

Glendale Baptist Church
July 1, 2012
Sermon: "Generous Undertaking"
II Corinthians 8: 7-15
By Eileen Campbell-Reed

Birmingham, England, Today, July 1, 2012

It's a spectacular day. Even as we speak, the Olympic torch is traveling through the city streets and parks of Birmingham. Thirty-three runners are taking their turn. And you can watch a live stream of the runners through the streets and countryside of Great Britain closing in on London, home to the 2012 Summer Games. In less than four weeks Queen Elizabeth will welcome athletes from more than 200 countries to the opening ceremonies.

But this morning runners (and walkers) from all over the world are carrying the torch. Most are local to Birmingham. They are as young as 12 and as old as Methuselah. They were nominated by their friends, families, and communities.¹ Let me tell you about a couple of them . . .

Wally (78): is said to inspire families to be active and adults "to volunteer themselves as coaches [and] officials [as]... He raised the standard of swimmers in our city ... [He] encouraged teenage girls who hate activity to get back in the pool and reengaged difficult boys."

Helena (14): is an outstanding student, leader and fundraiser, willing "to make sacrifices of herself for the greater good."

Giselle (56): innovative baker and seller of "fantastic cakes" which raise money for numerous charitable causes.

"Ash" (71): is a regular good samaritan taking extra guests into his hotel and giving aid to one guest who was injured crossing the street.

Susan (55) writes of herself: "I was unable to purchase tickets for the olympics and i would be very honoured to carry the touch and take part in the london 2012 olympics. I have raised a lot of money for charities ... £75.000 for B.I.B.I.C" [a non-profit agency that helps children "with conditions affecting their social, communication and learning abilities to achieve their potential for a happier and more fulfilled life."²]

People from literally every walk of life are running the torch through Great Britain this summer in anticipation of the Olympics. Like Susan, who couldn't afford tickets, most of them will not attend the games in person. No worries. This year NBC

¹ All web pages in these footnotes were accessed between Jun 25 and July 10, 2012.
<http://www.london2012.com/torch-relay/torchbearers/community=birmingham/>

² http://www.bibic.org.uk/about_us/

proudly proclaims, “For the first time ever, every Olympic event this summer will be streamed LIVE.” That’s 32 sports in 302 events. Even YouTube will stream the games live.³ It is hard to estimate how many of the earth’s 7 billion people will watch some part of the Olympic games this summer.

I’ve seen one Olympic game live and in person. But I remember very little of the women’s basketball event in Atlanta in 1996 – except it took all day getting there and back and the view from the nose-bleed seats wasn’t that great.

Two summer’s later, however, I had a very memorable Olympic moment. I was a youth minister at the time. Along with a group from church and several members of my extended family, I rafted the Olympic white-water canoe and kayak course. The moment was spectacular, even life-threateningly dangerous. But it was NOT pretty.

Ducktown, Tennessee, August 1998

As I came up out of the water, all I could hear was a rushing sound. All I could see was white water and more white water pummeling me on every side. I was on the Olympic course, a five-mile section of the Upper Ocoee River, only open on weekends in the summer. Some of you recall Jim McKay’s description on the Wide World of Sports: “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” It was not a “thrill of victory” moment.⁴

They call those of us who get out of the boat for some reason “swimmers.” I however, did not get out of the boat for *any reason*, and I definitely was not swimming. I simply was in the boat minding my paddle and following commands of the River Guide, one instant. Then I was cataclysmically thrown headlong into a section of the river called the “humungous” the next instant. The “humungous” is a half mile long class IV rapid – one of the few east of the Mississippi. It was built especially for the 1996 summer Olympics complete with extra boulders to increase the level of difficulty. That day I saw the humongous up close and in person and from the underside. Not a vision I would recommend.

When I finally got my bearings and had my own head above water, I was on a large rock – about the size of a pool table in the middle of the river. I looked across that rock and spotted Ashley, my 15-year-old cousin, teetering on the other side, white water still roaring all around us.

“Are you okay?” I shouted.

“Yeah, are you okay?” she shouted back.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Summer_Olympics#Broadcasting

⁴ [Jim McKay](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190895/): Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sports... the thrill of victory... and the agony of defeat... the human drama of athletic competition... This is "ABC's Wide World of Sports!" <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190895/>

Before I could answer I was hit from behind like an 8-ball and driven toward another pocket of water. A raft coming down stream laid me down on that rock and dragged me forward across it — as if one surprising and dangerous baptism were not enough for the day. I felt the entire right side of my body scrape across the rock and felt my t-shirt catch. I sputtered and gasped and wondered if, or when, this nightmare would end.

At least the river guide and crew of the raft that ran over me had the decency to rescue me. As they hauled me into the raft, they had the audacity to call themselves the 9-11 boat. They were just feeling proud that no one in their party had been for a swim. I lay on my back in the bottom of the raft looking up at the sky and trying to catch my breath. As I stared up at my legs propped up on the side of the raft, I began to survey the damage. I was shaking, bruised, and bleeding. My clothes were torn. My paddle was gone, and my sandals were literally dangling around my ankles. To this day, I still have scars on my right knee and shin.

