

Title: "In Praise of Pillars"

Text: 11 Thessalonians 2:13 – 3:5

There is a corny story about a little girl in a mountain family who laid her head on her father's ample midriff in a worship service and proceeded to fall asleep. Her mother, seeing her daughter cushioning her head in this fashion, whispered to her husband, "There, Clyde, now you know what it means to be a 'pillar' of the church."

It's tempting to ask at this point whether we are pillows or pillars, but what I would like to do this morning is to offer up a few words of praise on behalf of the pillars of our church, both past and present. I am not going to call their names. Most of us know who they are or have been. I am thankful, just as the Apostle Paul was thankful, for every member throughout the history of this church to the present. But in every church there is a special group of people who care a little more, do a little more, give a little more. No church can survive for long without these pillars. And I simply want to take this opportunity, as we celebrate and dedicate our significant accomplishments over the last year and a half with "Our Time, Our Turn," to thank God for everyone who has played a part.

I am told that in the Shenandoah Valley there is a stately mansion on whose walls hangs a portrait of the famous Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart. The portrait was evidently given to a friend, for across one corner of it is a message written in Stuart's own handwriting, "Yours to count on," signed J.E.B. Stuart." If we had portraits of each of our members since our beginning two hundred and twenty-seven years ago on one of our walls, at the bottom of some of those portraits would be written, "Yours to count on." To those who have been in this special fellowship, I offer my heartfelt thanks to God.

Way back in the Book of Numbers, we read that Moses was in near despair as he complained to God that he simply could not accomplish all that God had given him to do. He could not carry all the burdens of the people of Israel by himself. It is then that God instructs him to select seventy leaders to bear the burden with him. That is when the first pillars were selected. Some of the pillars of this church have been in places of leadership, some have not. By definition, however, pillars help share a burden. There are been persons whom this church has really counted on, depended on and leaned on.

There's a story told about this one minister who was exhorting his congregation to become more active in church affairs to get the church on its feet. "Brothers and sisters," he proclaimed, "what this church needs is the energy to get up and walk!" One of his deacons said, "Let her walk, brother, let her walk!" The preacher raised his voice a little as he felt the spirit moving in the congregation and added, "But we can't be satisfied with walking; we've got to speed up and run." And the same deacon responded with equal enthusiasm, "Let her run, brother, let her run!" The preacher was really getting into his message now. "But running's not enough either. One of these days this church has got to fly!" And that same deacon stood and shouted, "Let her fly! Let her fly!" The preacher paused for a moment and said solemnly, "But if this church is going to fly, we are all going to have to work harder and give more of our time,

talent and treasure!” To which the deacon slumped back into his pew and meekly responded, “Let her walk, brother, let her walk.”

I somehow don’t suspect that that deacon was a pillar of his church. However, Paul was writing to the pillars of the church at Thessalonica. He tells them how thankful he is for them. Then he adds, “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions....” I want to thank God for the pillars of this church those who have stood firm and held fast.

An historian was commenting on Winston Churchill’s importance to the people of England and, indeed, to all the Western world during the Second World War. He said, “There was a time in the dark days of the London ‘blitz’ when the only thing that stood between England and oblivion was one stubborn old man.” You know, I suspect we have had some stubborn people in this church. They, too, have been stubborn about the right things. They knew how to stand firm, as Paul put it, and they held our church together. Let’s hold up this idea of church pillars and consider some characteristics that these people have.

First of all, pillars stand firm, in spite of personal hardship and heartaches. Some of you have walked through the valley of the shadow of death. You have had more than your share of burdens to bear. I know because many of you have already shared your stories with me. Some people going through similar experiences would feel bitterness and anger toward God and consequently others.

Some unknown person has rightly said, “Life is a grindstone, and whether it grinds a person down or polishes them up depends on what they are made of. Harold Kohn put it in a witty way: “Some people constantly complain about their lot in life; others build on it. We have had some builders in this church. Rather than letting life’s hardships and heartaches make them bitter, they have built on their faith in God to make them better.

In his book, *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway has a line that goes like this: “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.” Again, by definition, pillars are strong are they not? Some of you are strong at the broken places. You have confronted your disappointments, not with despair, but with determination. Instead of clinching your fists in protest you have folded your hands in prayer. In turn this has made you more compassionate towards others.

A man wrote to *Readers Digest* not too long ago relating this incident in his church. His pastor, knowing that many members of the congregation were out of work and broke, put a hundred dollars in one and five-dollar bills into a wicker basket, explaining that the money was from the church’s mission fund. He added, “I’m going to do something I have never done before in my ministry.” With that, he passed the basket of money to the congregation, urging those in need to take from it, without shame. They did. But when the basket returned, it contained sixty-seven dollars more than it had when it started out. You know, I believe that the same sort of thing would happen in this church. In spite of personal hardship and heartaches, there are some persons in this church who have learned to stand firm.

