



“Reflecting on 40 Years of Ordination”
Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
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Forty years of ordination. I am so grateful they let me out of the home this morning to be with you! Actually, I went straight from high school to college to seminary to my first church. I was ordained when I was 25 years old. There should probably be a rule against that!

I was young, inexperienced, and naïve when I was foisted upon the unsuspecting people of First Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky. Many times I have reflected on how kind and generous they were to embrace me as their Associate Pastor, and how patient they were – and how patient God was.

Remarkable blessings have come my way. That is not to say I have been untouched by suffering or escaped rough stretches when I wondered how I would survive. No one breezes through life without dark and challenging times. But a whisper in my soul that the darkness will one day lift, the conviction that God is always working to bring life out of death, nudges to keep plodding forward until a new day dawns, the precious gift of a supportive soul mate, and wonderful people in each congregation I have served, have spawned in me a very grateful heart.

Life is a thrilling and maddening, exciting and teeth-grinding, rapturous and precarious endeavor. Decisive turning points abound. Decisions we make, decisions others make, accidents of history, forces both cruel and benevolent, and the hand of God can send our lives spinning in one direction rather than 100 other might-have-beens.

One example: There is little possibility that I would have the good fortune of landing in this magnificent church family were it not for a policy decision by two graduate schools. When I was a young pup in seminary, my primary focus was pastoral counseling. I envisioned myself doing one-on-one counseling, not leading a congregation or spending much time in a pulpit. In my final year of seminary, I was poised to apply to two schools with doctoral programs in the field of pastoral counseling. To my dismay, I discovered that neither school would admit anyone to their program until they had spent two years in parish ministry. What a ridiculous policy!

So, begrudgingly, I put my degree pursuit on hold and decided to go into parish ministry for a couple of years. Six months after serving in a church, I realized this was where God wanted me to be. What a *brilliant* policy those schools had! Without it, I would never have been given the privilege of serving this amazing congregation and working with our marvelous staff.

At a time in our nation’s history when the clout of the church has diminished, I am awed by the way God’s Spirit has blown through the lives of our members making a significant impact on one another, our community, and our world. In our worship, we strive to connect the teachings of Scripture with our lives today, we present music that

stirs our souls in ways that words cannot, we pray for our world, develop hearts of gratitude, hear words that comfort and words that challenge, and we engage in rituals that nurture and heal, and draw us closer to God and to one another.

Our Christian education introduces children to Christianity and helps them understand that God loves them and always will. Our youth find help in figuring out what is truly important in life and what is not, and the benefits of a spiritual life. Our adults have opportunities to deepen their faith and discuss how best to navigate life in the 21st century.

Our caring ministries provide a healing touch when we suffer a loss or diminished health or struggle with problems too great to shoulder alone.

If you were here yesterday, you would have sat with 400+ citizens of Wilmington. The governor, the mayor, the chief of police, the president of the city council and the director of the Center for Justice were here to share their plans for reducing violence in Wilmington, and to hear about the incredible work accomplished by Father Gregory Boyle who works with the toughest gangs in Los Angeles. You would have been proud of your church for hosting this event to search for ways to reduce the violence and steer young people in the right direction.

The multiple ways you share God's love with a hurting world is truly inspiring. We feed very poor people, build Habitat Houses, provide shelter for temporarily homeless families, drive people to doctor's appointments, and support men transitioning from prison. Our nation struggles with drug and alcohol abuse. We provide space nearly every day of the week for addiction programs. We provide classrooms on school day afternoons for 45 at-risk children so they can receive help with their homework and learn religious values. We provided 500 new backpacks stuffed with supplies to encourage low income children to make a good start on their school year. We sent 15 mission teams to help rebuild New Orleans and we are providing hundreds of water filters to people in Guatemala.

These are only a partial list of all that you do to make this the best place I could ever hope to serve. Speaking of which, we have not announced the final tally of our Capitol Campaign. You remember we set a goal of raising \$2 million with a stretch goal of \$2.3 million. I am awed by the final tally - \$2.7 million! You are unbelievable.

Our church family is brimming with great minds, generous hearts, and faithful people striving to live in harmony with God. Many of you remember when our Associate Pastor, Chad Miller, and his brother drowned in the Brandywine River. It was a shocking and painful blow. Five days later when their parents and relatives flew here for the service we held, we wrapped our arms around that family and kept them from collapsing. They may not have survived that tragedy without the love we extended them and the tears we shed with them. The Apostle Paul said, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and **WEEP WITH THOSE WHO WEEP.**" It was so hard and so painful; but it was Westminster at its best – showering the family with love.

One of the greatest privileges of ministry is being with people at pivotal moments in their lives – baptisms and illnesses, marriages and tragedies, deaths and celebrations. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your journey. You have made my life so rich.

Taking a step back and reflecting on some of the insights I have gleaned over the past 40 years, one gem of wisdom is this: in order to possess a vibrant faith, it must always be evolving. There is always more truth to be discovered, greater depths to descend, misunderstandings to correct, and action to be taken. Dictionaries list the word "faith" as a noun. It is not only a noun; it is also a verb. Faith is not primarily about believing certain ideas, it is about living in a particular manner.

