

“Faith, Family, Friends....”

...ducks, bucks and...! Yep, when I think of what things I am grateful for, they are numerous indeed. As we go through this holiday season, from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day, I realize more and more how the things we hold in our hearts are far more valuable than the things we hold in our hands. I was reminded of these in so many ways this past week that I'd like to share a few of my favorite things that make me grateful.

First of all, I am so very grateful to be a part of this family of faith called Lakelands Baptist Association. I realize I am not the most gifted at what I do in any category of life....and I don't need an "Amen" on that from you Sheila, but my inadequacies do one thing, they keep me dependent on God for nearly everything. I grow more understanding of the Apostle Paul's teaching when he says he delights and boasts in his weaknesses, for they keep him dependent on God, for when he is weak, he must rely on God's strength, and that is a good thing for sure. In the same way, if I rely on myself, I have nothing but my strength, my tactics and my intuition, which means I don't have much of anything. But when I recognize my own short comings in life and ministry, then I can cease relying on self and begin relying on God's Spirit and His power, and if I do it all in the midst of His will, I have learned that that is way mo'better for everybody, myself, my family, my friends and my ministry. I look around and see a lot of wonderfully capable pastors who could do what I do daily, and probably do what I do way better than I do what I do, so I am absolutely grateful that this association of churches allows me to keep doing what I've been doing for the past fifteen years or so, and pray that I will, with God's strength, be effective for a few more years before ya'll put me out to pasture, or is it, out to pastor, once again. I truly love and enjoy working with so many pastors and churches and am grateful everyday that I get to continue doing so.

And I, like so many of you, are grateful for my immediate family. Wow, I thank God for my beautiful and faithful wife, who absolutely fits the image of the Godly wife in Proverbs 31 better than anyone I have ever known. And she does it with such grace and humility, not to mention how she faithfully keeps the financial records so competently in so many of our churches and area ministries....her skills and attention to detail and her submissive and humble spirit in doing so, is nothing short of amazing. And with every gray hair I give her, and trust me, I've given her many after nearly 34 years of marriage...Sheila please, no comments needed from you....she just continuously ages with such grace and dignity. She is certainly not a blessing I deserve, but by God's grace, she is a blessing I received...and how grateful I am for God's kindness.

And the children that the Lord blessed us with are nothing short of another sign of God's amazing grace. Each of them brings something special and unique into our family's life, as can be seen through Zack's steadiness, Lacy's vivaciousness, Emily's merriment, hence her long belly laughs and Addie Lee's joyfulness and nuttiness. For instance, Addie Lee constantly reminds Kim and I that we don't yet have an "empty nest", which translated means, we can't start acting like old

fogies or go to restaurants nor on vacations without her, which we would never do anyway as she is the life of the party! Yep, between all them and their wonderful spouses, Katelyn, Ben and Justin, and the grands, life as we grow older only gets better.

And speaking of grands, as anyone who has them knows, they are the most bestest thing that ever happens to make life a joy, outside of Christ Himself. With Lettie Anne, Sadie Grace, and Ellie Kate...and yes, that's how you know you are blessed to live life in the South; children all too often are called by two names. And we're not done yet, with Emily due to give us another grand in like, two weeks, the joys just keep a'com'n! And speaking of the next grand, with less than two weeks before she gives birth, and in order to keep her streak going of having taken a deer every year since she was sixteen years old, she and Justin climbed a deer stand and she took a nice buck...uh, did I mention she is 8 ½ months pregnant? In fact, by the time you read this, she may not be pregnant anymore. Way to go Em, a chip off the ole block fer sure! All the good traits my children got in life seems to have come from their mother, while all the other more challenging traits, well...yep, they definitely got them from me! Uh, yes Sheila, you heard right...I did just admit that!

And my extended family is beyond amazing. When I hear of so much drama in extended families, I honestly cannot relate. On Thanksgiving Day, we had over fifty family and friends at our house, from California, Louisiana, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, and of course, South Carolina. For the past 46 years, it has become an annual migration that is growing in size with every marriage and birth. How grateful I am that my family continues the tradition of gathering from the four corners of the country on this special day. I love mine and Kim's families! We are truly blessed. But, I am so grateful that my Mama began to emphasize the value of family to us so very long ago, and after she could no longer host the annual event, the gathering moved from my old homestead in Augusta to the Redneck Plantation in Abbeville. And yes, not only has it taught me the value of family, but also the value of hanging onto some traditions, which add such value to life, a value that too many have let go of and exchanged for things that come and go like the grass of the field.

And finally, having friends to sweet'n life is an immeasurable quality of the good life. Friends who give invites for duck and squirrel hunts, who share their favorite fishing holes, who are kind and generous in allowing my family to hunt their land, ministry friends whose presence in my life is like iron sharpening iron, guys who pray for me and hold me accountable, guys who lend a hand in rebuilding old pickup trucks, buds that always show up when it's time to pull pork (and eat it), and others who simply accept me as I am, warts and all, and who love to go get a burger and just do life together. These are the many things I am so very grateful for, faith, family, friends, ducks and bucks, but especially, the folks with whom I simply do life. Blessed? Oh yeah, with faith, family and friends, how could one be anything but...!

Merry Christmas Ya'll!