



**"The Penultimate Sermon:  
Final Instructions"  
Rev. Dr. Scott Field  
1 Thessalonians 5:12-24  
June 2, 2019  
9:15 AM Service**

This is the penultimate sermon here – actually, it is simply the penultimate sermon. Period – or perhaps semicolon.

Penultimate is an upscale word which means simply "second to the last".

This penultimate sermon has had me thinking about a classic song by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys entitled *Time Changes Everything*. It isn't one we sing in worship. In fact, you may never have heard of it. I'm something of a fan of country music -- which we don't normally sing in worship, either, but there are sub-types within the larger category of country music. There's mountain music, with groups like Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys. There's so-called Classic County with artists like Patsy Cline and Lefty Frizzell. Rockabilly Country with the likes of the Man in Black, Johnny Cash. And while Nashville claims to be the home of country music, once you get farther south, as Merle Haggard used to say, well, when you get to Texas, Bob Wills is still king. Down in the great republic it's called Western Swing. If you haven't heard of Bob Wills, you might have heard of one of his disciples – Willie Nelson.

This isn't a sermon about Texas Swing music.

And the song itself is actually about a romance gone bad and moving on. So, I'm just taking the title. Because *time does change a lot of things*.

For example, when Lynda and I began serving a church in 1980, I had hair. And it was brown. And I was, as it turns out, about an inch and a half taller than I am now and a number of pounds lighter. In worship I wore a robe and a stole. There was no air conditioning in the church. No microphone or speaker system.

The bulletins were printed on a mimeograph machine. Don and Carley Smith would bring eggs from the farm every week to sell in the coat room. And, when it was time to butcher, Harold Kemmerer would take orders for a quarter beef or half a hog. The church organization was, with the exception of the pastor, entirely volunteer. We really needed only one committee, because everybody was on it.

First Church has gone through its own journey of change through the years. Many of you can tell the story. When we celebrated the 175th Anniversary of this congregation several years ago, it was a grand re-telling of the mission and ministry through nearly two centuries in this community.

Of course, most of the time local congregations sketch out their history in terms of buildings and locations. So, First Church was on Brink Street, at the now Starbuck's location. It was part of the Methodist Episcopal Church and then the United Methodist Church. It moved to the current location and built in 1954, then built again in 1994. In the most recent years, that is, while I have been here, you have replaced the original boiler with a two-boiler system, put a new roof on the whole place, replaced the carpeting, the lighting control panel, the computer network, increased WIFI capacity and performance, moved to cloud-based computing for the most part, enhanced the website, added text-to-give functions for financial support, and, increased mission partnerships in depth and level of investment.

Together we've also re-tooled children and family ministries, added the Alpha Course and Financial Peace University, re-thought preschool and early childhood education, opened the doors, figuratively and, because of the new electric door openers, also literally, for families whose children have special needs, have launched a college-aged young adult group, initiated Stephen Ministry (under the leadership of Pastor Charles Yoon), are opening the doors to immigrants through Justice for Our Neighbors, and are actively involved in dealing with homelessness through a financial and hands-on partnership with Habitat for Humanity in Crystal Lake.

Many of those changes were driven by a refreshed understanding of our mission and vision as a congregation as well as significant re-engagement in our organizational structure, administrative processes, and decision-making groups.

When other pastors have asked "what are you up to at First Church?", my standard reply has been, "Well, we've had a lot of work to do in the engine room." That is, there are a lot of "behind the scenes" matters that needed attention, from information systems to organizational structure to deferred maintenance on the facility, to mending relationships within the congregation.

Those of us who were in the first meeting between myself and the Staff-Parish Relations Committee along with the Leadership Council and the staff, remember that as the "not what we expected" meeting: Your congregational leaders were expecting somebody about age 40 with experience in the ministry and management of larger congregations. I was expecting a congregation on the move that wanted to kick it into a higher gear -- and was within an easy and short commute from Naperville where we had a home and Lynda was a second-grade school teacher. So, you got somebody who was twenty years older than you anticipated and another pastor rounding the fourth turn toward retirement. And I got a congregation that needed to pull over and do some repairs before the journey could continue. We needed to downshift before we would be ready to shift into a higher gear.

But now a new season of ministry is dawning -- both for First Church as well as for Lynda and me. It means more change, but I want to remind us of some of the things that remain the same.

For that, I want to turn to 1 Thessalonians 5, beginning with verse 12. The editors of the New Living Translation have given this a title: *Final Exhortations*. Seems like an appropriate place for give our attention before we head off into new directions.

*1 Thessalonians 5:12 - 13a*

*Dear brothers and sisters, honor those who are your leaders in the Lord's work. They work hard among you and give you spiritual guidance. Show them great respect and wholehearted love because of their work.*

Paul was writing as someone who had credibility with the believers in Thessalonica. He was commending to them the other leaders who would be there when Paul was not. Now, clearly, I am no Paul the Apostle. But I am departing and Pastor Lisa Kruse-Safford is arriving. I have told Pastor Lisa that First Church is a wonderful congregation to serve. You place a high value on your partnership with the pastors. And you also have high expectations of your partnership with the pastors. Already I can see that you are extending to her the same love and understanding that was extended to Lynda and me when we first arrived. Don't hold back. She will be your pastor and is well-equipped to serve in that role.