Nashville, Tennessee, February 2005

Another spectacular day. Glendale Baptist Church installs two new pastors. You've never seen so many robed ministers in one place. We were all decked out and the feeling was grand.

Mahan Siler brought the charge to the church. He said something important to us that morning. He had been our interim pastor for a season a year earlier. He knew us well. Mahan is a retired pastor. He's been part of the Alliance of Baptists since it's beginning.

That day he said, Glendale, being church these days is hard and sometimes dangerous work. It's like going down a river in whitewater. You need a sturdy raft. And more than that, to hold on against the ravages of the river itself and the storms that will come, you need to look up and see the other rafts on the river. Other churches are also traveling these waters. Find one another and lash your boats together, he said. Throw over a rope and hang on. We'll do better if we go down this way, this river of life, together.

Mahan was right. The seven and half years since he preached that charge to our congregation, we've seen some white water. We've shot the rapids. We've seen moments spectacular, even life-threateningly dangerous. And not all of them have been pretty. Actually we've seen both calm waters and class IV rapids along the way these last few years. And as a congregation, riding along in the boat, one of the ancient metaphors of church, we've done well, better than some expected of us. Stayed afloat. Retired our debts. We've seen both joy and grief along the way. Some of us have gone swimming, and found ourselves in over our heads. Or lying flat on

our backs, staring up at the sky with our sandals literally dangling around our ankles. And there are scars.

Nashville, Tennessee July 1, 2002

Really this particular section of rapids, this most recent chapter of our life together, began a decade ago. Ten years ago today was the start date for our pastor April Baker. We called her as our associate pastor in May of that year, and immediately launched into a challenging rapid. It's been quite a ride these 10 years, huh, April?

When I chaired the discernment and search committee, which eventually called April and Amy as our co-pastors in 2004, we began referring to the church's choice to call April, Glendale's "coming out" as a congregation. It was a decision not made lightly. It cost us something as a congregation. It cost some of us personally. We lost members as a direct result of that call. It was also a "generous undertaking" to use Paul's words from his pastoral letter to the Corinthians. It brought many gifts to us as a community of faith, including new members, and a powerful sense of clarity about our identity as a congregation.

After those first rapids and upheaval from calling April, when we wondered who would kick us out first – the local association, the Tennessee Baptist Convention or the SBC itself – we settled in to wait on them to act. We took advantage of the time floating through calmer water. We reflected on our choices. We prepared for the actions of other Baptists, and we turned ourselves to the work of visioning.

In the quieter waters of the fall of 2002 we asked ourselves where we wanted to be in the next three to five years. It was a good and fruitful time. I found some of my notes from those visioning retreats: I was resisting our focus on being a programmed church. Note to self "I can't imagine I'll still be here in five more years." (That was 10 years ago that I wrote that!) We don't really know what life may bring. In this decade, we have indeed moved increasingly away from being a "programmed church" and let go of structures that weigh us down. We've become far more flexible in how we accomplish our work together.

Glendale Baptist Church has become quite adept in the last 10 years at shooting the rapids. We learned some things about managing crisis, managing the press, and supporting each other through change. And certainly the community has changed. People have come and gone and others have stayed longer than they planned. But we have weathered some amazingly rough waters. My professor Wayne Oates said wisely, "either to deify or deny the past has harmful results."⁵

Ten years on, it seems to me that it's time to ask ourselves a few questions about the past: *What have we learned in the last decade? What gifts have we received in this*

⁵ Quoted in Walter Shurden, *Not a Silent People* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1972).

“generous undertaking?” And what do the stories of this time mean for us going forward?

Ft. Worth, Texas, June 21, 2012

Last week I attended the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s General Assembly. I wrote about my experience on my blog and Lauren McDuffie and I shared some reflections on Wednesday evening. On Friday afternoon of the meeting, I attended two workshops. One was about the church and new media.

Accelerating changes in society over the last 200 years have increased our knowledge, mobility, and speed at most things. At the same time we have decreased our connections to families and traditions, our sense of belonging, and our ability to pass on ways of life and meaning. Just consider:

- In 1920 the world’s total population was between 1.8 and 1.9 billion⁶
- In 2011, humanity crossed the threshold and the population hit 7 billion people⁷
- By 2011 more than 2 billion people were making use of the Internet. That is more than the entire population of the earth less than 100 years ago. More than one of every three people on the planet use the Internet.⁸ Of course developing nations are dramatically farther behind, but they are also the regions where growth is most rapid.
- “901 million monthly active [facebook] users at the end of March 2012.” Nearly one seventh of the world is using facebook.⁹
- “more than half of them using Facebook on a [mobile device](#).”¹⁰
- There are over a trillion unique web addresses or URLs¹¹

Corinth, Greece circa 60 CE

The Corinthian church and the Apostle Paul made good use of old media. Paul sent pastoral letters and *people* like Titus to deliver his messages, when he could not go in person. In his day, McLuen’s “the medium is the message” made total and complete sense.

