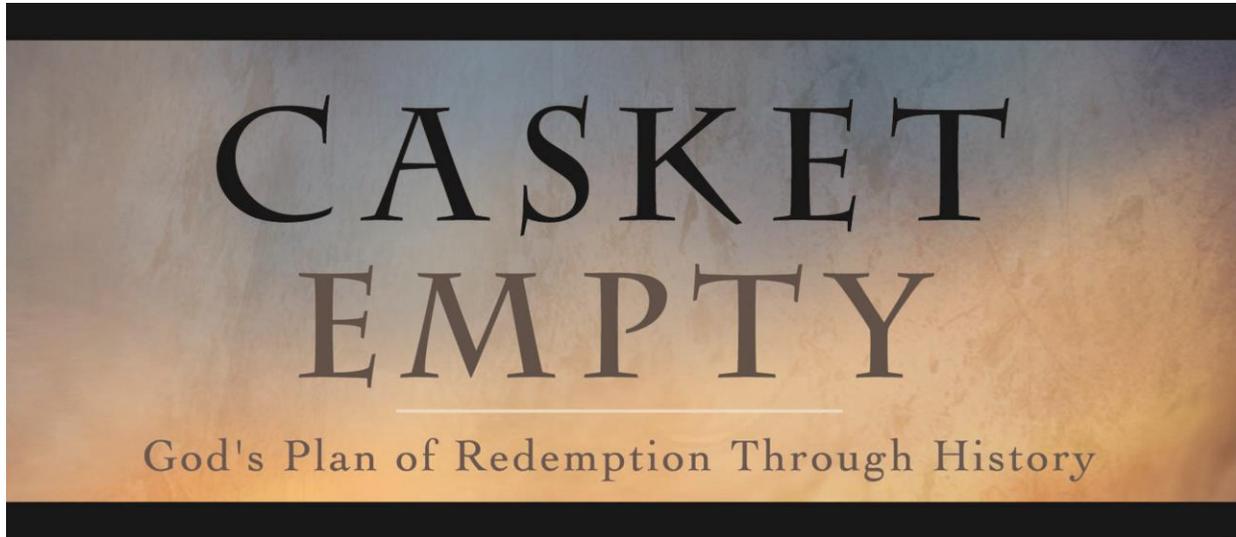


What Matters Most
CASKET EMPTY Sermon Series
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
September 3, 2017

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11



This morning we introduce our new sermon series for this fall entitled *CASKET EMPTY, God's Plan of Redemption through History*. We are going to begin with a prelude about what matters the most: what mattered the most to the apostle Paul and what should matter the most to us as we encounter the Lord in Scripture. Throughout this year, it's a little bit scary for 21st-century people to say this is what we will do for the year, but let me say this is what we are doing for the year. We are going to look at the great narrative of Scripture together to put the pieces of our life together in Christ. Although God inspired 66 different books of the Bible, He inspired them through three different languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. He used over 40 different authors, over thousands of years. The Bible is, in fact, one single story, and the unity of the Bible is found in the revelation of the identity of God and His saving plan for humanity in Jesus Christ. We need the unity of the Bible. We live in a society that is divided. Division is the natural state of the human heart outside of the Garden of Eden, and the unity of the Bible, this one controlling vision, helps bring life together under the Lord. We need the coherence of the Bible in a world that sometimes ceases to make sense. A dear friend of ours who is now with the Lord, Dr. John Pierce, a native of Cincinnati, very gifted with computers, math, and technology, a creator of sophisticated software programs, went to his university studies as a nonbeliever. He went to MIT, and as he was working on his doctorate at MIT, he interacted with people on the campus that were committed believers in Christ. As John Pierce

heard from them, they told him about the coherence of the Scripture. They shared with John that in fact there were many different writers, and yet they wrote one Book. This truth impacted John and led ultimately to his conversion. As he heard the story, he said, “How could it possibly be that people who lived hundreds of miles apart from each other, in separate centuries, came together to write a single book without any correspondence with each other?” He said, “The only explanation for that is that there must be one great mind, one great Author, behind this Book.”

