

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**November 20, 2016**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Clarksburg, WV**

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**2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5**

*But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord . . .*  
 (2 Thessalonians 2:13 N.R.S.V.)

## Pillars of the Church

A friend of mine once went to work in a coal mine. I am going to call him Bill. Now Bill was a tall man, six foot six. And that worked against him in the low ceiling mines we have around here. Nevertheless, he was far braver than me. He went into the coal mine, all the way back, nearly a mile, to where they were working the face.

As Bill tells the story, he was doing all right until the boss came by and told him that they were going to be letting down one of the rooms that day. Apparently when they are mining a section, they leave behind pillars of coal to hold the roof up. When they have finished with a section, they go back in and remove the pillars. Removing the pillars, causes the roof to collapse and seal off that section.

The boss explained all that to Bill, and then he said, “When we let the roof down, you will hear some rumbling, but don’t worry about it, you will be fine.”

Bill nodded to show he understood and went back to work. In a little bit there was this tremendous noise, the whole mountain started shaking, little rocks were falling out of the ceiling, and dust was everywhere. Bill says, “My mind knew that this was just what the boss was talking about and it was all going to be just fine. But my feet did not get the message.” Bill says he didn’t stop moving until he was out in the open air again. And he never went back in the mine again.

Today I am going to talk about pillars-not the kind that you find in a coal mind, but the metaphorical kind that holds up the church. In the Old Testament book of Numbers we read about how Moses was in near despair as he complained to God that he could not accomplish all that God wanted him to do. It was then that God instructed Moses to select 70 leaders to bear the burden with him. That was when the first pillars of the church were selected.

In every church there are certain people who care a little more, work a little harder, give a little more. We call these people the pillars of the church. These are the people who keep the church from falling down.

In our new testament lesson, Paul is writing to the pillars of the church in Thessalonica. He is writing to tell them how thankful he is for them. Then he adds, “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you . . .” That is his basic message, “stand firm.”

I am grateful and appreciative of every member of this church. You are a wonderful group of Christians. I am particularly grateful to the pillars of this church. I am not going to name them. You know who you are. Today I just want to thank them.

This is stewardship dedication Sunday. Often the message that is heard on stewardship Sunday is, “you gotta do more.” Today, I want to simply lift up the pillars of our church and say thank you to them. I am going to talk about what it means to be a pillar of the church.

**Pillars of the church stand firm, in spite of personal hardship and heartaches.** Every church experiences good times and difficult times. It is the pillars of the church who with God’s help see us through. When so many are like Bill, ready to run screaming out the door at the first sign of shaking, pillars stand firm.

One British historian in reflecting on the German bombing of London and Winston Churchill’s importance to the English people says, “There was a time in the dark days of the London “blitz” that the only thing that stood between England and oblivion was one stubborn old man.” (Dynamic Preaching, October-November- December 2016, pg. 29)

You know there are some stubborn people in this church. There are people here who are stubborn in the right ways, people who refuse to give up.

Pillars of the church not only stand firm. They keep building despite setbacks. One of my heroes of the faith is a woman named Fanny Crosby. Fanny Crosby wrote many wonderful hymns like, “Just As I Am, Without One Plea,” “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine,” and “To God be the Glory.” What is less known is that Fanny was blinded as a child by her doctor’s blunder. She didn’t give up just because she was blind. Instead she gave us some of the most inspiring music the church as ever known.

I praise God that we have people in this church who won’t give up. To all of the pillars of the church who refuse to give up, but keep right on building through your own personal hardships, thank you, I salute you!

**Pillars of the church also manage to stand firm even when the weaknesses of the organized church are all too apparent.** It is easy to find fault with the church because we are made up of sinful people, sinful people who are all too human in our weaknesses. So if someone is looking for ways in which this church falls short of the ideal of God, you won’t have to look too hard.

There are people, you know, who are always church hopping. They are looking for the perfect church. To such people we always say, “If you do find the perfect church, don’t join it. You will ruin it!”

I remember a story about a Christian girls school celebrating six grade graduation. At the end of the ceremony the girls were supposed to march out the door of the gathering hall across an open space to the next building. Everyone began to sing the hymn “Lead on O King, Eternal,” and the little girls marched off the stage. But just when they got to the line “Lead on O King eternal; We follow, not with fears . . .” the teacher realized something was wrong. The head of the line had reached the outside door and it was pouring the rain. Instead of going out into the rain, the little girls were marching in place.

Sometimes the church feels that way, like we are just marching in place. But we are here and we are trying. With God’s help we will move forward, even if it is with jerks and starts.

**Pillars of the church not only stand firm. They also grow in the likeness of Christ.** There is no virtue in standing firm in the same place, unless we are like the tree planted by the stream. The Psalmist says that those who follow the Lord are like trees planted by the stream, we grow and bear fruit.

One of the major criticisms of the modern church is that we are too judgmental. And some of us are too judgmental. It has been my observation, however, that the true pillars of the church, become more full of grace and less judgmental as time goes on.

There is a wonderful story that is told by Chuck Swindoll. It happened many years ago at the height of the “hippie movement.” One day an unkept young man stumbled into Chuck’s Sunday morning worship service. He had long straggly hair and a matted beard. He was obviously high on something.

The young man looked about for a seat, but the sanctuary was rather full and at first no one moved over to offer him a seat. Then one of those precious pillars of the church, a doctor, moved over and invited the young man to sit.

After a bit the boy looked around and asked, “What sort of place is this anyway?”

The doctor said, “It is a church.”

The boy said, “This is a scary place, isn’t it? What do people do in here anyway?”

The doctor thought for a moment and then replied, “Well, people come here who are hurting, to get their lives back together.”

The boy then pointed to the pulpit and said, “What do they do on that box?”

The doctor said, “The minister stands there and talks to us.”

“What does he say?” the boy asked

“Wait a minute and you will hear him,” Said the doctor.

The boy did stay and to make a long story short. He felt loved and accepted in that wonderful community. In time he made a profession of faith and was baptized. He went on to college and later to seminary and became a pastor himself.

Chuck continues, “That young man is the pastor to my son and his family. That is so wonderful I can hardly believe it. It has come full circle! The young man who walked into church that Sunday morning is now the pastor to my grandchildren.” (Dynamic Preaching: October-November-December 2016, pg. 31)

Chuck is particularly thankful for that doctor, that pillar of the church. Had it been someone less committed or more judgmental, the story might have a very different ending.

So this morning I just want to say thank you and salute the pillars of our church. I know that our pillars are not perfect. There is no one here that is without flaw, or that doesn't need to grow. But I do want to thank all of you and especially our pillars, for you have stood firm in the face of your own difficulties, that you have stood firm in the face of my flaws as pastor and the flaws of this congregation. I want to thank you that you have continued to grow in the mercy and grace of our Lord and Savior.

I want to thank you who are pillars and you who are becoming pillars, because this church could not continue without you.

Amen.