

Stuff

May 17, 2015

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

Many of you are aware that in a few days I will be starting a time of sabbatical from Church of the Palms. Years ago the elders of our church created a policy that encourages the pastors every seven years to take a sabbatical leave from their regular duties for the purposes of renewing and recharging and re-creating for the next chapter of ministry here at Church of the Palms. It is a generous gift you offer us and certainly one I gratefully receive not with any sense of having earned it – but with every anticipation of what it can mean to a person’s life and work. Very few get something like this – and there are many more deserving of it than I. Truth is we all need a break from time to time, and I am blessed to be given one.

In my absence we have a wonderful staff team that will have one less thing to do – which is cover up all my mistakes. The truth is what you will discover while I am gone is what little I do around here and how little I am missed. Having taken one of these sabbaticals before in a previous church what one learns is the sober lesson that leaving for a while is like taking your fist out of a bucket of water – the space gets filled in pretty quickly, which is the way it should be. Pastor Bruce will serve as acting Head of Staff and Aimee McCullough, who has done a wonderful job over the first six weeks of her work, will lead the administrative side of our ministry. I will be returning September 21 – hopefully rested and renewed for a brand new chapter.

While I am away you can do me three favors which will put me at great ease. First, you can support our wonderful staff and elders. Love them. Encourage them. And remind them what

wonderful servants they are. Church of the Palms is blessed with incredible leadership and they can always use an encouraging word. Second, you can take advantage of some amazing preaching. Most of you received in the mail the summer preaching schedule that includes some of the greatest preachers in the country. Dr. Bruce Porter – who served this church for 20 years – will bless us again by returning to the Church of the Palms’ pulpit several times. Dr. Morgan Roberts who preached for us this past winter will be here several times. And Dr. Allen Walworth, a dear friend of mine and consultant for our upcoming Capital Campaign – and truly one of the great preachers of our day – will be here as well. Bruce Hedgepeth, Hmingi Browne and Alan Rodda, our very own and gifted preachers will be in the pulpit as well. And on top of that a wonderful music ministry led by Genevieve and Jonathan. Every Sunday this summer is going to be a blessing, to be sure. The third favor you can do me is to remain strong in your giving. We are concerned that our projected and pledged giving has fallen behind in the first third of the year and with summer coming we can really use everyone’s attention and stretch on their giving over these next several months. Before leaving, for example, I will take care of my giving through the month of September and maybe you might want to think about doing the same. It would be wonderful to return to a healthy budget. So three things: Encourage your leaders. Experience some great preaching and worship. And stretch yourselves in your financial support. While I’m away, I have a stack of books to read, some writing to do, some blogging and tweeting perhaps. Some speaking in other parts of the country and most of all - time at home with my family.

Now one of the things I get to do early in my time away is clean a closet. There is a closet in our house that I have let get away. Have you ever had a closet that you let get away? I remember a time when this closet was my pride. Everything was in its place. Files were in order. Boxes neatly stacked. Clothes arranged. When I walked in I actually felt good. This is no longer the case. The closet on the cover of your bulletin is not this closet – but it comes frightfully close. And I let it get there. It’s mine to own and it’s mine to clean. And all it is, is stuff. It’s just stuff. I look in there and all I see is stuff. And what I must do is that I must confront the stuff. I’ve got stuff in there I don’t even

remember putting in there. But that's what stuff is all about. It just gathers. It gathers and it grows and before you know it you have to do something about it.

It's why I sympathize with our dear friend in Luke's Gospel. "A certain ruler" Luke calls him. A certain ruler comes to Jesus and he has some stuff. He's got a lot of stuff. Who knows what the stuff is – but he's got a lot of it. And while he has presented himself as a man who has his act together – even religiously has his act together – obeying all the commandments. He still has this stuff. And something has prompted him to ask Jesus about what he needs to do to inherit eternal life and Jesus points him to the law and says, "What about the commandments? Have you followed the commandments?" And the ruler says yes, checked all those boxes. And then Jesus says, "What about the stuff? What are you doing about the stuff? Because it seems that life is getting to be for you about the stuff. And one of the great secrets to the abundant and eternal life is that there is this great journey of letting go of the stuff." Now it is at this point that maybe the certain ruler is wishing he hadn't asked the question. Because he's got a lot of stuff and Jesus is telling him that the new and abundant life is about letting it go and it is now forcing him to confront how important and how comfortable the stuff really is.

And I wonder if that isn't one of the most important moments of our life – that moment when we are forced to think about how important the stuff is. The moment when we are invited to let the stuff go. Because you know the truth is there is more stuff in our lives than what's found in our closets. Life has its way – or we have our way – of holding onto more and more stuff. Objects to be sure – but so much more. You know what I'm talking about – the stuff inside our souls. Things we hold onto even though they are no earthly or heavenly good. Stuff. Heavy, messy stuff. Stuff like resentment. Stuff like guilt. Stuff like old habits. Stuff like addiction. Stuff like insecurity. Stuff like bitterness. Stuff like those old tapes that play that tell you that you're not worth very much. Life has this way of collecting a bunch of stuff and we have this strange way of wanting to hold onto it.

