

THE GIFT

Good morning and welcome. And good morning and welcome to the folks online. My name is Jeff Rekoon, and I'm very glad to be your lay minister this morning.

For as far back as I can recall, MY father's way of communicating with me was to walk out of the room before the conversation was over. I'm sure he doesn't remember that, but I do. And I still remember how badly I felt at the lack of courtesy and respect he had for me. At dinner time, we were not allowed to talk because he wanted to listen to the news on the radio. And he would wordlessly take his leave of whatever conversation my mother and sister and I were having. Just drift away. For so many years, I saw a lot of his back. How very sad.

But, in spite of this treatment, and having the ability to TRULY see what fatherhood offers, I HAVE COME TO REALIZE from the very bottom of my heart ...

There is nothing sweeter, or more thrilling, or even more wonderful than being a father. Nothing brings out the very best of an individual than loving a child and being a father. It's about having the OPPORTUNITY to be excellent and even to be exceptional.

SO, I am here this morning to sing what's too seldom sung ... the ABSOLUTE JOY of being a father.

We are a culture and a society that loves highlights, not routine. The "Hail Mary" pass that won last night's football game, or the home run in the ninth inning that clinched a World Series berth. But surely someone who day in and day out performs valiantly, like a father, can make the routine the most cherished highlight. And how cool is it that someone could be so respected and admired just for doing the routine. A father's greatest glory is the routine.

Fathers realize that there is no greater evidence of one's worth than to make a child's life better. No greater calling than that. The children in our lives are proof that God loves us and wants us happy, and that children are truly divine.

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Let me quote from Matthew 18:1-3: *“At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, set him in front of them, and said, ‘Truly, I tell you, unless you turn around and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself and becomes like this child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”*

And, just as the presence of a father means so much, so the absence is as deeply felt. I think there are so many children that never get to realize their potential because there is no father or FATHER FIGURE in their lives. Someone to guide and stabilize their lives. A father, to love them.

Love your children.

I have that great affection every day with my Sami. At her age, twenty-three, it's been the best three hundred and ten years of my life, and counting. Besides the normal drama girls seem to go through, like hair, skin, weight, dating, school, etc., she has also faced, head on, the challenge of being a type one diabetic. Contracted it at age thirteen, when most girls' plates are already drama-filled. She went through some significant life challenges. Needles, homolog, ketones, pumps, glucose-monitoring machines, and insulin injections became our language. OH, AND six emergency-room visits. Every day, my extraordinary wife and I would worry if Sami was taking proper care of herself.

You find out, early on, that you tap reserves you never knew existed.

Conscience and individual courage really count here, even if they appear powerless. ESPECIALLY if they appear powerless. Over time there exist so many festering injustices and faltering responses, yet you persevere. And with these challenges have come great successes. Sami is doing great in school and loves her job, AND THEY APPRECIATE HER. She has raised thousands of dollars every year for Juvenile Diabetes Research and attends all their meetings, workshops, and walks to raise awareness. You have NO idea how proud I am of her.

Equally relevant to these thoughts is what desperately haunts me: For every success we have, there are probably thousands of other kids who could be success stories but because of too-high insurance costs or lack of proper attention from good support people, they just never

get the opportunity. With all of the times I have spent with children without opportunities, you really know them without knowing them. Some never make it to the starting line of appropriate care, and that is beyond sad.

As we experience difficult times, I have found that we naturally try to balance sadness by pursuing happiness. Planning for the future, people often talk about all the good times they hope to have. Our culture is obsessed with that pursuit. But for me, what is most profound during a challenging time is REALIZING that the right response to sadness is not trying to balance it with pleasure, like going to parties or perhaps on your favorite vacation. The right response is not even trying for happiness.

The right response to sadness is holiness. You try to redeem something bad by turning it into something sacred. Parents who have lost a child, or spouses who have lost their spouse to a terrible disease, double down on helping others go through the pain they have gone through. Even children who experience great financial hardship try so much harder than others to make sure their families don't suffer as they did. And they are grateful to do it. And feeling grateful produces generosity. I reference Luke 4:38-39: *"Jesus came to Simon's mother-in-law, took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve Jesus and the others."*

ACCEPTING GOD'S GRACE ... not for what it does for you, but how it makes you do more for others. After a difficult health issue, Simon's mother-in-law immediately used her newfound health as an opportunity for service to others.