I believe that is true with all my heart. This Book is not man-made. It is the voice of our Heavenly Father revealing His plan for all the earth, for all of us, revealing who He is and how He desires us to live. The Bible tells us where we have come from; it tells us what's wrong with us; it tells us what the solution to our plight really is; it tells us what we are supposed to do in this world and where this is all going. If that is available in a conveniently bound or digitized version in the language of your heart, why would you not want to read it? We need the unity of Scripture; we need the coherence of Scripture, and the CASKET EMPTY project is designed to help us see that. I've been involved with the CASKET EMPTY project for over 10 years. Sarah Sulek, a member of our church, helped with the graphic design. These banners that you see around the sanctuary will be filled in over the course of this year with this acronym that will help you understand the big story of the Bible. Let me just tell you what it is up front. CASKET EMPTY is an acronym. CASKET is for the Old Testament. It stands for Creation, Abraham, Sinai, Kings, Exile, and Temple. This is a very simple way to grasp the whole sweep of the Old Testament. It starts with Creation, God's call to Abraham, His faithfulness to Abraham's descendants, and His rescue out of Egypt and His bringing them to Sinai, establishing them in the land under the rule of kings like David and Solomon, where they were to live in obedience to His commands, where they fail to do that and are driven into exile in Babylon and Syria, and yet where God promises from there that He will act again. The Old Testament ends with hope as the temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem and God's people await the coming of great salvation with expectations.

That takes us to the New Testament side, on the other side of the sanctuary. We will have to wait a few months to we get there, but let me just tell you now that EMPTY stands for Expectations—the intertestamental period, which takes us finally to Messiah—where we focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, Pentecost, Teaching, and Yet to Come. CASKET EMPTY sets before us the sweep of Scripture with the death and resurrection of Jesus as the center point. This sermon series, this fall and later this spring, is not based on trying to give you Bible information or Bible trivia. When you know the story of Scripture, it compels your service, and where we are headed as a church at the end of this series is an intentional effort to reach out with the gospel of Christ to our neighbors and family members. If you know the story of Scripture, you cannot

help but live by it. If you know the story of Scripture, it will guide your daily decisions. A member of our church who went through the CASKET EMPTY material said to me at the end: "Now that I know the story, I care about things that advance the story, and I don't care about things that don't have much to do with this story." What a great triumph for discipleship. Knowing the big picture of Scripture helps us in the little moments of our lives. I am very excited to go through this together this fall and spring at Kenwood.

As we begin this study, this prelude to the CASKET EMPTY study, we want to look at a key text from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 15, our Scripture reading this morning, Paul gives to us what mattered most to him. What mattered the most to him was the gospel and the content of it. Keep your Bible open to 1 Corinthians 15 as we look at this extremely important passage for understanding Paul's missionary vision. First Corinthians 15 begins with a reminder. He says in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2a:

"Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved."

Paul is speaking to the church at Corinth, which is a mixture of men and women, old and young. It is people who have come from an Israelite background. It is people who have come from a totally pagan background, and yet he addresses them all with this familial language because they are the family of God. If you believe in Christ, then you are part of the family of God, and he wants to remind this family group of the gospel "that I preached to you." The Greek idiom here literally is "*of the good news which I 'good-newsed' to you.*" He doesn't use the word *preaching*, although preachers love to preach. What he uses is a verb that means to *herald* or to *share* good news. The gospel is good news. It is a royal announcement, a public declaration. It was a word that was used in the first century, often with heralds who would go out in front of an important dignitary, like the Emperor, and they would gather the people together to hear an announcement, a piece of good news. It would be like heralds coming down Kenwood Road with the good news that we don't have to pay any taxes at all for the next three years! The herald goes out in front of the dignitary. That is our place. We are not the dignitary. We are like those heralds going out in front with good news. Paul says this is the good news, the gospel that I preached to you. It's an announcement. It's not a transaction; it's not a mechanism. It is an announcement. What is this announcement? He says it is "the gospel that I heralded, or that I 'good-newsed' to you." This is an announcement, first of all, that you have to receive. It is devastating when the royal messenger comes and announces the good news and some people disregard it. Paul says this good news which he delivered, they received it. The gospel will never run you over. It is an announcement that has to be received; it is an announcement in which you stand. It is a place in which you can be; it is a place in which you stand that is firm. The ground underneath your feet when you stand in the gospel is secure. It is not shifting. The

gospel is also an announcement by which you are being saved. We are saved with this royal announcement.

