

Turning Our Faces: The Lord is Near

Leah Grundset Davis & Stephen G. Hyde
Ravensworth Baptist Church
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Philippians 4

Leah: Intro of Turning Our Faces, Talk about letter to Philippians

Philippians 4 is possibly the chapter of Scripture, which I know most by heart. I'm sure this is true for many of you too. These verses are lyrical and the cadence is unmistakable. These are Paul's most loving words to his joy and his crown, the Philippian church.

Remember back when we studied Acts this spring and we heard the passage from Acts 16 about Lydia and the new church at Philippi? Paul had been there since the beginning and they had been there since the beginning alongside Paul. What a relationship they had! And this relationship was evident in his entire letter to the Philippians.

As we continue to talk about turning our faces and recognizing that this fall season at RBC is full of transitions, we do so with great hope.

At our Tuesday Morning Bible Study this week at Greenspring, we were talking about how much Paul loved the Philippian Church and how much they loved him. It didn't take us any time to turn our faces and connect that love between pastor and congregation to the love of this place for Steve and Steve for this place. We'll hear from Steve in a minute about what it means to be a pastor in a place like this.

First, I thought I'd share a bit about who I know Steve to be and what it's like to pastor alongside him, as he has shared with me, his jewel and crown, Ravensworth Baptist Church.

In the first five minutes of meeting Steve Hyde, I learned three things about him.

1. The first thing I learned about Steve was that he was deeply passionate about God's justice at work in the world. We met that first time on the steps of the Supreme Court as we attended a rally for Marriage Equality back in 2013. It was a group organized by our partners at the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, or AWAB, and we were there to be a living witness of God's love in the world for all of God's beloveds. I was a pastor at Calvary in DC so I hopped on the metro and made my way down. It's funny when I see pictures from that day, because I see faces that I didn't know yet from Ravensworth, but now people who are so dear to me.

Steve told me that morning about the work of Ravensworth becoming welcoming and affirming and the power that had swept through as the congregation worked to welcome and learn and share God's love in the world. He spoke with such a gentle, yet powerful way that I wondered, who is this guy? He held up a sign and wore a red stole. I think at some point, the clergy selected him to go speak to the press because they were all astonished that a southern, male clergy who was also Baptist would be out there as a witness to marriage equality.

We hit it off really well that day and talked about our common work around our churches interest in justice for the Palestinian people and decided we should get coffee so he could share about his sabbatical. I don't remember much from that coffee, other than we scheduled it for Ash Wednesday and when we got to Peet's we wondered, "What in the world were we thinking? It's Ash Wednesday." We had a good laugh and went on to talk about what it meant for the Alliance of Baptists to be more involved in Palestinian justice.

2. The second thing I learned that day and what has become crystal clear over the years is Steve's deep love for Ravensworth. I know a lot of pastors. Like, way too many. And I'm not sure I've ever met anyone who loves a congregation and is loved by a congregation more than this guy over there. That day on the steps of the Supreme Court, I could see how much his physical presence meant to the members from RBC who were there alongside him. And of course, his prophetic presence and words touched us all in a deep place.

Steve has been my pastor for six years so I feel the grief of what it means for him to be retiring. Of course, he's also been a most excellent colleague for the last two years as well. We've often said that we expected this pastoral partnership to go well, but we didn't know it would go *this* well. The creativity, fun, intensity, and shared burden of pastoring with someone you trust inherently is nothing short of a gift. Getting to do nerdy things like talk about what resurrection might mean in the Gospel of Mark or how we do the weekly dance of preaching about God's love and the current political mess is nearly a weekly conversation. All of this and more has made me a better pastor, preacher, and person.

3. The third thing I learned and most likely, where I will get choked up, is something that's really come in handy over the years---Steve is a sucker for babies and little kids. When we met that day at the protest-rally at the Supreme Court, I was five months pregnant with Lydia. As soon as I told him that it was like I had said the magic words: baby. And every ounce of professional grandpa emerged. When was I due? I was expecting a girl--had we picked a name? How was I feeling? Did grandparents live close by...?

Of course, we couldn't have possibly known that day that about a year later John, Lydia, and I would join Ravensworth Baptist Church and Steve would be the pastor who dedicated Lydia at her baby dedication.

Sadie Pearl came along in 2015 and I'm pretty sure Steve still has all the photos on his phone of when she came to visit the church office for the first time. Steve was also the pastor who dedicated Sadie Pearl. Steve is the only pastor my kids have known and they are so fortunate—same for many of you out there.