And, as you know, these actions really don't bring us glory. They bring GOD glory.

And I can take satisfaction in knowing that it's often the losses in our past that produce real significance and form in our lives. You may really try for happiness, but feel formed through sadness. You sense that you are at a deeper level than happiness, and you become more committed to your work, your spouse, your children. I take solace in the fact that those losses produce so much more empathy for others which, in turn, develops into a much stronger sense of personal mission.

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I will tell you that I LOVE being around happy, self-contented people, but I am way more drawn to those folks who are challenged by searing experiences, because they possess such profound depth and character and a heightened awareness. It seems to me that real moral good comes not from consistent days of success, but from overcoming dark moments in time, having GRATITUDE, and then helping others. Teri Rekoon fits that mold. You know Peter Lin fits that mold. And my dear friend Chris Wattson absolutely fits that mold.

AS I HAVE CHALLENGES, THOSE ARE THE PEOPLE I WANT TO BE.

You know, over the last few months, I have been reflecting a lot on this beautiful emotion of gratitude that takes place when wonderful gifts exceed expectations. Living in a society, self-sufficiency and personal ambition count big time. Both seem to offer the promise of greater financial gain and, perhaps, more respect. But gratitude should not be based on achieving individual benefit, but on human connections that are based on loyalty and service. It's where sympathy and caring for others exceed self-interest. To experience and help others, richly.

It's obvious why this feeling of gratitude attaches itself to fatherhood, but it also applies to a church. In the context of this church's culture, gratitude is a form, really, of spiritual glue.

Individual accomplishments have their place, but it's that DEPENDENCE on others that REALLY should be celebrated. It's about people connecting and making OTHER people's lives better. Empathy and compassion and mercy produce joyous human connections.

I told you earlier that it's wonderful to be a father. But you don't have to go really deep into the definition of father to realize that the affection and love extend beyond the children we produce. It also, most definitely, extends to the children that we inherit. You absolutely realize that outside the traditional feelings of kin are bonds with every bit as much meaning and magic and stamina. There are children in your lives where the caring transcends, and even sometimes outlasts, the ones with a biological tie.

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AND IN THAT SAME VEIN, if we talk about family in terms of the labels they have (such as father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, etc.), then we are seeing family in terms that are way too narrow. CLEARLY, the definition correctly tells us to extend that same affection and respect to people in our lives where the connection goes beyond common DNA. That's a change that should be built on. THAT'S ENLIGHTENMENT.

I have always been impressed by families that are EQUALLY bound by choice as well as blood. By people that so sincerely care about others and SHOW IT.

I see it clearly here every day. When Bruce Van Blair first arrived a few months ago, a number of folks helped unpack and move heavy boxes and furniture into his home. It was a particularly hot Sunday afternoon, but there were Diane Stellar, Leslie Kazarian, Vicki Ronaldson, Jamie Christiano, Tom Grabiell, Hutton Grabiell, and Harry Kipp, among others, helping out and smiling. Everybody working together. Everybody happy to be in the company of the others. Shared commitments that went beyond shared chromosomes.

You see, it's NOT about common genes. It's about common needs. IT'S ABOUT COMMON GENEROSITY. And if that's not TRUE family, please tell me what is.

Understanding the reverence that should be accorded a father (notice, please, that I did not put the word father in quotes) is never more evident than with Chuck Hoover, who perhaps understood as much as anyone that to really love the Holy Spirit and to sincerely care about this church, you MUST care deeply for the people of the church. And ALL of his faith family were his children. I saw it. And I felt it.

Chuck understood, as I'm sure you do, that we are ALL tied to this church and reflected in it, because it's so central to our narrative and is so very much a part of our success and, perhaps MOST importantly, so much a part of what we are capable of.