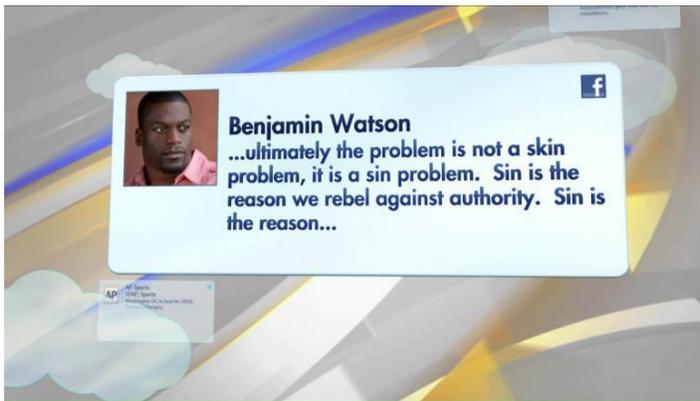
Notice the present tense of this. Notice it is passive as well. None of us can save ourselves with the gospel. God is the implied Actor, the Agent of this royal announcement. He is the one who saves, and the gospel announcement is an announcement that puts us in a process in which we are being saved. We receive it; we stand in it. It has a past aspect, a present, and it has an aspect that looks to the future. You are being saved by it. He adds parenthetically, *“if you hold fast to the Word I preached, unless you believed in vain.”* There are moments when people make a quick confession of faith, a declaration of belief which has no staying power—like Jesus' Parable of the Sower. Either the cares of this world or anxiety or pressure from the society around us reveals that our belief in Him is not deeply rooted. But this gospel, which we received, in which we stand, by which we are being saved, Paul says: “Now, let me remind you what it is.” In 1 Corinthians 15:3, he tells us that “the gospel is something that he delivered, he passed on, he *tradited* to you, and he gave it to us as of something of first and ultimate importance.” The gospel is what matters the most to the Apostle Paul—not his own reputation; not his church growth plans; not his letters that were being copied and circulated all around the Mediterranean world. What mattered to Paul, of first ultimate importance, which he exerted himself to pass on, was in fact something that he received. The gospel is not something that he invented. The gospel is passed on to him. It is what matters the most, and now, at last in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, he tells us the content of the gospel message:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures,”

The good news of God for all the earth is that His one and only Son has died for your sins and mine, and not only that He has died, but that He has been raised from the dead and lives forever, and so do all who believe in Him. The gospel is fundamentally about Christ: it is about His death; it is about His resurrection; and it is about God's plan in all of Scriptures. Let's look at all three of these things.

Number one: The gospel is that ***Christ died for our sins***. This is the language of sacrifice, the language of substitution. The statement that Christ died for our sins means that we have a problem for which this is the solution. I remember my 10th grade geometry teacher, Dr. Van Dyke. He had a New England/Southern accent. It was really a strange combination, and he referred to me as *Mr. Paahmer*. It was kind of a mix of a little New England and a little Southern, and I remember a moment in sophomore year geometry. We took quizzes every day, and you had to prove the solution to these problems. Dr. Van Dyke I gave us this problem to

solve, and I remember working out all the proof and I came to the right answer. There were a couple of steps along the way that I was unsure of, but I just plowed ahead. I got to the answer that seemed certainly to make sense. He looked at this quiz, and he said in front of the whole classes, “Paahmer, you got the right answer, but all the wrong steps.” I asked with great humility if I got partial credit for that. You see, the death of Christ is the solution, so what is the problem? The problem is that the world needs redemption, that it is in the bonds of slavery. The death of Christ means that the world is laden with guilt and needs forgiveness. If the death of Christ is the solution, it means that you and I have offended God—not that we are offended. We have offended, and we need a royal pardon. In the world around us, there are all kinds of offers of the solution and many places where we find misdiagnoses. The death of Christ, as one



of the central aspects of the gospel, means that this is the solution to our real problem. Ben Watson, who was a tight end in the NFL, recognized this and articulated it very powerfully. Ben Watson, speaking about the racial issues in our country, said that ultimately the problem with us is not a *skin* problem. It is a *sin* problem. Sin is the reason we

rebel against authority; sin is the reason we abuse our authority. But God has provided a solution for sin through His Son Jesus and with it a transformed heart and mind. He posted that on Facebook and got 900,000 “Likes.” What do you do after you get 900,000 “Likes”? You write a book! So he wrote a book called *Under Our Skin* that came out this year, and he said:

“We do have a problem when it comes to how we see each other, but ultimately, under that, we all have an issue called sin that we have to deal with. We need a change of heart, and from there, we can look at brothers and sisters, no matter what color they are, and see them with the love of Christ. And treat them accordingly, because our heart has been changed.”

Ben Watson is a Christian gripped by the gospel. He understands that the real problem and the real solution. The first aspect of the gospel is that Christ dies for our sins.

