

I love the Church. I love the Church, because Jesus **Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.** (Ephesians 5:25-27) I also love the Church as Christ loved the Church in her present condition: not so radiant, stained, wrinkled, and blemished. Her best days are yet to come.

I love this church, Brandywine Valley Baptist Church, because love is always local, or it isn't real. I know many of the skeletons in our closet. I know some of the dark temptations we face in in this congregation. I also know the love and energy and affection for each other that laces this congregation like a cell phone network. I know our hypocrisies and our holiness, and I love this church.

Many of you love the Church as I do, and many of you love BVBC as I do. This is our spiritual home. We rejoice that BVBC organizes its life around Jesus Christ. We rejoice that devotion to **the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer** makes this congregation a stable community of faith. We rejoice that the belief system we stand for seeks to tell the truth about Christ and the world and ourselves, and that it helps us to resist the world's incessant propaganda. We rejoice in the hard lesson that hypocrisy in the first Christian congregation teaches us that our own efforts to be holy can easily become holier-than-thou. This devotion and these beliefs and this humility about our own virtue enable you and your children can flourish in your faith and your day-to-day living. BVBC is a worthy spiritual home for you and those you love.

BVBC As a Spiritual Home

Here's why it matters so much for you to have a spiritual home. In the Bible your heart means what you love – everything you love – and what kind of person you are becoming because of what you love. To **guard your heart** means to protect yourself from uniting with anything that makes you into the wrong kind of person. We can go deeper. To **guard your heart** means to protect yourself from uniting with anything that alienates you from God.

Something has so corrupted our power to love that we can and do at times love what alienates us from God and is bad for us. How do we guard our hearts against disordered love and its terrible consequences? Today and last Sunday, we are exploring one answer to that question. You guard your heart, when you make the Church your spiritual home. Guarding your heart is a team effort. The forces hostile to the Christian faith and to a Christian view of life have grown strong and bold. You don't stand a chance against them by yourself.

Last Sunday, we looked at two healthy churches where people once found their spiritual home, and we saw that BVBC matches up well with them. But we left something out. Today, I want us to complete the picture with a second look at the Church in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Turn to 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8.

Sharing Life with Each Other

Devotion to **the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer**, the beliefs of the church, and humility about our own virtue are brilliant, but they need something tender and personal to keep them sweet. You see it in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8: **As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but**

we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. That's tender, and verse 8 is very personal. **We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.**

It is easy to experience the Church as nothing more than budgets, buildings, body counts, and badgering people about one thing or the other. No wonder people stay away, and if they come, no wonder they can't wait to leave. We pastors bear a lot of responsibility for that perception of the Church. But I have to tell you, it's hard for me to communicate a better vision of the Church in sermons, if you have no experience of the tenderness and self-giving of people in this congregation.

BVBC is a worthy spiritual home for you. Tenderness and self-giving are a way of life among hundreds of people here. My responsibility this morning is to give you a taste of this way of life. I'd like to do it first with a story from my ministry and then with a sampling of how powerful the tenderness and self-giving of this congregation can be.

I can say with some integrity that I have sought to be **gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.** Many years ago, I married a couple, who came to BVBC. Their wedding took place offsite. I did not know them well, and they did not often worship here. They finally stopped altogether. I lost track of them. .

Then, somehow I heard that they were expecting their first child. I didn't think any more about it until I got a phone call around 2:30 AM one spring morning. She was at Christiana Hospital. She had gone into premature labor and delivered a 20-week old baby. The doctor had told them there was nothing to do to save the child's life. Would I come to the hospital?

I would, and I did. The hospital room was filled with that young mom's husband, her parents, friends or relatives – I never did sort out who they were – and a newborn baby girl, lying in the hospital bassinet. They measured her weight in ounces.. I asked the couple to tell me what the doctor had said about their baby. They told me with help from everyone else there. There was no hope for the child to live. I expected her to die while I was there.

While we waited for the inevitable, I saw again what I have seen so many times among people in grief. They talked about anything and everything. They laughed. They joked. You would think they didn't have a care in the world. In the next breath they wept and consoled each other. Then, they laughed again and wept again, and this emotional roller coaster continued as long as I was there. In the middle of all this the tenderest thing happened. The child was dressed in the tiniest of diapers and a little gown. Her skin was very red, and on her head she wore a soft, cloth cap. We began to pass this child around for everyone in the room to hold. Some of us held her more than once. I held her and prayed for her and for her young parents and for others in the room. I left the hospital around 5:00 AM, and a short time later the child died. I never heard from the family again.

I can't count the times over the years I have watched hundreds of you in this congregation show the same tenderness to people in distress. If you have missed these acts of kindness, then you don't know Brandywine Valley Baptist Church. Worse, you and those you love have been deprived of indispensable help on this long journey we all make.

The Congregation Speaks

So, let's have a sampling of this congregational tenderness and self-giving. We are all facing a big milestone in this congregation. The time is near for me to step down as Senior Pastor. This is one of the most significant transitions a larger church goes through. I have dedicated 7-10 minutes of this sermon for you to encourage each other about this transition. What happens next is unrehearsed. Let's trust the Holy Spirit to guide what you say. Here's what I want you to do.

Would some of you stand to your feet and tell the congregation from your heart that you believe the Lord will bless BVBC's future? I've been at this church 35 years. That's a lot of shared experiences. I have done your weddings, buried your loved ones, dedicated your babies, led you to faith in Christ, baptized you, disciplined you, listened to you, argued with you, wept with you, prayed with you, served with you, and preached to you. The end of that relationship is a big milestone. But I believe, and I know many of you believe that the Lord will bless BVBC abundantly in the future. Would some of you stand up and say to each other from your heart that you believe that?

When you are ready to speak, stand up. We'll bring a microphone to you. Hold it right on your chin when you talk. Be brief. Speak from your heart. Who will be first? (Allow people to speak.)

Take Away

A spiritual home is a place where you find encouragement and strength to honor Christ in a culture that ignores Christ. A spiritual home is a place where you find your most satisfying friendships. A spiritual home is a place where you turn for support in the great milestones of your life. Make BVBC your spiritual home. It will guard your heart. You will strengthen this church for the road ahead. You will help this church to bless the people of the Brandywine Valley.