

Note of Encouragement, Seminary Plea, and Words from The Past

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” Philippians 4:12-13

While we have been worshipping on line we have had the opportunity to partner with several churches in the area. It has been a pleasure knowing they were joining us in spirit each week. Though I have not had the pleasure of meeting them in person, they have made an impact on my life. In fact, one member of another church sent a note of encouragement; word of thanks for the opportunity. Her words were a great source of encouragement to me. It was, however, her last two statements that have stayed with me taking hold of my thinking:

“The challenges and loneliness of this time of separation wasn’t planned, but it has blessed us in many ways. New and different is sometimes what we unknowingly need.”

This morning I opened up another message, this one was from the seminary I attended. In that letter it stated that Professor Alyce McKenzie’s blog “Preaching to an Empty Room” and “Preaching to an Empty Tomb” are reaching far beyond the seminary walls and these two texts are being translated into Portuguese and Spanish. I had Professor McKenzie for preaching class back in the old days when classes were held in person and students sat within two feet of each other. Long before society trends have shown a decrease in seminary attendance all across the U.S. The times certainly have changed. But then again change is the only constant in life. “New and different is sometimes what we unknowingly need.” The message went on to say how there is increased need for scholarship funds to help support those who are willing to serve during these difficult times. I am one of those who has benefited from scholarships in the past having attended on a Dean’s scholarship. There sitting alone in the house I was immediately taken back to the days when I would preach a sermon to a small class of ten while the professor video taped it. Then we would be asked into Professor McKenzie’s office to watch it and receive constructive criticism and words of encouragements. Talk about feeling lonely – hard enough to watch yourself preach let alone sitting on the same couch as an expert in the field. But that was exactly what I needed. Yes, “New and different is sometimes what we unknowingly need.” Professor McKenzie helped me to understand that the sermon is not just about words on a page, but about words being exchanged by those who are drawn into relationship through the God who enables both the giving and the receiving of words. I think it made me a more thoughtful preacher.

Many years ago, long before I thought about preaching or seminary, I was the one sitting in the pew. I sat at the back with the rest of the youth. Sometimes we played the dot to dot game on the worship guide, sometimes we wrote notes and passed them back and forth. We didn’t always seem like we were paying attention, but we were. In fact, sitting in that small white framed church I heard some words that have stayed with me. There was a missionary from Russia who had come to speak to us. Really quite remarkable since this was in the early 70’s. But this morning as I read about the difficulties at the seminary, and recalled the note of gratitude for the encouragement one woman felt during lonely and difficult times the words of that Russian missionary came to the forefront of my memory. You see at the end of his talk he said “I ask that you pray for the Russian people, that their lives not be so difficult that they think there is no God, and we will pray for you that your lives will not be so easy that you think you need not God.” If these days of isolation, and inconvenience are good for nothing else, then I pray that they will be just what we need to remind us of our need for God. And then I hope you will join me in praying not only for the Russian people but for people all over the world, that their lives not be so hard that they think there is no God.

See you Sunday at the Ranch!!!