We don’t have the letters that the Corinthian church sent to Paul. But we have hints that they were writing to Paul with questions and concerns, which he then answered. In the portion of the letter we hold before us today, Paul is conveying the

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_population_estimates

⁷ <http://www.vaughns-1-pagers.com/history/world-population-growth.htm>

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Internet_usage

⁹ <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>

¹⁰ ^ Sengupta, Somini (May 14, 2012). "Facebook's Prospects May Rest on Trove of Data". *The New York Times*. Retrieved May 15, 2012. Via: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>

¹¹ On July 25, 2008, Google software engineers Jesse Alpert and Nissan Hajaj announced that [Google Search](#) had discovered one trillion unique URLs.^[79]: Alpert, Jesse; Hajaj, Nissan (July 25, 2008). "[We knew the web was big...](#)". *The Official Google Blog*.

needs of the Jerusalem Church and asking the Corinthian church to contribute generously to those needs. He is asking them to lash their rafts together as they make their way down the river, the river of life.

The way to connect churches in the first century BCE was slow, and leadership was central (Paul or Titus or another pastor). Today as a pastoral theologian if I can't go in person and I want to send a pastoral letter, I can use telephone, fax, or email (all now considered old media) or I can text, tweet, blog or facebook and reach 100s or 1000s of people immediately. And I make use of all of these media. As a congregation we've put in place most of these options as well.

Today the means for connection and support, the possible ropes we can sling out across the way to tie onto another raft are numerous, to the point of overwhelming. The river of life is flowing more rapidly than it ever has. I can't begin to spell out all the implications of these changes in our time this morning. But we should be talking about them. As people who've come aboard and joined the crew on this boat called Glendale, we need to talk together again about – not only about what we can learn from our past – but what we need to learn about the present, the future that is already here. We can ask: *What will be our "generous undertaking" going forward? How do we want to navigate these waters? And with whom do we want to lash together our boats?"*

Nashville Tennessee, July 1, 2012

This morning Glendale Baptist church is gathered here and now. We are also simultaneously flung out around the globe as far away as South Africa, China and Korea, and a bit closer we are on the road to Baptist Youth Camp in North Carolina and on vacation camping in Texas, and settling into a new home at Morningside.

We each have a calling, a purpose, a story. And this faith community has a calling, a purpose and a story of being a place that where we can gather to tell our stories, share a safe boat, and support each other. We can hear about the letter to the editor in the Tennessean by Mark Caldwell, the way Khetta accompanies people on their final journey to die gracefully, the way Evie sings and dances, the way Mia swims and Darlene teaches, the article in *The Scene* by Melissa Snarr, the publishing of *The Scene* by Chris Ferrell, and the way Johnny nurtures spiritual well-being, and Lou gardens, John doctors, and Rand tends to the health of the population, Stewart lobbies the legislature, and on and on we can go.¹²

¹² Mark Caldwell, "Gospels give Baptists a moral basis for gay-rights support," *Tennessean*, June 25, 2012. See: http://www.tennessean.com/article/20120626/OPINION03/306260005/Gospels-give-Baptists-moral-basis-gay-rights-support?nclick_check=1 C. Melissa Snarr, "Those Culture Wars Aren't Ours," *The Nashville Scene*, June 14, 2012. See <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/nashville-churches-are-embracing-lgbt-congregants-and-the-spiritual-questions-and-challenges-they-raise/Content?oid=2896966>

Paul took a risk and asked the Corinthians to support the church at Jerusalem. What might it mean for you to take a risk today and ask someone for support of your story, your purpose, your calling? It might be a joy, a struggle or a need that you share. Take one minute and make use of that small blank space on the back of your order of worship to write down what's on your mind.

[pause]

Supporting each other in our stories, callings and purposes is a major portion of what we are doing this boat we call Glendale Baptist Church.

Glendale Baptist church exists not only to be a safe boat for each other on the river of life, we also have a shared purpose, calling and story of joining others, who with us, can do together what we can't do alone. We have lashed our boat to Luke 14:12 and Room in the Inn, with other churches in the Alliance, the Peace Fellowship, and CBF. We have lashed our boat to Iglesia Bautista Alberto J. Diaz in Santa Clara, Cuba and to Joe O'Cain's Other Sheep. We have learned some things about shooting the rapids of the past decade. And we can ask ourselves: *How we might share what we've learned? How might we live with greater intention into our own future?*

This river we call life is flowing faster and more swiftly than ever. The need for taking the risk to reach out is both easier and more challenging than ever. *And what makes our journey together (past, present and future) a "generous undertaking" rather than a meager or stingy one?*

Within our story, our calling our purpose, God is more present and available to us than the Internet itself. God is both the voice of a guide offering direction over the roar of life and the very flow of the river itself carrying us, and upholding this raft we call the church. God is present at every turn, even saving us when we've been run over by the church. That this journey is a "generous undertaking" is ***not our doing*** (although we take our parts), *because it is the doing and the being of God's very presence all in all.*

And may it ever be so.