

From the News to the Pews

Warm-Hearted Stories of
Family, Faith, Laughter, and Love

by

Steve Davis

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To Sheri, Tyler, and Natalie

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Preface

To my millions of imaginary fans, I say “thanks.” To my handful of actual fans, I say, “What are you thinking?” I am flattered that anyone would find inspiration or humor in my writings; I humbly say that I am grateful.

A local restaurant that the Davis family visits is 302 South Street. Their sign out front says, “302: World famous in small circles.” That’s me—very small circles.

All of the stories in this book have appeared in our church newsletter, so I owe a lot to Susan Mashburn, my secretary and our office manager. Our church members read them to appease my ego. I’m also grateful to photographer Melanie Brooks and the many coerced parishioners who posed for the pictures on the cover. Posed? Actually, they bring newspapers to church every Sunday. Friend John Bell has published all of my books, and for that I am grateful.

These same articles have all made their way into our local newspaper, The Times-Georgian, where my faithful readers gather around one table at a local coffee shop. This exposure would not have been possible without the support of the Publisher of our paper, my friend, Leonard Woolsey.

Since the subject of some of the articles is my family, I owe an apology to Sheri, Tyler, and Natalie. They are good sports, and if I will quit subjecting them to public humiliation they have said that they will keep me around for a few more years.

So, thanks for buying a book. Thanks for buying thousands of them. One, thousands, what’s the difference? Like most ministers, I am not good at math. The old joke is that my calling into ministry happened in the middle of a math class. I looked up at the heavens and asked, “Is that other job still available?” So, I became a minister and a writer and not a mathematician. Thanks for buying one. We ministers always round up. Thanks for buying thousands.

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Church News

From the News to the Pews

I long for its arrival. I've been known to brave the elements in my pajamas to retrieve it early in the morning. Having it in hand, and a cup of coffee, my day is off to a good start. I inherited a love of newspapers from my Dad, and now I have passed it on to our son, Tyler. I devour the sports section and read much of the rest. The daily newspaper is a welcome and honored guest in my home. It is eagerly awaited and joyously received. My attention is fixed on it, and for a little while, it is the center of my universe. And by the way, my newspaper boy could pitch for the Braves. He throws the paper in the same place every day—under my car.

But just as quickly it loses its value. Once the newspaper has been read it ceases to have value to me. Its news is no longer news. It has lost its capacity to excite me. From a pinnacle of prominence, it, much like Humpty Dumpty, takes a mighty fall. Having used it, I now abuse it. It might be used to line the cage of Polly the Parrot or be used to house break Fido. Once a treasure, it is now trash. “Honey, will you bag the newspapers?”

But alas, in our modern world, there is a thing called recycling and what was once only garbage for the dump, now can be redeemed from the dump heap. There is the possibility of rebirth for trees. And so the “good news” from the world of newspapers (you knew I would find a sermon in this) is that, in Christ, reconciliation and redemption are possible. As Paul says, “those in Christ are new creations. The old has passed away. Everything has become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

A well-known speaker started off his seminar by holding up a \$20 bill. In a room of 200 he asked, “Who would like this \$20 bill?” Hands started going up. He said, “I’m going to give this \$20 bill to one of you, but let me first do this.” He proceeded to crumple the bill up. He then asked, “Who still wants it?” Hands went up in the air. “Well, what if I do this?” He then dropped it and began to grind it into the floor with his shoe. He picked it up, now

crumpled and dirty. “Now who wants it?” Still hands went into the air. “My friends you have learned a valuable lesson today. No matter what I did to the money, you wanted it because it did not decrease in value. It was still worth \$20.”

“Many times in our lives,” he continued, “we are dropped, crumpled, and grounded in the dirt by the decisions we have made or the circumstances that come our way. We feel worthless. But no matter what happens, you will never lose your value to God.”

So, what are you worth? Have people in your life put you down and cast doubt about your value? The scriptures remind us that we are all “made in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27-28). That alone gives each of us great value.

I’ll see you at church or at the newsstand.

Dr. Phil

Nine-year-old Cole has a way of saying funny things. I think he gets that from his grandmother, Julia. Anyway, I walked into Longhorn Steakhouse for lunch with some friends, and I saw Cole sitting with his mom and dad, Chris and Melanie. Cole pointed at me and said to his folks, “There’s Dr. Phil.” I guess it could have been worse, like Dr. Ruth or Dr. Laura. At least he got the Dr. right.

Speaking of doctors, I was always a good student, though my senior year of college was two of the best years of my life. I crammed four years of college into five. I was having too much fun playing intramurals, and just playing, to graduate on time. I did, however, spend seven hard years in seminary obtaining two advanced degrees. So, yes, I earned a doctorate, but I could care less if you call me Dr. or Reverend. Truthfully, “Pastor Steve” has always been my favorite title from kids. I like that a tad better

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than Dr. Phil. Pastor describes my calling and Steve makes it personal.

