



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Precious Memories
First Thessalonians 1:1-3

One hundred and ninety years ago a New England farmer left home and over the next 15 years he became a rough, rugged, cussing, gun slinging frontiersman. He made his way to Arkansas where he joined the U.S. Army and served for two years, stationed at Fort Smith. With no television to watch or iPhone to pass the downtime for entertainment, he found himself in a tent revival. The preacher was a Cumberland Presbyterian, and he preached through the power of the Holy Spirit, and this frontiersman, Sumner Bacon was so touched that he received Christ. He felt called to the ministry, but at that point in his life he could hardly read and write and thus was not eligible for ordination. It was 1828 and Sumner became driven, as so many were, to move to Texas. Later in 1828, Sumner crossed the Sabine River with Bibles and religious tracts. When Sumner Bacon crossed the river he entered Catholic Mexico, and at the time the Catholic church did not trust the common people with the Scriptures, but only allowed the Bible to be in the hands of ordained priests who would then interpret the word for the people. The soon-to-be Reverend Bacon was a Presbyterian who understood, like the rest of us, that the Bible should be read by all God's people. Thus he entered Texas with copies of the Bible hidden in a bear skin to distribute to the people living in East Texas.

Eventually Sumner was ordained into the ministry by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and in 1836, shortly after Texas won its independence, and people of Texas were free to worship as they pleased, Rev. Bacon began to organize Cumberland Presbyterian Churches in East Texas. As part of his ministry he started a Presbyterian Sunday school class in the Old Stone Fort which at the time was near downtown Nacogdoches. It appears that Sumner, who was more of an itinerant preacher, was not the permanent teacher of the class, but he trained those who would teach. In 1838, Richard Overton Watkins, the first Protestant to be ordained in Texas, took over the Sunday school.

The Sunday school was disbanded in 1849, but many Presbyterians remained, and in 1886 First Presbyterian Church was established by the PCUS, or the Presbyterian Church in the South. In 1893 Main Street Presbyterian Church was organized with 12 charter members, and Rev. B.A. Hodges was the organizing

pastor. When the First Presbyterian Church closed, many of its members joined the Main Street Church.

At the turn of the century the congregation built a sanctuary on the corner of Main Street and Mound Street. In 1930 the congregation built the facility we are using today, and of course it would have been a bit confusing to keep the name Main Street, so the name of the church was changed to Westminster.

This church was established on May 5, 1893 as Main Street, and we are here to give glory to God and on this morning to offer thanksgiving for 125 years of service to Jesus Christ, 125 years of cherished memories that not only define who we are, but memories that lead us into the future as we continue to serve Christ.

At an occasion such as this, the memories are so thick you can cut them with the proverbial knife.

Over the past 15 years I have officiated at too many funerals. My first funeral at Westminster was for Lester Gordon. I never knew Lester. He lived in Austin when he entered the Church Triumphant. He was an elder in this church. I understand he sat in the back of the sanctuary, not that he was a back row Presbyterian, but he was a tall gentleman and did not want to sit where he would block the view of others. Jim Sparks, who was pastor here for 22 years, called Lester “Mr. Senior Citizen.” I understand that Lester, working with many of you who are still here, established the Senior Citizen Center, Meals on Wheels, the Government Commodity Program and the Telephone Reassurance Program. What you may not know is that Lester was reared in the Primitive Baptist Church. And his father was staunch, or as Lester would say, “hard-shell.” They believed that one should be baptized by immersion in a body of water, usually in a creek or river. A baptistry simply would not do, and of course Jesus was baptized in the river. What makes this interesting is that in the light of his upbringing, Lester and his wife Leah were the ones who purchased our baptismal font – a heresy for a Primitive Baptist. Bill Gordon, Lester’s son wrote, “Grandpa saw that my father was properly baptized in his church, so you can imagine his horror at Dad’s backsliding.” The good news is though father and son disagreed, they were never estranged over the issue. “Grandpa really loved his family, no matter what newfangled ideas his son had.”

Another Westminster Saint that I never knew was Mildred Bolton. She grew up in the Presbyterian Church in San Augustine. She had a 13 year old daughter who died. Sometime later her husband died. She had reason for despair, but she was a woman of great faith and as one of our members described her, “She was a

true disciple of Christ.” She was one of those dear saints who loved people and had a gift for evangelism. Diana Walker remembers back in 1973, she and Larry visited Westminster. Mildred visited the new family, taking Kevin who was 6 months old at the time into her arms, Mildred sat in a rocker in the Walkers’ bedroom, pointed her finger at Diana and said, “WE NEED YOU AND LARRY IN THIS CHURCH.” How could the Walkers say “no?”