Forty years ago, there was little involvement in interfaith relations. For Presbyterians, stepping across spiritual boundaries usually meant engaging in dialogue with Southern Baptists! Occasionally, Roman Catholics. One

exception was that the Holocaust had prompted a few tentative Jewish/Christian dialogues. Christians had mercifully halted conversions by sword, but most still held the belief that only Christians were going to heaven.

Today, that's changing. An increasing number of people respect the faith of others and are pleasantly surprised to learn that we have so much in common.

One of the joys of my ministry at Westminster – and there have been countless joys – has been the interfaith connections we have forged. Our Muslim/Christian dialogue group, lectures, panel discussions and Ramadan dinners have helped to counter the destructive stereotypes of Islam broadcast by much of the media and have provided opportunities to build new friendships. Our work with Congregation Beth Shalom to create and sustain *Peace Drums* and to resettle our refugee family from Afghanistan has deepened interfaith relationships.

Tomorrow is September 11th. Prior to 2001, it was an unremarkable date on the calendar. But after terrorists hijacked the four planes that struck the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and crashed in the field in Pennsylvania, the date was etched in every American's mind. Some of you know people who perished that day. Lives that ended far too soon. It was a tragic and gruesome reminder that there are extremists in our world who must be stopped and an ideology that must be countered.

Despite the fact that Jews, Christians, Muslims, and people claiming no religious faith, have fought side-by-side in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria to defeat the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS, many have used the actions of extremists to fan the flames of Islamophobia.

Today, it is more important than ever for people of goodwill of the Abrahamic faiths to build friendships to work together, and to promote the core values we share. The Ku Klux Klan and white supremacists who use the name of Jesus to justify racism and anti-Semitism do not represent Christianity. Militant Jewish settlers who rob Palestinians of their land do not represent Judaism. And members of ISIS who commit acts of terrorism do not represent Islam.

People of the Abrahamic faiths are given a mission. We are to bring good news to the poor. We are to open the eyes of the blind. We are to bring freedom to the oppressed. God beckons us to shine like a lamp in a room of shadows, chasing away propaganda and fears.

God commands us to feed the hungry, to comfort the ill, and to welcome the stranger. We understand this to be not a burdensome duty that weighs heavily on us, but an opportunity that inspires us to become beacons of light in today's callous climate. When we extend compassion to those in dire need, we touch people with the most powerful force in the world – love; which infuses our own lives with meaning and purpose and joy.

God expects us to stand resolute when faced with enemies of God's righteous realm and God emboldens us to become lasers of love that expose lies to the light of day, shine truth into places of injustice, and reveal God's will to a troubled world where too many political leaders have chosen a reckless route of rattling sabers, rather than the path that pursues peace.

It is the duty of all members of the Abrahamic faiths to lead the way. It is a noble calling that we cannot leave to others. The stakes are too high. The future of our children, the future of our grandchildren, and the future of our planet hang in the balance.

But I live in hope – because God never tires of bringing good out of evil and can work through faithful people like you.

Pastoral Prayer by Dr. Jones

Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough." In that spirit, take a few seconds to prepare your soul for prayer by thinking of a couple of things for which you are thankful. We begin in silence.

Good and gracious God, we give you thanks for the gift of life, and for the beauty and wonder of your marvelous creation. We are grateful for our minds that enable us to analyze and dream and decide. We give thanks for our hearts to express sympathy and forgiveness and compassion. We are grateful for our hands that allow us to build and create and serve.

Eternal God, we give thanks for our experiences in life. Thank you for the mistakes we have made that revealed to us a better way. Thank you for the times we have managed to get it right. Help us to repeat and build on our successes.

We give thanks for the empathy of another when we needed someone to understand our pain and confusion. Help us to pass it on – by listening and caring and becoming a trustworthy friend.

We give thanks for our amazing church family; for its boundless love, its depth of wisdom, its creative spirit, its generous resolve, and its constant drive to be faithful to the mission you give us.

We give thanks for the friendships we have created with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. In a culture that promotes greed and cynicism and violence, we pray that we may unite in showing the world the importance of honesty, the necessity for justice, and the power of love.

Merciful God, our hearts break for the people of Florida, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the numerous islands blasted by the violent winds and churning sea generated by Hurricane Irma. The people of Texas have barely begun their recovery efforts from the destruction meted out by the flood waters of Hurricane Harvey, and now many others face terrible devastation. We give thanks for the gallant men and women who saved people from perishing; for relief workers who will help rebuild lives; and for people of faith who will give themselves to mending and supporting and healing.

God, here in the safety of our sanctuary, it is hard to imagine that just a few blocks from here, residents live in fear of the next shooting. We pray for our police who are on the front lines; for the dangerous and difficult work they do for our community. We pray for leaders in government developing strategies to reduce violence. We know it takes many hands and multiple approaches. We pray that more people will be inspired to become mentors to children and youth who need another caring adult in their lives.

God, help us to be agents of healing and reveal to us the ways we may use our gifts to promote health and wholeness and peace.

Thank you, God. Thank you. Amen.