

The last time I gave a sermon was June 22, 2008 (11 years ago), right before I became Moderator for the first time. Originally I planned to give an update of my last sermon entitled "Why I am a Congregationalist." With our church going through some tough changes recently, I decided to change my sermon topic to "Hope for Our Future."

I will, however, start by giving you a shortened version of why I am a Congregationalist. My father's family goes back many generations to Priscilla Alden on the Mayflower. My great, great, great grandparents were Congregational missionaries in the 1830s, who sailed from New England to the Sandwich Islands, later named the Hawaiian Islands. One of my 3rd great grandfathers worked as minister on the island of Molokai, and the other as a teacher and shop keeper on Oahu. They encountered many hardships on their journey to this new land, including 3 - 4 months on rough seas, no running water or electricity, building homes and a church on windswept dry soil, and building trust with native Hawaiians. I am proud that one of my ancestors transcribed the oral Hawaiian language into a Hawaiian dictionary.

I grew up in Northern California, and from my earliest memory, we attended a UCC church (Foothills Congregational Church), where Diane Forster Burke also attended in her youth. Like many young adults, after high school, I drifted away from church until my early 20s. Scott and I decided it was time to give our kids a religious education. Brett was 4 and Kevin was 1 when we started going to a Congregational church in Huntington, WV. We found a welcoming small congregation that we immediately felt a part of. Coincidentally Scott Brown's parents were members of this small church where Scott grew up. When we moved for Scott's fellowship to Salt Lake City, Scott Brown's parents suggested we visit First Congregational church, where Scott attended. We also felt right at home here. I distinctly remember Frank Johnston and Blaine Simons ushering us down the hallway to coffee hour, chatting the whole way, and feeling a sense of belonging to this church community. That was 25 years ago, and we have been at First Congregational Church ever since.

So why have I stayed at this church? Why am I still a Congregationalist? I feel at home in this Congregational church because of the people and the church polity. I have enjoyed getting to know every one of you here over many cups of coffee, countless meals, and various church activities. I like the Congregational thought that I have the freedom to find my own way to God's grace; no one forces any theology on me. Everyone here is on their own faith journey, and we accept wherever they are on their journey.

Most of our ancestors, no matter what religion they practiced, faced many challenges in everyday life and sometimes in practicing their religion. Even with our ancestors' challenges, these men and women had hope for a better future. We can also have hope for a better future and a vision for our church, but we cannot be stagnant, we cannot be afraid of change, and we cannot keep doing the same things that are not working for us. We are at a crossroads in our journey as a Christian congregation. Do we move boldly forward, with the hope and faith that our ancestors once had, or do we do nothing to change our course? If we choose to move forward, the question we must answer is, "What does our bold future

look like?" That is for all of us to decide because we are a Congregational church. I pledge, as moderator, to help move us forward, to help us look at all the possibilities that our church has to grow, and help us find ways to make a lasting impact on our community. In order to do this, we must recognize that we are all volunteers, working for the same common good. We have to support one another, even if we make mistakes. It is inevitable that we will have differences moving forward, but God wants us to be mature and take acceptance of our thoughts, words, actions, and motives in resolving our differences. I believe that if we all work together toward a common goal that we are passionate about, we will start seeing positive outcomes in our church.

Randy Paush in his Last Lecture states, "The brick walls are not there to keep us out, they are there to keep us working harder toward our dreams." We have some figurative "brick walls," as well as literal brick walls, that we are up against in our church. Our goal is to figure out how to work around these walls, while still achieving our goals and dreams. Randy Paush also talks about the importance of people, not things, and showing gratitude whenever possible. He says, "If you lead your life the right way, karma will take care of itself. The dreams you have will come to you." If we all lead this church with positive energy, positive prayers, some hard work, and a collective vision, we can make our dreams a reality in our church.

I continue to have hope for our future. John Piper, a minister who's website desiringGod.org, expresses hope in this way: He states, "Hope bears the fruit of joy. Hope bears the fruit of love. Hope bears the fruit of boldness. And hope bears the fruit of endurance." What I hope for our church future is joy, love, boldness, and endurance.

Amen