

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 20, 2011**

**GRACE IN ACTION:
SERVING ONE ANOTHER**

Romans 12:1-8

UPDATE ON THE COVE

I want to talk with you about this passage from God's Word and its message to us. But first, I want to bring you up to date in terms of what's happening with our daughter church in the Lorton-Woodbridge area, the Church of the Occoquan Valley, also known as The Cove. The Faith Promise letter which went out to members and friends of our church family last month indicated our uncertainty about the future of The Cove. Some of you may have questions about The Cove's status, and wonder if any decisions have been made about the future of The Cove since you received the Faith Promise letter. Here is an update with some background:

As most of you know, we stepped out in faith several years ago now to attempt to establish a new church in the greater Lorton-Woodbridge area. We saw a need and an opportunity to spread the message of the gospel among the residents of that area who are unchurched, or who have given up on church for one reason or another. The Cove, which was originally called Redeemer EPC, was born out of our desire to help more people come to know God, experience His saving grace in Jesus Christ, get connected to other believers in the fellowship of the church, and live all of life as followers of Christ. That is why we planted a daughter church. We did it because we believed – and believe – it is what the Lord was calling us to do.

Pastor David Fischler came to serve on our church staff as the pastor of The Cove nearly six years ago, in January 2006. The Cove is now a mission church of our presbytery, which is the usual step before becoming a fully-functioning "particular church," as we call local church congregations in the EPC. Believing that God wanted us to be a church planting church, the Session of Faith set aside a significant amount of money several years ago to help underwrite the costs of planting and supporting our daughter church until its ministry could become financially self-sustaining. That fund is now all used up, and, despite the prayers of many and the labors of Pastor David and the mission team, The Cove has not taken hold the way we hoped, and it is not yet self-sustaining financially.

For the past three years, The Cove has met in rented space in a business park on Old Bridge Road in Woodbridge. The lease ends on December 31, 2011, and will not be renewed. The Cove's final worship service there will be on Sunday, December 11, in order to allow sufficient time to clear out all of their furnishings and equipment from the facility before December 31. The action plan approved by The Cove Oversight Commission (which was established by the Session of Faith to give leadership to The Cove in conjunction with Pastor David) includes the following:

1. They will suspend Sunday worship services for an indefinite period after December 11, and urge Cove members to join us at Faith on Sundays for worship, classes, and fellowship;
2. They will remove all remaining items from the Yarbrough Park facility on Saturday, December 17;
3. Starting in January, they will implement a new strategy focusing on small groups as the primary form of outreach, in a renewed effort to make connections with people who are unchurched, providing their unchurched friends with an opportunity to explore the Christian faith and to consider the message of the gospel, in the hope of adding new disciples to the church.

After December 11 and on into 2012, Pastor David will participate in leading worship on Sundays here at Faith, as well as other aspects of the life and ministry of our church family.

Exactly what the future holds for The Cove, and how this will all turn out, only the Lord knows. As with everything else in life, as with every detail in your life and mine, it is in the Lord's hands. If at some point in 2012 the Oversight Commission makes a decision to cease operations, or if giving by Cove members is not sufficient to fully fund Pastor David's salary and benefits, the Session has approved a contingency plan to provide a severance package for Pastor David.

WHAT WE KNOW

I know this is not the prettiest picture in the world, but it is where we are. These are challenging times not only for The Cove, but for us at Faith as well. Though there are some things we simply do not know, there are certain things we do know. We know that ...

- The Lord of the church is with us (Matthew 28:20).
- Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:11).
- God is sovereign (Isaiah 55:8-9).
- God is in charge.
- God is gracious.
- God's grace comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will – like you and me.

We know that ...

- God is loving.
- God loves each one of us.
- God's love is not fickle.
- God's love for us is not dependent on our performance or the results of our efforts.
- God loves us with an everlasting love.

We know that ...

- God will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).
- God will finish the good work He has begun in us (Philippians 1:6).
- God's plans and purposes will not fail.

We know that ...

- In the end, God wins.
- God is able, more than able, to do immeasurably more than all we could ever ask or think or hope or imagine, according to the power of His Spirit that is at work in us (Ephesians 3:20).

We know that ...

- Even when we struggle with the ordinary or even extraordinary difficulties of life
- Even when our prayers are not answered when we want and the way we want them to be answered
- Even when our best laid plans and labors in ministry do not bear the kind of spiritual fruit we long to see
- Even when we go through a period of contraction in the church
- Even now

We are still more than conquerors through Jesus our Savior and Lord (Romans 8:37), who loved us and gave Himself for us (Ephesians 5:25). Whether we live in plenty or in want, in prosperity or poverty, it is all the same: We can still do everything – everything God asks us to do and everything God wants us to do – through Him (Christ) who gives us strength (Philippians 4:12-13).

OUR JOB

We also know that God wants us to be faithful to Him right where He has put us, wherever He chooses to send us, and in the ministries to which He calls us. The soil may not seem to be fertile. The ground may be hard. That is the spiritual reality in a lot of places in the world today, including here in northern Virginia. That doesn't change the nature of our job. Do you know what our job is? Our job is ...

- To seek God and His kingdom and His righteousness above all else (Matthew 6:33).
- To be what God wants us to be.
- To do what God tells us to do.
- To say what God tells us to say.
- To go where God tells us to go.
- To love one another and whomever God tells us to love.
- To serve one another and whomever God tells us to serve.
- To let the light of Christ shine in us so that others will see our good works and the quality of our life, and what? So they will heap praise on us and tell us what wonderful people we are? No.

Our job is ...

