



A service of witness to the resurrection

***Celebrating the Life and Faith of The
Rev. Dr. Howard A. Gleason***

**Thursday, November 6, 2019
St. Mark Presbyterian Church, Ballwin,
Missouri**

A planner, a planter, and a preacher

Jeremiah 29:10-14

Romans 8:26-39

***A sermon by
the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating***

As I was preparing this sermon, I thought I might begin by telling one of the many jokes which Howard would often use at the beginning of his sermons. I then I realized that wouldn't work---I suspect every one of us has heard all of Howard's jokes at least once, if not more! It cannot be said that Howard loved a good joke, mainly because most of the jokes he told were far from good. But they were always, *always* funny.

It may surprise you that earlier today I received an email from Howard, especially since in Howard's words, he didn't "do" computers. But apparently in heaven these things are worked out. Anyway, earlier today Howard sent me an email and wanted me to assure you that he is already feeling at home in heaven. In fact, as soon as he arrived, St. Peter grabbed him by the arm and asked if he could have a word.

"Howard," St. Peter said, "I am so glad that you're here! I have a couple who have been waiting six years to get married!" Howard was a bit surprised. He

looked at St. Peter and said, “You say they’ve been waiting six years to get married? Why didn’t you just find a judge?” St. Peter looked at Howard and said, “Are you kidding me? It’s taken me six years to find a pastor, I can’t imagine how long it will take to find a judge!”

For Howard, humor in a sermon was intentional. Howard’s sense of humor was rooted not only in his buoyant Irish heritage but in his theological understanding of hope. The theologian Karl Barth once described that as a congregation listens to a sermon there is one primary question on their minds, and that is “Is it true? Is God present?”¹¹ For Howard, humor was a bridge toward hope. And helping others cross that bridge was always Howard’s deepest prayer.

Is it true? “Yes,” Howard would tell us, “and I know it is true because I have seen in the eyes of children, in the questions of teenagers, in the prayers of those who have walked through the valley of the shadow of death.” Is it true? “Yes,” Paul tells us. “Yes, the promise of God is true: nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not hardship, not distress, or persecution or even Parkinson’s disease.”

It is that sort of hope which formed the core of Howard Gleason’s faith, and it is that sort of hope which is ours today.

Howard was one of the first pastoral colleagues I met in St. Louis. He was part of an interview team from Presbytery that met with me as I was being called to Woodlawn Chapel. He offered encouragement that day and continued to be a source of encouragement and support for these past 20 years. I know many others have experienced that as well.

Like Paul’s long, winding pathway through Romans, Howard’s encouragement was centered on his experience of the grace and love of Jesus Christ. He trusted in those words his brother-in-law Gene read earlier from Jeremiah – it should not be surprising to any of us that Howard had them marked in one of his Bibles. Jeremiah’s prophecy was rooted in the knowledge of God’s plan – and if there was anything that Howard loved more than green beans and ice cream, it was a plan.

¹¹ This quote attributed to Karl Barth is frequently cited, including Peter Marty, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/living-truth-not-just-believing-it>, among other sources.

Over the years, Howard offered me copies of plans he had made. Plans for new church developments like Woodlawn. Plans for building campaigns at St. Mark. Plans for getting new members. Plans for how to make plans. No doubt about it, Howard was a planner. That showed in his ministry, in his personal life, and even in this last year as he and Rosella made that hard transition from Country Club Drive to Friendship Village.

No wonder he had Jeremiah's words bookmarked: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. 12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart..."

Not only was Howard a *planner*, but he was also a *planter*. Howard approached gardening with fierce determination and conviction. He found plots of land around West County and would organize garden parties – not the kind of parties where you served cucumber sandwiches and tea, either. Howard's garden parties involved tilling rock-hard ground where God had never intended plants to grow. This was no different than ministry as far as Howard was concerned: you make a plan, and then you get your fingers dirty. For Howard, suburban farming included showing Rosella and their friends how silky smooth a mole was before stomping on its neck, saying, "Well, a farmer's got to do what a farmer's got to do."

It included finding ways to keep raccoons and critters away from his sweet corn. Apparently, as the story goes, Howard and company had run a large family of non-Presbyterian raccoons in West County. They were thrilled with Howard's generous planting of sweet corn, however, and managed to consume the entire crop. Howard was determined that the next year these heathen raccoons would not win the sweet corn war. The next year, a Saint Mark member offered some advice: "If you put some dirty underwear on stakes the raccoons won't bother the corn." So, being a *planner*, a *planter* and a *preacher*, Howard organized the staking of dirty men's underwear around the garden. You could not accuse Howard of not airing his dirty laundry!

Whether it was planting seeds in a garden or planting the seeds for ministry, Howard had a gift for planting. Trusting that it was God who would give

the growth, Howard would plant seeds for trees he knew he might never sit under. When parents of disabled young adults came to him concerned that their children could benefit from doing more than sitting at home, Howard planted a seed that eventually grew into Lafayette Industries. When the economy took a downturn in the 1970s and members of the church were out of work, he allowed the seeds of Business Persons Between Jobs to germinate. When he saw that residents at Bethesda Meadow needed a worshipping community, Howard planted seeds, recruited volunteers, and God provided a church. And so it went: in projects both large and small, Howard was a planner, a planter, a preacher.

His faith was hewn out of the bedrock of his own life struggles and questions. Howard did not go to seminary because he felt a call to ministry; he went to seminary because he had questions. It was his pursuit of questions that led him toward his ministry. His questions led him to the people he loved and the work God imagined for him. A planner, a planter, a preacher – a Trinity of relationships, united in love of God and for God’s people.

He used those gifts to find ways of communicating the joyful good news of faith to people who, like him, had questions. Howard used whatever he could – a sock puppet named Marky Mouse, an acre of unfarmed (and some would say, unfarmable) ground, hundreds of corny jokes – whatever he could to proclaim the truth of the Gospel: If God is for us, who is against us?

That is a big question. For Paul, the answer goes back to God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ. It is that grace which secures our hope, which brings comfort in our questions, which guides us home. What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus? Paul’s answer to that question is “Nothing; Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height, nor depth,” and we would add nor Parkinson’s Disease, “nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

For this reason, we give thanks for our hope in Jesus Christ, and for this reason we give thanks for the life of our friend, our pastor, husband, dad and grandfather, Howard Allen Gleason. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

