



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road  
roswell, georgia 30076

23-Sep-2007 Farewell Sermon

**SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 6:10-15 Luke 14:15-24**

**SERMON: The Feast That Matters (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)**

What should you say in your final sermon? Well, I have come up with four items: 1) Pay attention to that day's Scripture readings, 2) Reflect on the story of the congregation and the ministry shared by pastor and congregation, 3) Notice what has changed and what hasn't and 4) Offer a word for the future, say farewell and don't go on too long!

*1. Pay attention to today's Scripture readings.*

A man once gave a great banquet and invited many people... this is how Jesus begins another parable offered for the benefit of his host and the other lawyers and Pharisees who were in the room "at table" with him. Since they were eating together, this was a "teachable moment", especially for a story about a Great Feast.

Everything seemed in order for the Feast, until the guests, who had been previously informed that they had a place at the table, began to offer their flimsy excuses. Undeterred, the host urges his servants to go out quickly to the streets and lanes and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame..... The poor, maimed, blind, lame - *this is the core of this parable*. Jesus wants the Pharisees to know that full-blown sinners *will be God's guests at God's banquet*.

The Host's instructions to his servants that they should "compel" anyone, especially the "poor, maimed, blind and lame" to come to God's banquet feast may seem overly strong. I suggest we hear the word "compel" to mean to "beg them", to plead with them be part of God's banquet. It means to assure them fully that they really belong, that they have a seat at the banquet.

The flimsy excuses offered by the original guests are just that, *flimsy excuses!* Sadly, God knows all about the flimsy excuses we offer in response to God's gracious invitation. God knows we find it possible to reject the One whom we know to be our Savior! God has endured all the brush-offs we have given. It is not that God puts us outside; *we do this to ourselves!*

Tables spread with mouth-watering morsels, guests gathered in the perfect ambiance, lots of noise, laughter and fun. We know a party when we see one. But we also know that not all parties are the same. Some parties focus more on display than on real interactions between people, other parties are known more for who is not invited than who is. Some parties are held to celebrate, others to commiserate. As diverse as parties can be, they all have one thing in common: their purpose and tone are set by the host.

The host of the Great Feast is God, and God sets the tone by inviting the poor and the maimed and the blind and the lame and you and me and all of us. Life in the kingdom is a party where God is the host and where there is space for all. There is a royal welcome for all to share the life of the kingdom of God, which is for a genuine and joyous celebration, for all, because all are invited, welcomed, expected, included. I am invited to this celebration. You are invited to this celebration. Let's not give God the brush-off! Let's not tell God we are too busy to attend! Let's make sure our plans for our lives include God and indeed stem from God.

2. *Reflect on the story of the congregation and the ministry shared by pastor and congregation.*

The passage in Deuteronomy was a reminder to the Hebrew people of all the provision that God had made for them as they moved into a new future. God had prepared for them a fine and beautiful land in which they would settle. There they would dwell in fine, large cities that they did not build; they would live in houses filled with all sorts of goods that they did not fill, that they would benefit from hewn cisterns that they did not hew, and vineyards and olive groves that they did not plant.

This is the case for Northminster Presbyterian Church as well, as it moves into a new future. In that future, as you continue to journey with and to God you will continue to benefit from the contributions and faithfulness of many people, some present here today, some scattered around God's world, some gathered in the Church Triumphant.

I have some markers that remind us of what we have today and what will continue to bless you in the days to come.

Sermon in a sack: a reminder of the faith and commitment of Dwight Bayley and his family to this congregation as our organizing pastor and first installed pastor.

Ben's Plaque: a reminder of how it was that God called together the Northminster family and the Simpson family for a season of ministry and service.

I have the manuscript for my first sermon as installed pastor: *Citius, Altius, Fortius – Swifter, Higher, Stronger*. Preached on the day the Atlanta Olympic Games ended, this sermon could have been re-preached today as it called this congregation forward and onward in its intention to serve God, *to extend God's welcome to all*.

That day, August 4, 1996, I urged this congregation to reject two little words that hold within them the scent of defeat. The words I urged you to reject then were, "*if only*"; my friends, on this day, I urge you to reject them as you embrace a new season in the life of this church. "If only" will not get you to where God is!

That day I invited all those who listened to see themselves as members of the Northminster relay team; that we all have a place and a part and a role in extending God's welcome. *And this also is still true for the next lap of this church's race.*

I have the Northminster News that carried the news that the congregation was being called to vote to approve the funding for this phase of our building and the Shovel that was used by the Confirmation Class of 1998 for the ground breaking, and photographs of the various phases of the church facility being built.

These buildings and all the other resources we have and enjoy: staff, space, stuff – insights, imagination, inspiration – people, prayer, passion – mission, ministry, management, all these resources are to be dedicated to extending God's welcome. They are never to be used to get us puffed up with pride, nor for the glory of this church or its pastor or any of its members. The gifts with which we have been blessed are to be deployed for God's work in our community and world.

As you move forward, your generosity to the aims of the Capital Campaign that concludes at the end of this year means that we have a new organ, we have continued our contributions to the Presbytery's capital campaign, there is a Mission Fund invested with the Presbyterian Foundation and there are funds to stretch and expand the Fellowship Hall to create additional space, enhancing the Fellowship Hall and the Kitchen so that NPC can be a place of ministry with and for people of all ages. This is something about which you can and should be excited.

Talking about the Capital Campaign, I have here this banner “Care and Connection”. You will see in this logo the Cross, a Heart, you will see People, and specifically you will see People gathered in unity, in a circle. This is who this church is when we are at our best - a congregation gathered by and in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, with a heart to extend God’s welcome to others, with a focus on people and a realization that it takes all of us actively and faithfully and fully serving God together.

*3. Notice what has changed and what hasn’t.*

I think it is already sorta kinda obvious that yes, some things have changed over the past 11 years. But in so many ways we do and will always face the same challenges if we are to be extending God’s welcome.

In a few weeks you will join together in this year’s Stewardship Campaign with the focus of: The G.I.F.T. of Giving. G.I.F.T. - Growing, Inspiring, Faith Together this is what Giving means. The G.I.F.T. of Giving is not about Jim Simpson. *This church is not all about any one person now nor should it ever be all about any one person.* It is about growing inspiring faith together: sharing God’s life in God’s world, extending God’s welcome.

*4. Offer a word for the future, say farewell and don’t go on too long!*

It is hard to believe that 11 years have passed. I am grateful to God for all of you and for all who have shared in the life of the congregation over that period of time.

I thank you for working with me, for putting up with my shortcomings, for overlooking my failures.

As I leave I ask forgiveness; forgiveness for those times when I hurt any of you, for those occasions when I did not measure up to what you believed I should be or was best capable of, for those times when I let you down or short-changed you.

As you face the future, I urge you to trust in the God we know and who encounters us in Jesus Christ, the God who has made sure that there is space for all in the party that is the Kingdom of God.

I urge you to look after each other, to encourage one another, to support your staff and all called to be leaders within the congregation, to pray for God’s guidance for the future, and in time to respect and embrace your next pastor.

I urge you to love God, to love one another, to love God’s world, to love sinners, to love truth and mercy. I urge you to make and share God’s peace, *which is beyond human understanding and which will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.* **Amen.**

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**Deuteronomy 6:10-15**

**10**When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, **11**houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, **12**take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **13**The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. **14**Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, **15**because the Lord your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the Lord your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth.

**Luke 14:15-24**

15One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" 16Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. 17At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' 18But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' 19Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' 20Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' 21So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' 22And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.'" 23Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. 24For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

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