Number two: The second aspect of the gospel is that ***Christ is raised from the dead***. Jesus' resurrection means that His offering for sin is accepted. His resurrection from the dead means that He lives in newness of life. His resurrection from the dead, enthronement at the right hand of God the Father, means He is the true Lord of the world. It means that all who believe in Him will receive life, and that life is to start right now. The empty tomb of Jesus is the beginning of God's New Creation. The imagery of the CASKET EMPTY series gives us a cross which is now empty and a tomb with the stone rolled back and the radiance of God's New Creation bursting

forth. If you are honest and I am honest, we crave newness of life. I love to watch the change that happens in young husbands. They fall in love and make elaborate plans to execute an engagement proposal. The wedding ceremony happens and the new life begins. Those first months, those first years pass, and to their horror they discover, with that radiant clear mirror of married life, that they are less than they thought they were. Then something remarkable happens. As they behold the object of their love, they desire change in themselves, and new life starts to appear. When we behold Christ, the Bridegroom, when we are His bride and are in the safety and the security of that Covenant relationship with Him, we desire the transformation and newness of life that He offers. God promised people long ago that He would do this. One of the greatest images of this is the prophet Ezekiel. We will look at this later in the fall, but Ezekiel is taken into a valley. Ezekiel was a priest. The most defiling thing for a priest is to come in contact with the dead, and Ezekiel is taken by the Lord into a valley filled with dead bones. He sees this valley, and the bones have been there for a while, and all of the flesh is gone. The bones are very dry, and the Lord asks Ezekiel in Ezekiel 37:3:

“Son of man, can these bones live?”

Ezekiel says, “Lord, you probably know the answer to that.” The Lord replied in Ezekiel 37:4:

“Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the Word of the LORD. . . Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”

He continues in Ezekiel 37:12:

“Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. . . And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O My people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you shall live.”

The life that we crave is available to us because of Christ’s resurrection and the pouring out of the Spirit. Christ dies for our sins; He is raised from the dead, and all of this happens by the repeated phrase that Paul uses, *“in accordance with the Scriptures.”* CASKET EMPTY is aimed to help us see the death and resurrection of Christ as the center of the Bible. The death and resurrection of Christ is the center of the story; it is where the ages turn, where the solution for our problem is offered, and where new life begins. We need this compelling narrative to inform our daily living. We live in an age that has been called an *age of anxiety*. It is an age of worry, and that worry is driven by many causes. We live in an age of skepticism, and yet this great story of Scripture, the unity of the Bible—the coherence of Scripture—offers to us the very story of the world, the true story of the world. C.S. Lewis wrote a short article called *God in the Dock*. The *dock* is the English word not for something you'd see by the lake or by the sea, but the dock is the defendant's box where someone who is accused is *in the dock*. Lewis was asked why it is so difficult to share Christianity today, and Lewis wrote this short piece. about three pages long, and he gave four reasons why it is difficult to share the gospel with people today. If

that was true in Lewis' day, how much more is it true today? Lewis gave these four reasons. He said:

#1. "There is a theological vagueness in the minds and hearts of people. People seem to have an amalgam of beliefs. They don't believe a particular thing. It is a little bit from here, a little bit from there, and their belief system is confused and muddled even for them, so it is hard to bring something clear and coherent."

#2. "Modern people are skeptical about history. They are so immersed in the present moment that they are cut off from history." If that was true in the 50s, how much more is it now that people are just immersed in the present, surrounded interpersonally and virtually, by conversation partners to suit their own preferences, and many of us today live in an echo chamber of self-opinion, and there's a skepticism that we don't really have reliable information."

#3. The next point Lewis gave was the problem of language. He said: "Sometimes in church, we use fancy language and it blocks people from understanding. We need to communicate clearly in language that people understand."

#4. "There is almost a total absence in people today of a sense of sin. Ancient man knew of his guilt and sought to offer sacrifice; modern man assumes his innocence and places God in the defendant box and accuses God."

This is the title of the essay.

These barriers are still around us, and the great narrative of Scripture will help us to speak into them. Paul's audience knew, just as our audience does today, that dead people don't rise from the dead, and yet Paul placed before his original hearers, and to us this morning, the certainty of Christ's resurrection: He rose; He appeared to Cephas (that is Kepha, Peter's Aramaic name); He appeared to the Twelve; He appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive; Jesus appeared to James, His brother. His earthly brothers did not believe in Him when Jesus grew up among them, and yet James received a post-resurrection appearance of the Lord and became a leader in the Jerusalem church. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:8:

"Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me."

