

Theme: Important Things to Remember - “We Walk By Faith, Not By Sight!”

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:5-9 (NKJV)

⁵ Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. ⁶ So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. ⁷ For we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. ⁹ Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him.

Let me take you back a little more than 21 years ago to July 6th, 2003. On that Sunday a brand new, green as could be, fresh from the seminary, pastor preached his first sermon and he used this very same text that I just read. That new pastor, in case you couldn't guess, was me. My first week in the ministry was a really rough one. I hadn't anticipated just how lonely it was going to feel getting dropped 1500 miles away from friends and family all by yourself, or how stressful it was going to feel to be the pastor of a congregation—I mean, what do you even do on the first day you become a pastor? There was so much to do, my head was spinning. When my mom called me in the middle of the week eager to hear how my first few days were going, I sat down in the corner of an empty room in my house and said, “Not good...” as my voice broke and I began to cry. To top it all off, my computer crashed near the end of the week and I ended up barely able to finish the bulletin and sermon.

So here I was, finally, at that moment about to preach my first sermon. And if you thought I was nervous that day, just think of the congregation who attended that day in the Houston suburb of Spring, TX. Here was this “kid” who barely looked old enough to drive standing in front of them—this guy was going to be their pastor, the spiritual caretaker of their congregation (I was 25 years old at the time, but I looked very young)?! As it turned out, this was the perfect sermon text for my very first Sunday in the ministry—both for me and for the members of that congregation. It was an excellent reminder that, no matter how uncertain, scary, or change-filled our lives can get, as Christians, **“We Walk by Faith, Not By Sight!”**

I'm struck by how much that first sermon and the thoughts of this text and theme are applicable to us today, on this day on which I preach my last sermon as your pastor. That day, much like today, was a day of anticipation, but much like today it was also a day of uncertainty and even anxiousness about what the future would bring and maybe even some doubts as to whether or not God would make good on His promises to take care of the spiritual needs of this congregation. If those are thoughts and feelings that you bring with you today—and I will admit, these are some of the thoughts and feelings I have this morning—then we need to be reminded of the words of our text: **We Walk By Faith, Not By Sight!** This should be one of our “mottos” as Christians. Why is this motto, and this mindset so important in this life? Because when we walk by faith, and not by sight the apostle Paul tells us that **1. We walk with confidence.** He says in **v. 6 we are always confident.** When we walk by faith, trusting in what God has promised us, not depending only on what we can see and observe, we can always walk with confidence.

Now, when I first preached the words of this text on my very first Sunday in the ministry, let me admit to you I was NOT confident at all (at least not confident in myself). In fact, I was scared to death! I remember talking with some of our members just a few years after that first sermon and they admitted they were scared to death and apprehensive as well! So, how did that all work out? Looking back over the past 21 years of my ministry, as well as our past 7 ½ years together, I can look back with thankfulness because, thanks to the LORD and His grace and faithfulness alone, He has worked things out for good, just as He has promised (see **Romans 8:28**).

Look back at your own life—whether you look back 21 years ago, 50 years ago, or even just over our time together here at St. Stephen—can you see how God has worked things out for good in your life, even when what you could observe with your own eyes and senses didn't seem like it was going to possibly work out well at all? I pray that by God's grace you can see His consistent, unconditional love and faithfulness at work in your life.

How about going forward? Aren't the words and theme of our text vitally important for us to hear as we sit here today and look to the future? What is it that is going to carry us and guide us through this time of uncertainty and change? The same thing that has guided and carried us through the past seven and a half years: God and His Word. Can go forward confidently and "**Walk by Faith, Not by Sight**"? We can! Let me share with you a paragraph from that very first sermon I preached:

Why can we walk so confidently? Look what God has promised us! Look what God has done for us! First of all Paul tells us, "**Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God**" (v. 5). What has God prepared us for? In the verses which come just before our sermon text, Paul tells us that this temporary dwelling that we're living in, the tent of our body, will "**be swallowed up by life**" (v. 4). That is what God has prepared us for! Life! Real life! Eternal life with Him in heaven! He secured this life for us at the greatest cost to Him: the suffering and crucifixion of His one and only Son, Jesus Christ. If God was willing to go to that unthinkable extreme to make sure that we would share eternal life with Him in heaven, He is most certainly going to do everything necessary to ensure that we are all fully taken care of in this life. Paul writes of this in Romans chapter 8, **He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? (Romans 8:32).**

