry, I won't tell them about this award winning and beautiful building. I won't talk about the privilege of life in suburban Minnesota. I won't talk much about the significant people and history in Colonial's life. I'll tell them about you. You are the story of my life.

As I bid you farewell today, I want you to know I have you in my heart. While I've written a letter in your lives, you've penned one in my life too. I will read that letter the rest of my life – along with the many cards and letters you've given us.

As I've told many of you, we members of the clergy don't often see the real story of our soul care. We work with words and deeds that make invisible marks in your lives. We always wonder what's going on out there.

I love doing the grocery shopping because it's one of the few things in my life that when I finish I can see what I've done. I plan my trip. I execute it in an organized fashion and when I get home I put things away. It feels good to see what I've accomplished.

Sharing a universal sense of inadequacy, we often wonder with the Apostle Paul if our pastoral labor has been "in vain." Then at the end, when we resign or retire, we hear and see what we've done as you sum up our ministry in your lives. It's always a bit of a surprise and quite gratifying.

I must tell you that your response to my time here at Colonial has been overwhelming and often, quite unexpected. This is, without doubt, the most satisfying and fruitful chapter of my ministry. Thank you.

Thank you for opening your souls and letting me in to do soul work on behalf of Jesus Christ. Thanks for opening your lives to Gloria and me and accepting us as we are. Thank you for letting me write a letter on your hearts.

But thank you isn't the end of the story in our text. We human ministers write our lines on your hearts for better and for worse. Our words and deeds make a difference, they matter. We ministers are, as Paul puts it, "vessels of clay." We're ordinary people doing extraordinary work. Our humanness mars the work. We make slips of the tongue and of the life that hurt rather than heal. We offend and are offended. We're liked by some and disliked by others; accepted, and at the same time, rejected. We are utterly human.

NEVERTHELESS, nevertheless, Paul adds, we clay pots hold an imperishable treasure. God works in our work. Paul's conclusion is powerful. Since God is at work in our human work, we are confident and, wonder of wonders, we are adequate. Our work is the amazing grace of almighty God – in spite of us.

That requires humility. Elsewhere, Paul asks the question, "What are we ministers of the gospel?" He answers, "We are merely stewards of another's treasure." We're managers, that's all. Or, in a more earthy metaphor, Paul says we ministers are mere farmers in God's field. The point is, it's God's field not ours, God's treasure not ours. The work we humans do is sheer privilege – grace.

That requires a response and only one will do. I thank you for your kind words of witness to my ministry, but at the end of the day and a life of ministry only response is allowed. It's a theme of Scripture repeated powerfully in the Reformation, *Soli Deo Gloria*. "Glory to God alone."

That is the conclusion of our text. We're vessels of clay entrusted with an imperishable treasure, "so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (4:7).

This work, this congregation, is God's work not ours. Week after week, I've come to this pulpit where in human words I've attempted to proclaim God's word, not my own. Time after time, I've let you to this table, the Lord's Table, not ours. This work is God's work.

Nine years ago when I was installed as your Senior Minister, I sat where Jeff is sitting today. My friend, Wayne Stacy, stood here and talked to me and to you. I've repeated him today and other times. "This work we do is God's work," I've reminded you.

Wayne put it in the negative – a more powerful form of expression. He said, "We err and we err greatly when we forget that this work which we do, when we do it, is not our work, it's God's work.

*Soli Deo Gloria*. Glory to God alone.