

"ABOUT THAT LETTER..."
II Corinthians 3:1-3

Have you ever written a letter of recommendation for someone?

Periodically I am asked to write one- maybe it is for a person applying for a job, or entrance to college, or to be attached with other letters of

recommendation so that the person or the organization that they are

corresponding with has multiple people who can speak positively about the

person, project or organization. Kristin Goodwin, who used to be on our

staff as our Director of Campus Ministry/Director of Community

Development, e mailed me just recently to ask if I would be a reference for

her and that they might be contacting me for a recommendation.

When I am contacted they usually have a variety of questions as to

how that person works with others, their strengths and areas that need

improvement, and usually the last question is, "would you hire this person?"

I feel a deep responsibility when I am asked to write or speak on behalf of

someone that I am recommending.

Writing letters of recommendation were very important in the early Christian church, it was a part of the culture. If someone was going to travel to a new area, to a new community, a friend who knew someone in that community would give him a letter of commendation to introduce him and to testify to his character. This was the only way newly fledgling congregations in the early church had of knowing whether or not some new prophet who splashed onto the scene or some new teacher who was emerging had the right pedigree, the right credentials and therefore could be trusted. I mean, there were false prophets and teachers springing up everywhere during the days of the New Testament Church and so you had to be careful, and guess what? Times haven't changed.

If you go to the book of Philemon you will discover that this is such a letter. And when you read the writings of the Apostle Paul you discover that he, many times, closed his epistles or letters commending certain people, and in other instances, warning against them.

As we have been gearing up for this 2009 Stewardship Season, you have been hearing from a variety of people in our church- Bob Barsan, Bill Bartilson, Keith Morgenstern and Wendy Wilson regarding their own personal experiences related to stewardship and how they have and are making decisions about the giving of their time, talents and money. You have received information in the mail and in the bulletin where the verse from II Corinthians 3:2 was highlighted, where Paul states, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all." Another way of saying it is, "You are a letter of recommendation, the result of our ministry." The church in Corinth was alive and doing great things for Christ, they were a richly gifted community. Did they have their problems and issues? Yes, you bet. But it was because of Paul that the Gospel of Jesus Christ came to Corinth, for he, himself, had brought the Christian message to them and it was through his work that the church had been established there.

And so Paul can write to them with confidence and say to them that “you,” church in Corinth, are also a letter of Christ.” You could imply that Paul is saying that you, individually and personally, are a letter of Christ. And so we could say to one another here today, Jesus is sending you his personal letter. And this personal letter is being sent, on your behalf, to your home, to your place of work, to your school, to the neighborhood in which you live, to the city in which you live, to the world in which you live telling all who will read it that you represent Christ, that you are a letter of Christ that reveals so much about the Savior. But we have to recognize that this letter known as Second Corinthians is not referring, specifically, to the believers individually but the entire church at Corinth, the church as a whole. And so, “You, the entire Corinthian Church”, you, all together, are a letter of Christ. And so each of you Corinthian Christians, personally, are a paragraph of the one letter of Christ, being sent by Jesus to Corinth, and we, individually, who have gathered here today at First Presbyterian Church, Akron, are a

paragraph of the letter that Jesus Christ is sending to the city of Akron and the surrounding areas where we live.

What was the last important document that you signed? Was it a wedding license, a loan for a car or house? The other day I had to go see a specialist. In preparation for my visit I had to file out a new patient registration and then, when it was all said and done, I had to sign and date my part of the agreement before the doctor would even see me. My written signature was crucial because it carries with it the full authentication of who I am as a person. So be careful what you sign- read all the fine print because it is binding and legal.

As I think about what the Apostle Paul has written to the church at Corinth and I think about you, the people of First Presbyterian Church.

It is as if Jesus Christ is writing a letter to the people of Akron, Hudson, Silver Lake, Copley, Stow, Cuyahoga Falls, Ravenna, Barberton, Kent, Norton, Wadsworth, Tallmadge, Uniontown, North Canton, Hartville, and Litchfield- all the places from which you and the rest of our members and friends reside, and on the header of this letter it says, First Presbyterian Church of Akron. And Christ's message to us, to this community of faith is, "I love you, desperately." "I love you madly." "I love you unconditionally."

And so, each and every one of us, together, the entire congregation, we are that letter. Whenever anyone joins this church or another Presbyterian Church they are asked a few questions. Last Sunday two young men were baptized and C.J. Moore, Alex Morgan and Josh Starkey who had been baptized as a baby but was confirmed, these three fine young men who became baptized members of this church answered these questions: 1)"Do you trust in [Jesus Christ]?" And they said, "I do." 2)"Do you intend to be his disciple, to obey his word and show his love?" And they said, "I do."

3) Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, giving of yourself in every way, and will you seek the fellowship of the church wherever you may be?" And they said, "I will." When they, along with anyone joining this body of believers says YES to the membership questions they, you, are declaring your commitment to Christ and His church, this church, and you are, in essence, signing on the dotted line of the letter. You are joining the countless others who have also declared their allegiances to Jesus Christ and together, you, we, are all a letter written by Jesus Christ.

Today is Stewardship Dedication Sunday and, hopefully and prayerfully many of you have been thinking about what you are going to give back to the Lord in the New Year, 2009. We all know these are difficult times economically. And I know that many people are watching their spending and re-evaluating their family and personal budgets like never before. Last week the other organization that Pastor Mark Ford is a part of had its quarterly prayer gathering at Open M Ministries on Princeton St.

At one point during our gathering we got into smaller groups. We were sharing issues that we, as pastors, and the churches we pastor were facing.

And one of the pastors, of a large church in the greater Akron area said, pray for our church's finances during these difficult economic times. And all the pastors in our group echoed the same concern. And yet I also know that church economics often defy conventional wisdom. An economic downturn doesn't always result in less cash in the collection plate. "The history of the church is that God's people have done the most remarkable things during difficult times," said the Rev. Joe Harvard of Durham, North Carolina's First Presbyterian Church. He went on to say, **"One of the things about times like these is that it forces you to examine where you put your trust."**

Some people put their trust in their job- what they do. Others put their trust in their children- their offspring, and keeping the family lineage going forward for future generations. While others in what they have accumulated- their possession and their money.

With the economic situation we might be tempted to hold back, to stay the course and maintain. Others might be tempted to cut back, just in case. And yet others might step out in faith and trust.... Trusting that God will provide and yes, bless.

In that moving movie "Schindler's List," Oskar Schindler worked hard to do everything he could to rescue Jews from the Holocaust. He was able to save a thousand Jews from the tragedy of Auschwitz. When he became aware of the horrors of Auschwitz, he used his money as a wealthy industrialist to buy Jews to work for him, and was able to save them. As the war was coming to a close, he was basically bankrupt. There is an emotional scene at the end of the movie, where Schindler is saying goodbye to the financial manager of the plant. He is a Jew and a good and trusted friend. As he hugs his friend, Schindler is sobbing saying, "I could have done more." He looks at his car and asks, "Why did I save this? I could have bought ten more Jews with this." He picks up another small item and

says, "I could have saved another one. Why didn't I do more?" Friends, there will come a day when Jesus returns and in all of His glory He comes back for His own. The issue will not be how much we have in our bank accounts, in our 401Ks, how many rooms we have in our house, where we went on our most recent vacation or what kind of car we drive. We are going to see the King of Glory and there will be unbelievable joy. We will think, "Why didn't I do more?" (James Forlines, *Men's Beat of Free Will Baptist Foreign Missions*, April 1999, 4. Quoted in Robert J. Morgan Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes.)

Today, we have an opportunity to, if we are able to come forward, to visibly show our God that we, individually and corporately as a congregation are signing the letter as we commit to the ongoing support of the life of this church, giving in every way that we can. I invite you to come forward with your letter, upon which you have written your 2009 pledge and place it in one of the three baskets on the Communion Table.

And if you are still praying about your 2009 pledge send it into the church at your earliest convenience. I invite you to join me join me in both singing the Hymn of Dedication #560 "We Plow the Fields and Scatter" and come forward with your pledge/letter. So let us sing and let us come...

"ABOUT THAT LETTER..."

II Corinthians 3:1-3

Introduction: Have you ever written a letter of recommendation for someone?

Writing letters of recommendation were very important in the early Christian Church

The 2009 Stewardship Season: Theme verse- "You are a letter of recommendation, the result of our ministry"

You, individually and corporately are a letter of Christ

It is as if Jesus Christ is writing a letter to ...

Three questions at membership:

- 1) Do you _____ in [Jesus Christ]?
- 2) Do you intend to be His _____, to obey His word and show His love?
- 3) Will you be a _____ member of this congregation, giving of yourself in every way, and will you seek the fellowship of the church wherever you may be?

When we join the church we are declaring our allegiances to Jesus Christ,

And together, we are a _____ written by Jesus Christ

Our difficult economic times...

Rev. Joe Howard of Durham, NC's First Presbyterian Church said, "One of the things about times like these is that it forces you to examine _____ you put your trust"

Conclusion: I invite you to join me and come forward with your letter...