- To give glory and praise to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).
- To declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into the light of His glory and grace (1 Peter 2:9).
- To glorify God in everything we do, and to find our joy in Him (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Our job as a church and as individual followers of Christ is to be faithful to God in the place to which He has called us, and in the mission He has given us. The job of Pastor David and the members of The Cove mission team is to be faithful to God where they are. Our job here at Faith is to be faithful to God, faithful in serving His purposes right here and right now.

Our job is to be faithful. The results are up to God. Only He can produce the harvest. Paul explained what had happened in Corinth this way in 1 Corinthians 3:6: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” God is the One who causes the seed of the gospel to take root in a person’s life. God is the One who causes it to bear fruit. The results belong to God. Why God has caused the gospel to bear astonishing fruit in some places and not others, at some times throughout history but not others, is a mystery of God’s sovereignty. Why revivals come when and where they do, and not somewhere else, is beyond our understanding. We cannot make revival happen. It is up to God.

Our job is to be faithful to God, and to allow God to use us as laborers in His field. In response to His grace, our job is to give ourselves completely to God – as living sacrifices, Paul says in Romans 12:1 – and to ask God to use us as channels of His love and grace, as redeemed sinners who are living proof of the power of God to save sinners, to change hearts and lives and homes, and even to change the world.

How God chooses to bless us and use us is up to Him. Our job is to give ourselves to God as living sacrifices who belong totally to Him, and to let Him decide how He wants to use us in the work of His kingdom.

OUR GIFTS

It is also our job to use our gifts, the grace-gifts God has given us, for His purposes. Every believer is given one or more of these *charismata*, or spiritual gifts, the Bible says, “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). They are given to us to use to build up and strengthen the church. To minister to one another in a myriad of ways, according to what each person needs.

Paul uses the metaphor of the body here in Romans 12, just as he does in 1 Corinthians 12, to describe the essential unity of the church, the amazing diversity of people and gifts and ministry roles in the church, and the inter-connectedness and interdependence of each and every member of the family of God’s people in the church. We are not all the same. We are not all cut out of the same mold. That is intuitively obvious, isn’t it? We have different pasts, different dreams, different experiences, different temperaments, different aptitudes, different gifts, and we all have different roles to play in the life and ministry of the church. But in Christ, Paul says (Romans 12:5) we all form one body, and we all belong to one another.

The spiritual gifts God has given to us are meant to be used as expressions of grace in action. They are by nature and definition gifts of grace, given to us freely and sovereignly by the Holy Spirit, to be used to serve one another and to serve the purposes of God’s glory in the world.

I will not take time today to go into detail about the particular gifts Paul mentions here in Romans 12. It is not a complete, unabridged list of the spiritual grace-gifts God gives to His people. The lists of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 are different both from each other and from the list in Romans 12. Put all the lists together and you will have a better understanding of the number and diversity of the gifts of the Spirit. In 1 Peter 4:10-11, Peter distinguishes between two basic kinds of spiritual gifts: speaking gifts and serving gifts. Each of us, he says, should use whatever gift (or gifts) we have received “to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms... so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ, to whom all glory and power belong for ever and ever. Amen.” Amen yes!

Here is the thing: Each of us who belongs to Christ has received at least one spiritual gift. Maybe more than one. Your job is to help build up the church, to make the church stronger and healthier, by using your gift(s) in some ministry to meet a need in the church or in the world outside the church in the name of Jesus. If you don’t know what your spiritual gift is, ask one of the pastors or ministry leaders, and we’ll be happy to help you figure it out and find your place in ministry.

Finding your place to serve is what our Ministry fair today is all about. Please don’t leave today without signing up to participate in some way in some ministry in the life of Faith or as part of our witness to Christ and service in the community. Make a commitment, with God’s help, to be a living, loving example of grace in action by using the gifts and abilities and opportunities and energy God has given you. Do it for God’s glory, for the health and vitality and witness of the church, and for the sake of someone – or a lot of someones – who may need just exactly what you can provide in the name and love of Jesus.

AN INVITATION

It is time to bring this to a close, but there is something the Lord has put on my heart to share with you. This is our Faith Promise Dedication Sunday, and we have dedicated our Faith Promises of financial support to help fulfill our mission from God in the year ahead. It is also our Ministry Fair Sunday, with the opportunity and invitation and encouragement to you – to every member of Faith and every person who considers Faith to be your church family – to learn about different opportunities to serve in ministry, and to sign up to get involved in some way. It is hard to overstate how important both of these are as ways for us to show our gratitude to God for His grace, and to put His grace-gifts into action.

But it is not your money or your time or your gifts for ministry that God most cares about. More than any of these, more than all of these, what God cares about is you. He doesn’t just want your money. He doesn’t just want you to give your time. He wants you. All of you. He wants you heart, mind, soul, and body. As a living sacrifice.

Adam is going to come up and lead our closing song. It is not in your hymnal. The words are in your bulletin and will be on the screen. The song is *I Give You My Heart*. As we sing, I invite you to come forward to the front of the church as a sign of your desire to dedicate, or rededicate, yourself – *all* of you, your whole being, all that you are, all that you know, all that

you have, all that you can ever be – to the Lord Jesus, who gave all of Himself for you and me.

If you have never opened your heart in faith to have your sins forgiven and to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life, do it today. But this invitation is for all of us. By the grace given to me, I urge you – all of you – to take this step of dedicating or rededicating yourself to the Lord, to live for Him alone. I invite you to come forward as we sing. If you would like someone to pray with you, some of the elders and others will be here.

Lord, have Your way in us. Let it be so to the glory of Your name, now and for ever. Amen.