

October 30, 2016
Romans 8:24-27
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“Sign of the Times”

Good morning. I'd like to talk about sign this morning: I don't mean prophecies and portents; I mean actual placards with letters and messages. Things we say about ourselves as individuals and as the church. My husband, Tim, has said that he will never put bumper stickers on his car (two-thirds of our children are here today and they can back me up on this). He's a private person and doesn't want to broadcast to complete strangers where his kids go to school, what sports they're in, or if they made the honor roll, what his hobbies are, who he's voting for in 2016, how he feels about gun control, abortion, or various breeds of dogs. I shy away from bumper stickers for slightly different reasons: many of them are badly designed and have ugly type fonts, and if you put it on crooked or off-center, you just have to live with that. That is difficult for me. You might think I'm kidding: I'm not. I do keep a Life is good window cling on the back window of my car, and I am happy to consider that a statement of belief, as well as a line of cute sportswear products.

As you might guess, the McFadden yard isn't exactly bristling with yard signs encouraging folks to Make America Great Again or telling them that we're Stronger Together. It isn't that we don't have convictions about political candidates, we just prefer not to put those out in public. Other people make other choices -- that's fine. About the only yard sign we put out is in August for the Creekside Fish Fry. Someday we'll probably have to put a realty sign out when we sell the house.

Signs are tricky things, because communication is a two-way process, and we can't control how other people receive our communication. This got me thinking about church signs. Not the printed part of church signs, which typically have the name and

maybe the denomination of the congregation, but the part below for movable letters where the message can be changed for information, events, or clever sayings. I know you've seen these signs -- we have a sign like this at the end of our driveway at Creekside. Ryan and Jessica Prah! do a great job of keeping it updated. They ask me what to put on the Creekside sign, and I try to give this careful attention, because poorly chosen words are at best confusing, are sometimes comical in ways we did not intend, and occasionally embarrassing or offensive. Let me show you some examples:

Slide 1. Eat This is a punctuation problem

Slide 2. Texting This is kind of clever, I suppose. But if anyone ever got into an accident because they were reading a church sign, this one would be a candidate. Really, what's the message here? Don't text and drive? We need a church to tell us that?

Slide 3. Worries I don't think this one is a mistake. Can the church help people with anxiety, or are we just making fun of them? Or do we actually mean to say that our church is a toxic environment which will increase your stress?

Slide 4. Sleep I'm sure this is intentional. I don't know if the preacher knew about it ahead of time, but would you want to go to a church that publically belittles their pastor? What does this imply about biblical teaching?

Slide 5. Satin I don't think this intended to be a statement about shiny fabric. It ends up being a statement about spelling.

Slide 6. Prophecy This was one of my favorites. I can't tell if this is a legitimate announcement or a great piece of irony about not being able to tell the future.

Slide 7. Go Cubs And finally, sometimes we can't get the messenger out of the message.

I chose not to show, and I will not say some of the signs which I found offensive. I wish that no church would broadcast messages of condemnation, bigotry or homophobia, but some do. And wrapping

these things up in cute sound bites doesn't make them any less poisonous. If your church sign says something your church does not believe, it shouldn't be on your sign. If your church sign has a cute saying that doesn't have anything to do Christianity, why bother? I don't think the role of the church in our culture or any culture is to provide comic relief. What we as individuals and what our culture needs from the church is hope.

Our text is from Paul's letter to the Romans. He was writing to the Roman church at a time of unrest, political tension, and international persecution. In short, a time very much like the one we live in today. Actually, if we're honest, the state that the world is in all the time. If not here at this precise moment, then for Christians somewhere. It's a pretty safe bet that at any given time or place, the people of God need to hear and proclaim a message of hope. Here's what Paul writes, "For in hope we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

I'd like to share some words with you from author Clarissa Pinkola Estes. She wrote these words following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, but I believe they are relevant to us today. I will quote her at length, because her words are much more beautiful than mine.

My friends, do not lose heart. We were made for these times. I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in our world now. Ours is a time of almost daily astonishment and often righteous rage over the latest degradations of what matters most to civilized, visionary people. Yet, I urge you, please not spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times. Especially do not lose hope.

I grew up on the Great Lakes and recognize a seaworthy vessel when I see one. Regarding awakened souls, there have never been more able vessels in the waters than there are right now across the world. And they are fully provisioned and able to signal one another as never before in the history of humankind. Look out over the prow; there are millions of boats of righteous souls on the waters with you.

In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or unended in the world. Do not focus on that. There is a tendency, too, to fall into being weakened by dwelling on what is outside your reach, by what cannot yet be. Do not focus there. That is spending the wind without raising the sails.

We are needed, that is all we can know. And though we meet resistance, we more so will meet great souls who will hail us, love us and guide us, and we will know them when they appear. Didn't you say you were a believer? Didn't you say you pledged to listen to a greater voice? Didn't you ask for grace? Don't you remember that to be in grace means to submit to the greater voice?

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up during the first, second, or hundredth storm.

One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. To display the lantern of soul in shadowy times like these – to be fierce and to show mercy toward others; both are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity. Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it. If you would help to calm the tumult, this is one of the strongest things you can do. There will always be times when you feel discouraged. I too have felt despair in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it. I will not entertain it; it is not allowed to eat from my plate.

The reason is this: There can be no despair when you remember why you came to Earth, who you serve, and who sent you here. The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours. They are the words and deeds of the One who brought

**us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall:
When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can
be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for.**

**Brothers and sisters, I have an assignment for you. I'd like you to
pray for words in the coming week. Not a lot of words -- if you are as
articulate as Clarissa Pinkola Estes, God bless you, and let me know
what Sunday you want to preach. Here's what I would like to hear
from you: Why are you here? Or to borrow the ship image, What were
you built for? if you had to put a statement about yourself or your
convictions on a yard sign or bumper sticker, what would it say?
Would it give your name and your job title? Is that what you're here
for? Would it give your name and say how many children or
grandchildren you have? Is that what people need to know? Would it
be a message of judgment or condemnation? Would it be a statement
of belief? Hope? Peace? Justice?**

**There aren't right or wrong answers, only answers which state what's
important to us. What drives you and what you do? If you have an
opportunity to tell someone about yourself and why you go to
Creekside Church, what are you gonna say? I think the Spirit is more
likely to help us with the words if we've given it some thought
beforehand, so I'm strongly encouraging you to do that. We'll let you
in here to worship next week even if you don't have words to share.
But please, let me know through the week or by next Sunday morning
at the latest, what that statement would be for you. I'll share them --
including mine, without names attached -- next Sunday. Thank you,
and may the Spirit of grace and peace move in your hearts in the
coming week. Amen.**