Having worked hard for my educational degrees, I read with much interest a few years ago that 11 Georgia educators had their licenses revoked by the Professional Standards Commission. All 11, 10 teachers and a principal, bought advanced degrees from a university that requires little or no course work. Shame on them. That is an affront to all other educators who put in long, tough years for their professional training.

I have noticed that many preacher types like being called “Doctor,” when, truthfully, some have never attended seminary and have no advanced degree work. I've known some ministerial “Doctors” who have mail-order degrees.

Why? Why do they do it, and why do churches hire them? Perhaps some ministers like to hide their insecurities with a title. Lots of folk hide behind badges and titles. Is it possible that churches might want their egos stroked by having a “doctor” in the pulpit? Who knows? It's an odd thing to say the least. I am disheartened, however, when the state Department of Education seems to have more ethics than those who profess faith in Christ. We shouldn't allow ministers with bogus, mail-order degrees to preach in our pulpits any more than schools should allow such teachers to teach.

The fact that I am writing this article points out the log in my own eye: arrogance. Those of us with earned doctorates can be awfully snooty towards those who have bogus ones. Which is worse, an earned degree with pride or a bogus one with humility? Woe is me! Paul reminded us in Romans 12:3, “I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.”

We all know that Jesus chose a towel for service over a title for recognition. Dr. Jesus? No way.

Sincerely,

The Most Holy Father Right Reverend Doctor Steve¹

Herniated Heart

I can tell you that not all surgeries are the same. I had cervical disc surgery a few years ago to repair a herniated disc. Before that I had knee surgery and had very little angst about it. But this disc repair was different. I was a tad worried and had a bit of fear knowing that my surgeon, Dr. Prybis, would be cutting on my neck and not my knee.

Upon arriving at Tanner Hospital, I was greeted by some smiling volunteers at the front desk. When taken to the surgical area, the first nurse I saw was Ashley, who just happens to attend our church. Her smiling face put me more at ease. Then one of my surgical nurses came in, and lo and behold, it was Michelle. She is a member of our church, and she is the kind of person who could have made Job laugh. She makes Leno, Letterman, and Chris Rock seem boring. She had me laughing, causing the pain to move from my neck to my side.

Then some caring church members came by and with them was preacher friend Jimmy, who said a prayer for me. I guess his prayer put me to sleep, along with some feel-good medicine, because the next thing I remember is waking up in a room and meeting nurse, Matissha. She was kind, patient, and professional.

I went home that evening, took off the protective neck collar and looked at my bandage in the mirror. LOL. Michelle, the surgical nurse, had left me a message on my bandage. I guess it is sort of

¹ Randall O'Brien, *I Feel Better All Over Than I Do Anywhere Else* (Macon: Peake Road, 1996) 39.

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like putting your name in newly laid concrete or carving your initials in a tree trunk. Her message to me in black marker on the neck bandage was: “Tanner (hospital) and Jesus love me.”

That got me to thinking about the role of churches and hospitals. Hospitals don’t typically talk about loving patients. They will speak of caring about their patients, which Tanner Medical Center does very well, by the way. The hospital will treat all patients the same, whether they share my faith, some other religion, or no religion.

Churches, on the other hand, often speak of loving people. It is in our marching orders, “Love your neighbor; love your enemy” (Matthew 5:43-44). I have often said that churches are hospitals for sinners. All of us, who profess faith in Christ and attend a church, have some sickness in our souls. Call it herniated hearts. And hopefully, when you come to a church, you will find smiling, caring people who leave their mark, not on your bandage, but on your heart.

Balloons Belong in Church

I have said it from the pulpit, and I am not taking it back. What I have said from the pulpit that I am not taking back is this: “Balloons belong in church.” I have said it because balloons are for celebrations, and church should be a celebration. So, I stand by what I have said, but I would like to revise it slightly. Balloons belong in church, but not on Sunday morning in the sanctuary—and especially not hovering over the pulpit as the preacher preaches!

To our church members who missed that particular Sunday, I told you so. I told you to show up every Sunday because you never know what you might miss. It seems a child had released a balloon

on Wednesday night in the sanctuary and with helium (and some hot air) it went to the ceiling. No problem. We have a high ceiling. Rethink that—big problem.

This particular balloon apparently had a good personality and got pleasure out of seeing the preacher sweat. The balloon was like an airplane in a holding pattern, circling the airport (pulpit). It almost landed then went back up for another go round. I can see every set of eyes in the sanctuary, and trust me, they were not on me. That may be a good thing, but it meant that they were not listening to me. So, what's new?