He uses a term of self-deprecation. He says in 1 Corinthians 15:9:

"For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

You may have some reason this morning for which you would disqualify yourself from Christian service. Paul says he is not worthy of this calling, and yet, he goes on in 1 Corinthians 15:10 to

say that the grace of God has been powerfully effective in his life. He says:

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain.”

Paul says that God’s grace was not to no effect. The grace, the unmerited favor, that we received because of Christ’s death and resurrection has a powerful effect on our lives. We need this Word this morning, because the gospel is not something that you can just appropriate the benefits of and go on your merry way. The grace of God changes us and turns us into motivated, dedicated, consecrated servants of the Lord Jesus. Paul says: “I didn't deserve the grace I received, and yet once I received it, this grace went to work on me.” And he says, “the result of the grace of God was transformation.” He says in 1 Corinthians 15:11:

“I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.”

Whether it was Paul or anyone else who is heralding this gospel, the Word of Christ goes out and people believe.

Number three: The death and resurrection of Christ give us grace. The third aspect of the gospel is that ***it gives us new life, and He gives us mission in this world.*** In a couple of weeks, we are going to be voting as a congregation on a new mission statement for our church. Earlier this spring, our pastoral team went on a three-day retreat. We went through a very wonderful time of praying and time in God's Word and getting to know one another, and asking the question: What do we see God doing at Kenwood? None of us really wants a man-made vision or statement or catchy slogan. We want to see what God is doing among us, how we can describe that, and use a statement like that to help us focus our priorities and decisions. At the end of the three days of sharing and praying and describing where Kenwood is now and where we see God taking it, we came together on the last day, and the Lord led us to this statement:

“As God’s redeemed people,
united by faith in Christ,
empowered by His Spirit,
we worship God,
live by His Word,
and join His mission in the world.”

We shared it with Executive Council in the months following and presented it to the church in June and will be voting on it at our annual meeting in a couple of weeks. I want to mention this now because it fits together with this great, large vision of Scripture. The vision statement has a preamble or prelude line. It starts like this: “As God's redeemed people.” We here are people who are recipients of God's saving action. Whatever we do follows in response to what God has done for us. *Redeemed* is a powerful word. It means that we are a rescued people; it means we

are a saved people; it means that God is active to claim us as His own, and we are that. As redeemed, we become persons. The enemy of our soul is always seeking to disfigure and degrade the image among us, but we are people made in His image and likeness. We will talk more about that next week. We are redeemed people, a group. We are a people who are united together solely by this one thing: by faith in Christ. That is what binds this group together: the 20 languages, the regional distribution of our church, the variety of schools, education levels, vocational calling, giftedness, and family numbers. All that fades in the background behind the unity we have that is found in Christ and is by faith in Christ. What defines the community is people who have placed their faith in Christ. If you are here this morning and you have not placed your faith in Christ, you are still welcome to be here, and I must say that there are hundreds of people all around you praying that you will put your faith in Christ. We are a people also empowered by His Spirit. With our faith in Christ, Jesus promises the empowering presence of His Holy Spirit, and that is what we are. We are God's redeemed people; we are united by faith in Christ; we are empowered by His Spirit, and as such, there are three things that we must be about at Kenwood, now and going into the future. We must be a people that worship God, that offer to God our very selves, our gifts, our talents, our adoration. When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness and shown all the kingdoms of this world and their glory, the devil offered Jesus everything this world has to offer, and said in Matthew 4:9:

"All these I will give you, if You will fall down and worship me."

And Jesus said in Matthew 4:10:

"Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.'"

Kenwood exists as a place to worship God in spirit and in truth, a place where we offer to God praise, where we become like the One we worship.

We also are to be a people who live by His Word. We had long, prayerful discussion about this one. Jesus' most frequent designation of us is to be disciples, which is to be learners. We want to learn God's Word, but we don't want to just study God's Word. That's not the end. We don't want to just learn it. We don't want to be a congregation of people who can ace a Bible trivia exam. We want to be a people who study His Word, who learn it, so that they can live by it. Jesus in the wilderness said in Matthew 4:4:

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God."