I hear how we are a "small" little church, but I will tell you that one Chuck Hoover is worth two thousand, one hundred, fifty-four members of any other venue of spirituality. Why would I accord any other place of worship more luster, when we have had the joy of

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Chuck Hoover? He never held himself high, an autocrat with all the answers. He crouched, so to speak, with his younger faith family children to a level where conversations could be broached, questions could be asked, and disagreements were always respected.

And he seemed to insist that all of us crouch down as well. That's how we best communicate. That's how we move forward. That's how we best put the church, this church, within reach of all of us.

There is no better example of Chuck Hoover being honored as our father than the following story.

During the last few months of Chuck being with us, one of our members decided to visit with him at his bedside. Visits took place four to five times per week over a six-week period. Many, many times, the member arrived only to find Chuck too tired to talk or fast asleep. So he had to circle back at another time, hoping that a few precious minutes would be available. From what I was told, you couldn't find more disparate individuals. Chuck, 85 and with the challenges he was facing, and the much younger, healthier member, with much different life challenges. In so many respects, an odd couple.

But what a sweet affirmation. They were absolute proof, these two, that a father can truly pass a closeness and extraordinary life lessons down through the generations. And isn't that what we all need? Isn't that what we all want? And I'm sure there was a moment when the example that Chuck set became a lifetime of gratitude for the younger member.

PLACES BECOME MORALLY POWERFUL. You go to his bedside as much for the experience as the privilege, and the knowledge that ALL the moments are times of grace.

During all those times, the member had the specific goal in mind of addressing three topics and getting Chuck's response: How did you happen to first meet Tina? What are your thoughts about your children and stepchildren? And finally, what are your thoughts about Community Church, Congregational and your role in it?

Life meanings.

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With all the high emotions and the importance attached to each second, I'm told you really get locked in. The experience produces a heightened awareness of how precious time is. And, as the visits continued, Chuck and the member kind of became parts of one another, somewhat incomplete when separated.

And I'm sure there were moments when this vigil of time spent went beyond Chuck. As he had life challenges, so we at our beloved church have our challenges. And I'm sure the talks and thoughts extended beyond him as if he were both man and metaphor. Getting these subjects addressed in a reasonable time line was critically important; when it was finally completed, Chuck passed a short time after, as if it were almost preordained.

I'm told the beautiful thing about such moments in life is that there is so much clarity. You truly know what you live for and what matters. It's enlightening and peaceful all at once.

But the member who did these visits wanted, MOST IMPORTANTLY, to give a gift to Chuck and Tina and family. Something that perhaps they would go back to, in time, as a wonderful remembrance. And so to bring more honor to his life, a gift was born and given with IMMENSE gratitude.

The gift?

All of the meetings were recorded on tape and given to his wife Tina on a disk.

By his example, Chuck established the need for everyone to summon a determination to do better. To try just a little harder for your cause. And while many of us derive great joy from a beautiful flower or get a chance to feel the warmth of a friend's smile, we also gain strength and happiness from what is left behind. And so it WAS with Chuck. And so it IS WITH CHUCK.

Being a father offers a real opportunity to be more excellent and, perhaps, even exceptional. You see, it's a chance to RAISE our humanity. And if family is a yardstick of our love and if the children in our lives are a measure of our great affection, then fatherhood SURELY is a gauge of our souls.

By accepting God's grace, we have continued blessings.

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My great wish today, if Chuck were standing in front of me, is that he would tell me that I'm a good father and that he is proud of me, and I'M SURE he would extend that same feeling to Harry Kipp, Tom Grabiell, Rodger Whitten, Jamie Christiano, Bruce Hird, Bob O'Neill, Dan Winton, Cass Casserly, Bob Underwood, Paul Reynolds, Gary Van Otten, Dave Mercer, Don Ronaldson, Jeff Chandler, Bruce Van Blair, Guido Haug, Ed Foster, Ted Covalt, Jon Frojen, Andy Cies, and the many other phenomenal fathers in our congregation.

I so miss the times talking to him at his bedside.

Would you please be kind enough to pray with me? *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”*