I recognize that one of our United Methodist rules among the pastors for this kind of transition seems kind of arbitrary and counter to human nature, but it goes like this: with this transition, Lisa is your pastor and I am not. A fair number have commented that they know I'm leaving but certainly Lynda and I will be back for worship on Sundays -- at least occasionally. And the answer is, "No, we won't." Generally, when a United Methodist pastor departs, he or she stays away for at least a year. The current pastor can invite their predecessor for particular occasions, but that is the call of the current pastor.

I should also mention here that many of you know I gave up Facebook for Lent. It was such a liberating experience that I haven't gone back. So, if you are expecting me to respond or you are anticipating seeing pictures of our exceptional grandchildren and my amazing wife on Facebook, you won't. If there is a critical need to reach me, the church office knows my address, phone number, and personal email. The relationship between us is changing. We will no longer be involved on a daily basis with you and our attention will no longer be focused on a daily basis on First Church. This is not because we hate you or can't wait to leave you in the rearview mirror. Quite the opposite: you are very dear to us and we are cheering you on. It is just that the relationship between congregation and pastor is a very special thing. You have allowed me the privilege of being pastor and I want to make sure that same privilege is extended without interference or misunderstanding or any crossed wires with Pastor Lisa.

I fully expect you to have a collaborative relationship with Pastor Lisa. This is one of the areas in which First Church is and can remain so strong.

### 1 Thessalonians 5:13b-15

*And live peacefully with each other. Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone. See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people.*

These are very practical directives that grow out of the way God has treated each of us in Jesus Christ. These are the sort of relationships God weaves together between us through the Holy Spirit.

- *Live peacefully with each other* -- that will allow Pastor Lisa to function as a coach rather than a relational referee.
- *Warn those who are lazy*: I love this reminder. Church is not something we go to; it is a community of which we are part. The mission of Jesus is not a spectator event, but a full-contact engagement in which we have the victorious power of God to confront evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves -- even if the confrontation is with our own preferences, biases, and spiritual inertia.
- *Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone*:

This is another of those areas in which you shine like the stars.

Stephen Ministry is actually a distilled form of the love with which you generally care for one another. This congregation is so noteworthy not because of the quantity of the people who are here -- though that is important -- but because of the quality of relationships. I personally appreciate those who have taken the time and effort to offer correction to me, question some things in sermons, encouraged me to re-think some things, or informed me of a pastoral care need I overlooked. And I also appreciate those who have been patient with me along the way. I hope I have returned the same grace to you.

### 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

*Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ. Jesus. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. Do not scoff at prophecies, but test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good. Stay away from every kind of evil.*

- *Always be joyful*: You may wonder what to do with this directive, as if it is a matter of trying to manufacture happy emotions. Not at all. Joy, as Christians understand it, isn't an emotion. It is a firm assurance and anticipation that the victory of Christ over sin, death, the world, and the devil is certain now and forever. This is one of the reasons, I believe, that the earliest Christian observed Resurrection Sunday, what we call Easter, by going to the cemetery for a picnic at the grave of their deceased loved ones. They were gathered, as our liturgy even today puts it, "in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life."
- *Be prayerful*: because the Jesus Mission is not a DIY project and our own transformation to become more and more like our Savior isn't a self-help program. We must experience and depend upon the direct, personal, and powerful work of the Holy Spirit within and through us.
- *Be thankful*: because God has not overlooked or forgotten any one of us. We can trust in God's provision today and promise tomorrow.

- *Do not stifle the Holy Spirit:* test what you see and hear, especially when it comes to teaching or direction from the leaders of the church (pastors, bishops, writers of curriculum and Bible studies and other materials). Check them prayerfully with the scriptures and the teaching of the larger church. Hold on to what is good and let the rest go by.

Though time changes many things, some remain the same.

Depending upon God's love for us, Jesus victory for us, and the empowering Holy Spirit within us.

And, because we have the personal experience, the assurance, of God's work in our lives, because we also have the community of sisters and brothers in Christ to hold on to us in the midst of our lives, we are free to give ourselves away for the blessing of others in Jesus' name.

Years ago, a personal coach told me I would benefit from developing a personal life-goal statement by which I could measure my calendar, my checkbook, my relationships, and my satisfaction with life. So, after a few attempts to detach it from a particular profession or job or set of expectations on how life was supposed to look -- at least according to my blueprint -- I came up with something that has stayed with me for several decades already.

And here's what I came up with:

I want my life to be a positive influence for Jesus Christ so that at the end of my days I will meet him as a friend.

It's pretty straightforward and applicable in almost any specific situation. If I can help somebody along the way, then my life will not be wasted. It will count. And that, after all, is what we are all seeking in the middle of the changes we experience: significance that might live beyond our few years here.

In a few moments we will be invited to the Lord's Table.

We will be reminded that we have already been bought and paid for through the death of Christ.

We will invite together the Holy Spirit to empower us for the mission.

We will place our present circumstances on the backdrop of certain hope for resurrection and life eternal.

We will offer ourselves to be partners for the mission -- day by day and one by one. To help others along the way.

And then -- whether we are with one another or apart from one another -- our lives will count. For others. For ourselves. And for Jesus, too.