In those days the church had an organist, but no choir. And Larry, who loved singing in a choir, began recruiting choir members. Eventually the church hired young Becky Stanly, a music major at SFA, to be the choir director. And as you know, here in 2018, Westminster has the best choir in New Covenant Presbytery. We have had a wonderful string of choir directors including Debbie Dalton, Elise Gavin, and Myra McNellie. Over the years our organists have dedicated themselves to offering the best music, and we have been blessed with some great organists, including Jimmy Pitts.

Imagine that, our choir program found its beginning with Mildred Bolton pointing her finger at Diana Walker in 1973 saying, “We need you.”

When I entered SFA, I visited this church back in 1973 and I bet there were only 30 people in worship. But this church took the call to make Christ known seriously, and as you moved into the late seventies without an installed pastor, the members of this church worked together and at times the elders preached and the church tripled in size, and continued its growth when Jim Sparks became pastor back in 1979, and the church flourished under his 22 year ministry.

One of our members recalls the time when they joined back in 1978 and Westminster was the only Protestant church in town that held a Christmas Eve service. Before the service Dott and Jim Martin would invite the church to their home for a Christmas Eve dinner. I have heard so many wonderful stories about the Martins over the years, but they too were members I never knew.

Of course, there is the story of the Christmas Eve service some 20 years ago when it was so cold the pipes froze and there was no heat in the building. I understand that David Ball’s mother attended and was hoping for real wine to be served to make her feel warmer.

Some of you remember the portable buildings that provided space for the church Sunday school, and how Rev. Sparks had the dream of solving the problem of portable buildings with the construction of our education building.

In 1930 this building was constructed along with the manse. I believe in the 1960's Westminster Hall was built. During a time of membership growth in the late 70's we had to install portable buildings to meet our educational needs. When the portable buildings were removed we built our education facility. Over the years there have been parking lots to build, buildings to renovate, and Lord knows the amount of work members of this church did in visiting with architects, contractors, and raising money.

When it comes to our buildings, over the years we have been blessed by the talents of the Wrights, the Atkins, the Gregorys, the Klines, the McKinneys, the Thompsons, the Patillos, the Sandersons, the Stanlys, and so many others. And with each name there comes another memory of hard working Christian brothers and sisters.

This church has served this community during a great depression, two world wars, and oh too many other national crises. One story that particularly touched me is that on Christmas Eve in 1944 Tom Wright, Joe Wright and Ray Rinker were off fighting in World War Two. Tom, I know, was one of the many men who were penned down at Anzio Beach. This church, understanding the seriousness of supporting them at least in spirit, received Tom and his brothers into membership in absentia. It is the only case I know of where a Session did this.

I have to mention one of my favorite memories; after all I am the preacher. Remember Jerry Lackey. He stood head and shoulders above the men on the back row of the choir. He was an elder in our church, but we really could not get the Methodist out of him, but he was happy as long as I mentioned free-will at least once a year in a sermon. He was always laughing, full of wisdom, and a great church worker.

Following Hurricane Katrina, Jerry joined other members of this church on a trip to Gulfport, Mississippi, where we helped a family put drywall back up in their house. At night we lived in little blue corrugated pods, fought mosquitos, and ate common meals together in the mess hall. One thing about Jerry was he was a Texas Longhorn to the core. On that trip, I had a CD with the fight songs of several universities, and here came Jerry walking from the mess hall. He did not see me as I turned on my radio, found the tract with "The Eyes of Texas" and played it as loud as I could. Jerry heard the music, looking absolutely stunned to hear "The Eyes of Texas" on a mission trip to Mississippi. He was a bit confused as to where the music was coming from and said, "Oh my goodness!" as he immediately dropped what he was holding, stood at attention with arm extended in

a “hook ‘em horns.” -- that my friends, is one of my precious memories – working with Jerry and others from this church hanging sheet rock in Gulfport and Jerry standing at attention to “The Eyes of Texas.”

I wish I had time to tell the stories of all the saints who were members and friends of this church, and I apologize to the hundreds of folks who I am not going to mention. But hopefully, if we get to lunch on time, because I am limiting my stories, you will forgive me. But the memories we have about the life and ministry of this church are precious.

Walt Whitman wrote, “Thanks in old age, thanks ere I go, for health, the midday sun, the impalpable air, for life, mere life, for precious ever-lingering memories.”

I began to understand the importance of memories after talking to an expert on the subject. Mrs. Lena Suggs was the oldest member of First Central Presbyterian Church in Abilene. When I left Abilene she was 100 years old. She lived by herself until she was 99. At that age her body was failing, but she had a keen mind and loved her church and her friends.