Do you believe that? If you really believe that, then that means you must eat this Word. It means that you must take it in. It means that you must be here to listen to His Word taught both in the sanctuary and in small groups. It means that we must stir each other on, not just to

be a people who are studying, studying, studying, but to be a people who are really living it and saying: “Here is how I live out His Word.” One of the sub-motifs of this fall is going to be some interaction with Martin Luther. Next month is the 500-year anniversary of the reformation, and we will have some dialogue with Luther a little bit along the way, a special sermon in October about that moment. Luther discovered afresh what the church had often forgotten, and that is that our life is found in the Scripture. Luther is a colorful communicator. He said: “The Bible is alive. It speaks to me; it has feet—it runs after me; it has hands—it lays hold of me.” He says: “The Holy Scriptures require a humble reader who shows reverence toward the Word of God and constantly says, ‘Teach me, teach me, teach me.’ The Scripture resists the proud. ‘Teach me, Lord, so we can live by Your Word.’”

The last action that we must be about is that we must be a people that join God's mission in the world. I have shared with you my favorite number many times: 174,000. I need to check if that's adjusted slightly, but approximately 174,000 people every single day on planet earth place their faith in Jesus Christ for the first time. That is an overwhelming picture of the saving, seeking activity of the Lord Jesus Christ. We desire to be a congregation that is about worshiping God, living by His Word, and joining His mission in the world. That means we need to be here on Sunday morning. That means we need to be in a place where we are growing in our discipleship, and that means that we must have a place of service and mission. Robert Jensen says: “It's the church's task to tell the biblical narrative to the world in proclamation and to God in worship.” It is the church's mission to tell all who will listen that the God of Israel has raised His Servant Jesus from the dead and to unpack the saving and glorifying import of that fact, whether that's in one-on-one conversations—which is, by the way, how most people say they come to faith in Christ—or whether that's in a creative small group, maybe a small group Bible study, or a creative small group outreach. We launched an outreach in our city this week. It was very creative. It was to teach English as a Second Language to people in our city who are here from closed access countries, where we cannot go as missionaries, but they came here. We posted this announcement, and within 24 hours, we had five people sign up. We can join God's mission with special events, and those are fun and exciting times that give us an excuse to invite people and to rub shoulders with them. We are going to use this *Martin Luther on Trial* play in October as one such thing. But the greatest way in connection with our summer series where we can join God's mission is often just the ordinary, daily obedience to God.

Many of you know we dropped our daughter off at college last week. It was a joyful time. A few of you who love me and know me packed our car with Kleenex, but it was actually a beautiful time. We have heard from her. She has started classes and got settled in a room which is the same size as her room at home. But now, there are two other people who live there. One of them is from New Hampshire and the other has come straight from China. As I was getting to

know her roommates and talking with them, I asked her roommate from China said, "What does your father do?" That was a great intro question. She said, "My father's a pastor." I asked then a really dumb question: "What's the name of the church." She said, "Oh, it doesn't have a name. It just meets in our house!" The Sunday night after we left, Salome called home, and she said: "My Chinese roommate got a call from home from her cousin, who said, 'Your mom has not stopped crying since you left.' She scurried into the shared bathroom and closed the door. We could hear her crying." Salome continued, "Dad, I looked at my other roommate and we didn't say anything. We waited about three seconds and then we just went in there and surrounded her with a hug and prayed with her. Dad, I did it." That was just daily obedience. The first chapel that Salome went to, she sat down next to a girl named Grace. She didn't know when she sat down who Grace was. When I was a student at Gordon-Conwell over 20 years ago, classmates of ours, dear friends of ours, Mike and Joanne, New Englanders, lily white, felt the call to go to a place in the world that was hostile to the gospel. As they were preparing to go to this country where it is difficult to serve Christ, they were doing what many seminarians do after they get married, and that is to fulfill the great charge of Genesis 1 and have more and more children. Mike and Joan couldn't. They struggled as many do with infertility and agonizing prayers. We prayed for them, but they had no children. They went to the mission field, and after they were there for a few years, the people that they were serving trusted them, and one day they opened their door, and there on their doorstep was a little girl and a note that read: "We cannot raise this child, but we have observed your life and would you?" If they had had biological children of their own, the government would not have allowed a legal adoption. So they adopted her, and then they adopted seven. They have a big family. When Salome asked Grace where she was from, she answered, and she asked, "Who are your parents? What do they do?" and that girl next to her in the chapel was the girl who had been set on the doorstep. God is a missionary God and He wants to use you, He wants to use me, and He wants to use our church. Let's be a people who worship Him and live by His Word and join in His mission in the world. Amen.

How fitting it is to come to this table this morning. This is not the table of Kenwood Baptist Church. It's the table of the Lord Jesus, who died and rose again. On the night in which He was betrayed, He took bread and broke it said: "This is My body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of Me. This cup is the cup of the New Covenant, which is poured out for you." If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, I invite you now to partake with us.