But Jesus is here to invite us into the abundant life and the strange thing about the abundant life is that it gets more abundant with the less abundance of stuff. It is what I think the apostle was

talking about when he talks about being baptized into the death of Christ. Because if there is anything that death does – it gets us to let go. You can't take it with you. No U-Haul trailers hitched to hearses. We are invited into the death of baptism -- that is to say, to let go of the stuff, – in order, Paul says, to walk in newness of life! Life is a journey of letting go.

Jesus talks about it over and over again – God is the vinedresser who prunes away the fruitless branches so that the vine can grow more fruit. God is the refiner's fire who burns away the impurities of life. God is the farmer who knows that the secret to the harvest is the seed that is buried and dies in the ground so that it can live again. Life is a race that requires the runner to strip down and lose the weight and sin that clings so closely. The one who wants to save his life will lose it. Messiah saves us by putting his own life on a cross so he and we can be raised to new life.

The Christian life is this invitation to go into the closets of our homes and the closets of our lives and confront the stuff – and with the help of the Savior to let it go – so that the new chapter can begin. No one knew this better than the apostle Paul – whose old life was the stuff of law and self-righteous condemnation. Overseeing the putting down of the new way of Christ. But then came the moment of having to confront his own stuff – and letting it go and the new chapter that followed.

One of my favorite books by C.S. Lewis (and aren't you glad to know that the references to C.S. Lewis will dramatically decrease over the next four months) is a book called *The Great Divorce* and it's a book about spirits in hell that are given one last chance to come to heaven and to enter. But each of these spirits when they approach the gates ... has a choice. They must make a decision. And one of the spirits – a dark and oily spirit -- when he approaches has on his shoulder a big lizard. And the lizard is moving around and twitching his tail and constantly whispering things into the man's ear. And the lizard emblemizes lust for him. It's his lust. And a great angel comes out to greet him and says that he may enter heaven ... but before he can enter heaven he (the angel) must kill the lizard. And spirit tries to convince the angel that there is no need to kill the lizard ... he can just work to keep the lizard quiet so that it doesn't bother anybody. And the angel says, "No, I must kill it. That part of you has to die." And the man thinks that the lizard is just an extension of himself ... so he thinks

if the angel kills the lizard it will mean his own death. So he begs to keep the lizard, but finally he gives in and he gives the angel permission to kill the lizard ... which he does.

And when he does something amazing happens. The dark and oily spirit begins to change ... and he turns from a spirit into a real person ... a real and complete person – an immense man not much smaller than the angel. And the lizard, now dead ... also starts to change ... and it changes into a great silvery, white stallion with mane and tail of gold ... and the newly created man jumps on the stallion and they ride off into eternity.

It's the great secret to life – for something to live something must die. For abundance to come, abundance must go.

I love that poem by T.S. Eliot, *The Journey of the Magi* where he tells of the journey of the wise men to Bethlehem through the recollection of one of the three kings. And how in discovering the birth of this child ... what it meant for them was that life would never be the same. Eliot was commenting on his own life ... and his own conversion which took place when he was 39 years old. At one point in the poem the wise man remembers on the journey to Bethlehem seeing three trees in the distance and then rhetorically asks: "Were we led all that way for birth or death?"

And the answer of course is both. For in Jesus' birth comes the invitation for our death ... death to the old and the sinful and the broken ... so that God by his grace might do a new thing in us.

It would not be a complement if at the end of my journey what they had to say about me is, "Boy, you know, all the way to the end Steve managed to hold onto all of his stuff. Good for him. His closets were crammed full. His garage was stacked to the roof. His bank account had more in than he obviously needed. And he managed to hold onto that resentment, that bitterness, that lust, that envy, that guilt, that repeating tape in his head. Good for him – he held onto it all!" That would not be a complement to my life. How about you?

“You lack one thing,” Jesus said – get rid of the stuff. A clarion call for me at least – as you have given me a season for pause.

Brennan Manning was a Roman Catholic priest who discovered along the way of his ministry that servants of the church are not immune to the stuff. And the stuff for him was that he was an alcoholic. Alcohol was the lizard on his shoulder. And he thought that life could be good with the lizard as long as he could keep it quiet. But then came the visit of Messiah who said, “You lack one thing. You must give it away. You must give the bottle away. And by grace he did and in its place a stallion. And on his stallion he became a messenger of redemption and inspiration and newness of life. On his stallion he became the author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel* and *The Furious Longing of God* in which he wrote these words:

“The gospel is absurd and the life of Jesus is meaningless unless we believe that He lived, died, and rose again with but one purpose in mind: to make brand-new creation. Not to make people with better morals but to create a community of prophets and professional lovers, men and women who would surrender to the mystery of the fire of the Spirit that burns within, who would live in ever greater fidelity to the omnipresent Word of God, who would enter into the center of it all, the very heart and mystery of Christ, into the center of the flame that consumes, purifies, and sets everything aglow with peace, joy, boldness, and extravagant, furious love. This, my friend, is what it really means to be a Christian.”

“Did you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

May it be so.