

“A Tour de Grace”

Sermon by Bill Hemme

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Many of you are aware that I completed a 2600-mile bike ride this summer, pedaling all the way from San Francisco to St. Louis. Shortly after returning home last month, Pastor Vicki asked me to share with the congregation my thoughts on the bicycling adventure as well as my spiritual journey.

I want to begin thanking all those members of First Presbyterian who followed my ride, sent words of encouragement, and prayed for my safety.

What motivates a middle-aged man to attempt to ride a bicycle across the country? In my case it had a lot to do with turning 50 in March. Doing the math, I realized that I have probably lived two-thirds of my expected lifetime, and I wanted to start the last third off in a big way. And the promise of adventure was something I'd dreamed about since I was a kid.

The apostle Paul is perhaps the best known and most prolific traveler in the bible. Traveling about the same number of miles in the first century, Paul visited the city of Ephesus on his third missionary journey, establishing a Christian church. The epistle I read a few moments ago presented a number of straight-forward rules—“Rules of a New Life” they are called in the New Revised Standard Version—to help the new church grow and prosper in the midst of a culture that was often hostile to the teachings of Jesus:

- speak the truth to our neighbors;
- do not let the sun go down on your anger;
- let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but use your words for building up so that they bring grace to those who hear;
- put away bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, and malice and be kind to one another;
- forgive one another, as God has forgiven you in Christ;
- be imitators of God, and live in love, as Christ loved us.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century these rules are as applicable as they were 2000 years ago. There was a lot of time during the ride to think. Along the way I formulated a few rules for long distance cycling that extend to life. In the same spirit as Paul, I might add five lessons for our spiritual journey here on earth:

1. *Slow and steady for the long ride.* In training rides for this tour, I generally averaged a speed around 15 miles per hour riding on local roads. Fully loaded for the ride, I figured I would lose 2-3 mph, but a speed of 10-12 mph seemed reasonable. With this expectation, I set up my trip itinerary planning on riding around 70 miles per day. I flew into San Francisco to start the ride, having shipped my bike out the previous week. My host in San Francisco was a gentleman by the name of Doug Henningsen, who rode across the country by bike some years ago. On the eve of my first major tour, I asked Doug what to expect. His response was that I will have to get used to going slow. When I asked what he meant by slow, he said 3-4 miles per hour was about as fast as I could expect to go climbing up the mountains. And he was absolutely correct! Within the first few days of the ride, I started climbing into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. At first, I found the slow pace frustrating because I felt like I was getting behind, but over time I came to appreciate the slower speeds involved in the long hours of ascending the mountains. It provided opportunities to appreciate the splendor and grandeur of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and Lake Tahoe. The miles would accumulate gradually, but eventually I would reach my destination. It turns out that persistence is much more important than speed on a long ride. I believe the same is true of life. In contrast, once a summit was reached I was often rewarded with a long, free-wheeling descent. These were thrilling, but usually very short lived. It could take three hours to climb up one side of the mountain, while the ride down the other side might take just 20 minutes. Mountain descents were also the scariest parts of the trip: cruising downhill, towing a 70 pound trailer, at times reaching speeds of over 40 miles per hour, braking hard to navigate tight turns on narrow roads, sometimes without a guardrail, dodging pot holes, and praying there is no traffic! Once I was safely at the bottom, I realized that I had been so focused on the road and staying safe, that I scarcely had a moment to look around and appreciate the surroundings. My position as college math teacher brings me into contact with many young people in a hurry to get on with their future, sometimes setting themselves up for failure by setting unrealistic goals. After 29 years of marriage, 25 years of teaching, and almost 21 years of being a father, I've come to the conclusion that life passes quickly enough. Slow and steady is the way to go.
2. *Travel light.* Climbing the first foothills of the Sierra Nevada, I realized quickly that I had packed more gear than necessary, and I felt every ounce of it struggling to get up the hills. At the first opportunity, I shipped back a boxful of items that were unlikely to be used, including spare parts, some tools, and bike locks. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions". God provides us with what we need and promises us the kingdom of Heaven. One of the tenets Tina and I have always adhered to is to "living below our means". It means that I don't have a giant screen, high definition TV to watch the Rays; we don't live in a spacious 4-bedroom, 3-bath house with a pool and a 3-car garage; and Daniel had to "suffer" through childhood without a Nintendo or Xbox game system. However, we did have the money to pursue higher education, take some wonderful family vacations, and to contribute to

charitable organizations. And the lack of debt from living within our financial limits has enabled us to avoid major upheavals when the economy recesses.

3. *Expect (and somehow embrace) hardship.* In John, Jesus tells us that “in this world you will have trouble.” As the ride approached, a common sentiment I would get from friends was “I hope you have good weather on the ride.” For a tour 2-3 months in length, the weather was bound to be good, bad, and everything in between at some time or another. And indeed it was. I encountered heat waves in California and Missouri, rainstorms in Nevada and Kansas, steep grades and headwinds in Utah, and sleet and hail in Colorado. As long as the conditions weren’t unsafe, the best thing to do was ride right through them. Eventually, the wind or the route would change direction, the skies would clear, or the summit would be reached. Two weeks ago, Tina and I attended a memorial service for the 17-year old son of Jeff, my college roommate. A rare connective tissue disorder has now claimed Michael’s life as it had previously taken the lives of Jeff’s first wife Amy (a close friend of Tina), and Steven, the first of their three children. No one I know has suffered more loss than Jeff has, yet his faith has provided the strength to not only endure, but to praise God for the blessings he has enjoyed.
  
4. *Offer and accept grace.* All along the ride, I observed incredible wonders of nature: the snow-capped peaks of the Sierra Nevada and the Rockies, crystal clear mountain lakes and streams, dramatic painted canyons, deserts and grass prairies beneath endless skies. All of these I chronicled in my online journal. But by far the most memorable moments of the trip involved the people, most of them complete strangers, who reached out to assist me along the way. These folks are affectionately known as “trail angels” by cycle tourists, and are not uncommon, especially for solo riders. For example, Don and Peg Vanderkar, in Placerville, California, who hosted me for two nights, without notice, when my bike had mechanical problems. Willem Kalkman, a 68-year old retired engineer from New Zealand making his second bike ride across the US. Willem and I rode together for a over a week. With patience and humor, he schooled me on the finer points of bicycle touring, particularly mountain climbing. Taz Vass, the grocery store owner in Dolores, Colorado. We rode into town on a very cold, wet day, and he offered us a table in the bakery to check out our lodging options up the road. My concept of heaven now involves the warmth and smell of banana bread baking in the ovens of that shop. When we discovered there were no motel rooms available ahead, Taz put us up in his sister’s house next door to the grocery! These were just a few examples of the grace offered freely throughout the ride.
  
5. *Pray often for each other.* I’m a firm believer that there is power in prayer. It was clear that a lot of my friends and colleagues, both at St Petersburg College and here at First Presbyterian Church, were praying for

me. There were a number of occasions when climbing a particularly challenging summit that an unexpected tailwind helped me over the top. I won't claim that those prayers actually changed the wind direction, but I can say that they gave me a boost that helped to take advantage of the tailwind.

Life is a journey through God's grace, which is available to all through faith in Jesus as our lord and savior. We are called by Christ and reminded by Paul to be imitators of God, and to live in love, as Christ loved us. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.