Not only do we continue to walk confidently "**by faith**" as we enter a new chapter here at St. Stephen, we also continue to **2. walk in righteousness**. The love that God has shown for us in Christ inspires us to show our love for Him and others. As Paul wrote in v. 9 of our text, "**Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him.**" Here at St. Stephen, and in your homes, and workplaces scattered throughout the Bay Area and throughout California you have so many opportunities to do things that are well pleasing to Christ. Whether it's something as simple as helping out on a work day, cleaning up after a fellowship meal or something as time consuming as teaching in our Christian Day School, or serving on the church council or the Women's Auxiliary, these acts of faith are all "**well pleasing to Him**" (v. 9).

These acts of love and service are especially important now as you are going to be served by our vacancy pastor, Mark Gullerud, and Lord willing by a new full-time pastor in the near future. He will need your love, support, and service to the Lord and this congregation. You will also need to keep in mind that neither Mark, nor the next pastor, is going to be me. We have different personalities, different gifts, and different levels of experience. He will probably do many things differently from me. Some of this will be very good, some of it may not always be what you prefer. The fact is, there will be an adjustment period for both you, the congregation, and for Pastor Gullerud, and for the new pastor that God will in time, if He wills, bring to this congregation—just like there was an adjustment period for you and me seven and a half years ago. Again, how did that work out? Pretty well, I think! Again, thanks to the LORD and His grace and faithfulness alone!

You see, the important thing is even though many things may change over the next few weeks, months, and years here at St. Stephen the most "**Important Things**" will stay the same! I may be leaving this week, but Jesus is not! He has promised you and me, "**I am with you always, even to the end of the age**" (Matthew 28:20). I may not be preaching in the pulpit here anymore on Sundays, but you still have God's Word and Jesus' promise that, "**Heaven and earth will pass**

away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Luke 21:33). God has already graciously blessed us with Pastor Gullerud to be here ready to remind you of these promises next Sunday! He, and the next pastor, will preach and teach the Word of God faithfully to you in all its truth and with all its authority, just like I strove to do while I was your pastor. He will administer the Sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper among you faithfully and will pray for you and be concerned for your spiritual well-being. These are all things—the most **“Important Things”**—that will not change!

When we look at ourselves and our situation right now as a congregation we might feel that we have good reason to be afraid of the unknown future that lies ahead of us. We might wonder when God is going to bring us a new pastor, or what his ministry is going to be like, or we may think about how there are more empty pews in church than there are people, or we may be worried and anxious about the future of our school. This is what we might think and feel when we walk by sight, when we walk by what we can see and observe, and by what our rational minds tell us is most probable. **BUT WE DO NOT WALK BY SIGHT! WE WALK BY FAITH!**

- † By faith we know that God has blessed you and me, this congregation and this ministry at St. Stephen tremendously in the past.
- † By faith I know that God had a reason for bringing us all together and for allowing me to serve you, and for Jewels and I to live among you and serve with you for the past seven and a half years, and for that I am very thankful to Him.
- † By faith I know that since God has promised to bless those who preach, believe, and live by His word faithfully, we will be blessed!
- † By faith I know that we have the one thing that is needed for true life, the very words of God Himself, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.
- † By faith I know that your next pastor, with the help of the Holy Spirit, will bring this powerful, life-saving, life changing Word to you and will preach and teach that gospel and the whole counsel of God's Word to you faithfully and to the very best of His ability.

Will there be some hard times, some adjustments and difficulties ahead? Yes, there very well may be. Will there be sorrow and some tears because we will not be able to see each other and serve God together on a regular basis as we have over the past seven and a half years. Yes, there most certainly will. But as Paul said in our text **we are always confident.** After all, just because we walk by faith and not by sight, that doesn't mean that our faith is blind. It rests firmly, permanently, and confidently on the eternal words and promises of God Himself. The Apostle Peter tells us, **And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Peter 1:19 NIV).**

God sent His very own Son to die on the cross and save us from our sins. He raised Him from the dead to give us life. He has given us faith through His Holy Spirit's work in the Word and the Sacraments. This same Spirit still lives and works inside each one of us and has been given to us as God's **“guarantee” (v. 5)**, as Paul says in verse five of our text, the **“guarantee”** of our future inheritance in heaven. Therefore, we can always be confident and say with all believers in Christ: **“We Walk by Faith, Not By Sight!”** Amen.