In watching "Pastor Steve and Ms. Jean," as they are known around my house love my kids, and make sure my kids know just how loved they are, it has taught me so much about what it means to be present, to slow down, and to center our kids in our worshipping life together as a church. I also know that most of us could tell this story

about Steve and Jean and the way they've jumped right in with our kids, or with us, with complete and total love, and always the ability to see the best in us.

This kind of love, supporting our kids joy means that even when you go to the same Nationals/Braves game and Lydia with her biggest smile ever says, "Pastor Steve, do you think maybe you could cheer for the Braves just for me?" that you see the deep internal struggle within him and the selfless reply, "Oh Lydia, maybe I can do a baby cheer." She knew she could get him to do it. The Braves won that day too. Let the record show that Jean stayed strong and loyal to the Nats.

That's what I'm saying—a sucker for the kids.

There is so much more that I could say from this place, and I want to be very clear that working alongside Steve has been one of the most meaningful experiences in my years of ministry because of the way he pastors and points us all toward the love of God. My gratitude for his wisdom and his collegial respect points toward his commitment to God's justice and how much he loves this place.

We've heard from Paul and his love for the Philippians and my take on what a good pastor Steve is and how wonderful this congregation is, but now we have a chance to hear from Steve himself about what it means to love and be loved by a place like RBC as we look toward this fall and what is to come.

Steve: Loving and Being Loved

Since I'm at a loss for words at the moment, I'll remind you of my all-time favorite Peanuts cartoon.

Lucy, Linus, and Charlie Brown are lying on a hilltop looking at the sky on a summer afternoon.

Lucy: If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations. What do you think you see, Linus?

Linus: Well, those clouds up there look to me like the map of British Honduras in the Caribbean. That cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor. And that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen. I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side.

Lucy: Uh-huh. That's very good. What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?

Charlie Brown (with that blank, strangely endearing Charlie Brown look on his face): Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsie, but I changed my mind.

I don't have to tell you where I see myself in this picture. I mean, what can I say after all that?

I will take Leah up on her invitation to talk about what it's like to love and be loved by a congregation like ours. I will keep it brief. After all, we have until the end of October, and a few minutes of business--and a picnic--are waiting for us.

So--what is it like?

It's transforming.

In my first sermon as pastor, shortly after 9/11, I said:

That's why I'm here--to touch your souls, to put a welcome mat in front of mine, and to walk around with you inside the soul of Jesus.

That's exactly what we have done together. Being loved by a congregation like ours is wonderful, but the point of it all is not how loved I am.

I'm dealing with a lot of papers these days, and I've come across things like the notes I made during the September 7-9, 2001 call weekend. I also found a journal from about a year before I first visited RBC. And I had written in capital letters across one page, that I wanted to be in a place that I loved so much, it made time fly.

I didn't know then that being in a place I loved, and loving a congregation like ours, would mean time flying by this fast. Loving this place and this people has been wonderful, but the point of it all is not even how loved you are.

The point of loving and being loved in our life together is what happens when our hearts soften because of one another, and God's love is poured out in our midst. All the love of God needs in order to do powerful and transforming work is a Beloved Community of open and willing hearts, eager to share God's love and to collaborate with God in seeking justice for others.

I am a little like Linus. When I hear the warmth and intimacy in this letter, I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side. There's nothing else in the New Testament like it. Going back to his first encounter with Lydia, Paul's heart was captured by this congregation.

I understand that, much better than I did 18 years ago.

And I see more clearly than I could then, that love never ends. The love of God, seen more clearly by us when we turn our faces toward Christ Jesus, is flowing like a river through this place, and this congregation.

Leah: Setting up Paul's words

I imagine that Paul had all the feels when he wrote this letter to his beloved Church at Philippi--he didn't know if he'd see them again, if they'd work through their crisis, or what kinds of questions would arise for them as they figured out what this whole following after Jesus-thing meant.

What he did know was that they were loved by God, and that the Lord was near to them in their life together, and that the power of God's love has the possibility to transform everyone.

No matter what they encountered he wanted them to know a few things and so he wrote them a benediction--

Leah and Steve:

Leah: Finally beloved, whatever is true,

Steve: whatever is honorable,

Leah: whatever is just,

Steve: whatever is pure,

Leah: whatever is pleasing,

Steve: whatever is commendable,

Leah: if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Leah and Steve: Keep on doing what you have learned, and the God of peace will be with you.

Steve: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Leah: The Lord is near.

Steve and Leah: Thanks be to God. Amen.