Secondly, pillars of the church also manage to stand firm even when the weaknesses of the organized church are all too apparent. The church is a strange institution. It is only by the grace of God that we have survived this long. Anyone who looks for something to criticize will find it. Sometimes people will find something to criticize that is not even there.

An article in the *Prairie Overcomer* sometime back revealed that a few years ago gifts to the Prairie Bible Institute of Alberta, Canada, declined from a certain geographical area

drastically. At that time the school's president, Dr. Maxwell, had undergone two operations for cataracts, one for each eye. A representative of the school was visiting in the area where the giving declined when one of the regular supporters of the school finally asked him, "What is this we hear about President Maxwell driving around with two Cadillacs?" That was the rumor that had spread. Cataracts had become Cadillacs and people were withholding their support. If you don't think things like that really happen, you haven't been around the church very long.

It is easy to criticize the church. But too much criticism is almost always nothing more than a smoke screen for one's own inadequacy and lack of commitment. I think we can all agree that we church people don't always live up to the high ideals we profess. In one of his books, Bruce Larson compares us to the "Keystone Kops" in Gilbert and Sullivan's delightful operetta *The Pirates of Penzance*. The hero, Frederick, enlists the aid of the police in capturing some nasty pirates. The police gather in the square while the women in the town sing, "Go ye heroes, go to glory." And these comical policemen reply with endless choruses of "We go, we go, we go." That does sound a little like us does it not? Those beloved hymns that we sing at the end of our services – "I'll go where you want me to go, dear Lord, over mountain or plain or sea." do make us sound a little hypocritical. But at least we are here, and we are trying!

Paul says for the pillars, the brothers and sisters, to stand firm and hold fast, and they have – in spite of personal hardships and heartaches – in spite of the obvious frailties of the church as an institution.

There is one thing more I want to say about our Pillars. While they have stood firm, they have also grown. There is no virtue in standing firm if you are dead. When Paul instructs us to stand firm, he does not mean for us to turn to stone. Rather, we should be like the tree planted beside a stream of living water that the Psalmist talks about. A tree stands firm but it keeps growing. Many of the Pillars of this church are really trees in disguise. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

Chuck Swindoll tells about an incident that occurred in his church many years ago at the height of the so-called hippie movement. A young man stumbled into Chuck's church during the Sunday morning service. He had long straggly hair and a beard. He obviously hadn't bathed in several days. He had been living on Fritos, beer and drugs. With a dazed look in his eyes, he slowly made his way down the aisle trying to find a seat in the packed sanctuary. No one wanted to move over and give him a seat. It was one of those precious pillars of the church, a medical doctor, who finally did so. After a while the boy looked around and said, "What kind of place is this? The doctor said, "This is a church." The boy said, "This is a scary place, isn't it? What do the people do in here anyway?" Thoughtfully the doctor tried to answer him; "Well, people come here who are hurting, to get their lives back together." The boy pointed up to the pulpit and said, "What do they do on that box?" The doctor said, "The minister stands there and tries to heal with God's spirit and word." "What does he say?" the boy asked. "Wait a minute and you will hear him," said the doctor.

To make a long story short, the young man did stay to listen. And because of the love and kindness of that doctor and others he became an important part of that worshipping community. He made a profession of faith in Christ and was baptized. Later he went to college, then on to seminary. Today he is a pastor. "Now" said Chuck Swindoll, "that young man is the pastor to my son and his family. It's so wonderful that I can hardly believe it! It has

come full circle!! The young man who walked into our church that Sunday morning is now the pastor to my grandchildren!”

I’m glad, aren’t you, that this young man sat down next to a pillar of the church. Because if he had sat down next to a nominally committed Christian, a pious put-on, the story would have turned out completely different, I suspect. Some people were misled a few years ago by a survey that indicated that church members were more prejudiced than society as a whole. Closer analysis of the results of that survey, however, indicate that the more involved a person is in his or her church, the less prejudice he or she will have. Nominal Christians have always been Christ’s deadliest enemies. True pillars are like trees – standing firm, yet still growing.

Do you see now why I wanted to take this time this morning to thank the Lord for the pillars of our church. I am not implying that anyone is perfect. I am not saying that all of us do not have room for improvement. I simply want to express my appreciation and the appreciation of this congregation to those members who have, in spite of personal difficulty and in spite of the flaws of the pastors and congregations, stood fast and have grown.