Her ministry in the church during most of her 90’s was to visit what she called the “old folks” in the church. And though she would not admit it, she was the oldest. I remember at her 100th birthday party, I said to her, “Mrs. Suggs, you are getting up there in age, but I hope I will make it to your 110th birthday party.” And she said, “Steve, I don’t see why not, for you look healthy enough to me.”

One day she spoke to me of her memories. She told me about her father, and about the family farm and all the things she and her sisters used to do. She spoke of the war years, of her service as a nurse. She spoke of the special memories of deep relationships. She spoke with tears in her eyes. It was her memories, at the age of 100 that were the most important thing she had left. And she told me that at my young age, I should be about making good memories.

And I want to ask you the question that Mrs. Lena asked me, “Since as far as memory goes the present is a blank canvas, what will we paint on that canvas as the years go by? And how will we be remembered? We cannot do anything about the past.” Before we know it, it will be 2019. The craft stores have had their Christmas items on sale for a month. But as the years go by all too fast, it is my prayer we will do everything we can to paint good memories on the canvas of our minds.

I really doubt if the good memories will come with years of computer games. When you are 95 years old who cares if you made it to the tenth level of the super duper Mario Brothers, or whatever game people are playing these days? Maybe your business will produce good memories, especially if your business allows you to serve others. But my guess is that in your relationships, in your gift of service to others, in your witness for Jesus Christ to the world, in working with youth and children, in watching your children grow, in providing meals for our youth, in mentoring a child, in helping a neighbor in need, or volunteering to help at a food pantry, or going on a mission trip, it is there you will find the best memories for the future. Precious memories are not about money, expensive vacations, luxurious homes, but precious memories come when we spend our time building relationships with other people and with Jesus Christ.

When the Apostle Paul visited Thessalonica, God blessed his ministry and many came to know Jesus Christ as their Lord. But as was often the case, Paul had to deal with hostility from the local synagogue. The anger became so violent that a mob came to arrest Paul, and Paul had to be smuggled out of town. In the city of Corinth Paul worried about his new friends in Thessalonica, and rejoiced with news from his friend Timothy that all was well and the church was thriving.

When Paul wrote the church in Thessalonica he dealt with several issues, but he began his letter with a note of thanksgiving as he remembered the new church. Hear his words of thanksgiving as I read the opening verses of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians:

Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace and peace to you. We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

This, my friends, is how to produce precious memories that will be with you all your life. Let your faith inspire you to do good works, selfless works, works that benefit others. Precious memories are produced when our service to others is prompted by our love for God and our neighbor. And precious memories come from the ability to keep on doing what is right, to endure because we have hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith, hope and love--have you heard those words before.

We are here this morning to enjoy a celebration of 125 years as a church. It is a reunion of friends and family, and to remember all those who were so special

to you who now dwell in the Church Triumphant. When we sit down for lunch, I am sure our conversations will be about family and old friends. We will talk about former members, people who taught us in Sunday school. We may talk about grandparents, parents, spouses, and sadly we will remember so many who are no longer with us.

Your conversations will be filled with funny stories, like the time Aunt Eva who was at least 95 years old, gave two of her nephews a sock for Christmas. I don't know what she was thinking, but she bought a pair of socks and gave one to Dell and one to Billy. You may mention Uncle John and say, "You know, I simply would not have survived without him." You may talk about William who had a deep faith in God and became a preacher, but he always livened up a gathering of any group. There is Aunt Sue who took you to town one day and without your mom knowing about it she bought you a pint of ice cream. She was always making people laugh as she spoiled her nieces and nephews. Then there was your crazy Aunt Emma Rae who, on a family outing gathered around the campfire, heard a rustling in the trees and thought it was a gorilla. It was like it was common place for gorillas to attack families around campfires in Texas creek bottoms. In this room there are precious memories, but the question is, what are we, those who are still living and breathing, what are we doing to create precious memories for our children, our grandchildren, maybe our great-grandchildren? What are we doing to give meaning to their lives? What guidance are we providing for them, so that when this church celebrates its 150th anniversary, they will gather around tables for dinner remember with great warmth the memories they have of us?

Oh how I pray that because of our faith, our hope and our love, oh how I pray that when the day comes and those who come after us will think of us when, or if ever they sing:

Precious memories how they linger,
How they ever flood my soul.
In the stillness of the midnight.
Precious sacred scenes unfold.

May our lives be filled with precious sacred scenes of family, of friends, of community and especially of Jesus Christ. Amen.