I think my parishioners actually enjoyed it—anything to break the boredom. Raise your hand if you have ever chuckled when a kid fell off a pew, or the organ wheezed, or the sound system picked up police calls. Do you watch The Weather Channel when it's 68 degrees and sunny around the country? No, but I'll bet you watch during hurricanes.

A minister went to the Talladega 500, and after watching the cars circle the track for hours, boredom set in and turned him into the worst sinner. He admitted that voices within him began to hope for a smashup, a fire, anything to break the monotony. How could he as a minister hope to see cars flip and smash into walls? The demon of boredom had gotten the best of him.

Maybe you are like the millions of Christians who have settled into the comfortable belief that boredom at church is one of the crosses we carry. If you are one of those, then a balloon hovering over the pulpit was more excitement than you ever imagined could happen between stained glass windows.

I am not saying that worship should be entertaining, but we should strive to do it well. We preachers should work on our craft as a good surgeon works on his. (I don't want a surgeon practicing on me like we practice on our parishioners.) We should work to make worship interesting and compelling so that worshippers don't need a hovering balloon to have Sunday lunch conversation about church.

“We had to miss church today. How was it?” “It was great,” says the hungry parishioner. “Balloons again?” “No,” he says, “just a great sermon.”

Now I’m really dreaming.

The Most Interesting Minister in the World

We Baptists claim not to care for beer, but we do laugh at the beer commercials. One in particular, recently, has put a smile on our faces. “The Most Interesting Man in the World” commercials depict an older, handsome, bearded man with Spanish music playing softly in the background. The narrator describes this man (“the most interesting in the world”), who just happens to like a certain brand of brew, in this way:

- His mother wears a tattoo that says “son.”
- He once taught a German shepherd to bark in Spanish.
- If he punched you in the face, you would have to fight the urge to thank him.
- Both sides of his pillow are cool.

Well, a friend of mine (Brett Younger) came up with a list for “the most interesting minister in the world.”² That list includes:

- When the most interesting minister leads a silent prayer, the birds stop singing.
- When the most interesting minister steps into the baptistery, the waters part.
- When the most interesting minister preaches, cell phones refuse to ring.
- When the most interesting minister performs a wedding ceremony, no one looks at the bride.

² Brett Younger, “Baptists Today” (October, 2010) 28.

Well, I just got back from a week's vacation at the beach, and trust me, I am not the "most interesting minister in the world." I spent a week hanging out at a pool, napping, watching movies, napping, playing golf, napping, and winning the family Putt Putt contest (though by only a stroke over my wife). If you think that was interesting, then you would enjoy watching paint dry.

Most of us ministers lead normal lives. They look a lot like your life. Bills have to be paid, the oil needs changing, we fuss over what to buy for back-to-school, marital spats happen, etc. We get mad at the golf course (which I did on vacation) when the dad gum ball won't go where it is supposed to go.

However, we ministers should lead lives that aren't exactly normal. We (and others) should strive to lead exemplary lives. We can't just blow it off every time we make a mistake and say, "Oh, we are only human." We who preach should practice what we preach. And those in the pews who claim to follow Christ should do so as well. We ministers should say what the Apostle Paul says: "Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us" (Philippians 3:17). Though we don't always say eloquent things in the pulpit (or on paper), we should be able to say to our congregation, "Watch me, follow how I live, and you will be OK." Not perfect, but OK.

But I would like to be "the most interesting minister," just for one Sunday. Why? Because his sermons are never long enough.

Stutttering Like Mmmel Ttttillis

I sent Glenn a text that said, "The chimes at 3:00 sounded like Mel Tillis trying to talk." His response to me was, "Still ttttrying to figure out the problem." Glenn is our Minister of Music, and I sent him the text because the church's carillon, which plays chimes on the hour, is broken and sounds like Otis from the Andy Griffith

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Show. The dictionary definition of carillon is: “A sanctuary set of chromatically tuned bells in a tower, usually played from a keyboard.” Ours is not played from a keyboard.

We actually have a little man who lives up in our steeple. We send him food from time to time and offer him free parking at church for his services. Apparently he has some issues with claustrophobia or perhaps the ringing in his ears has made him nuts. But for whatever reason, the bells aren't ringing as bells should ring, so the chiming of the hour sounds more like an old 45 record that is “stuck.”

Actually, our carillon is played by a CD. We could do some fun things, by the way, with our CD-run carillon if we choose to. We could, I suppose, play Elvis' greatest hit on his birthday or “Sweet Home Alabama” and turn it up so loud our friends in Ranburne, Alabama could enjoy it.

Another possible use of the carillon would be to set a downtown mood each day, depending, of course, on the mood of the preacher, yours truly. If I am in a bad mood, then I will give the community a steady diet of Roseanne Barr singing the National Anthem. If I am sleepy, then you get Barry Manilow's greatest hits. Right now, with our carillon imitating a talking Mel Tillis, I'm thinking folks at the downtown square are a tad nervous all day.

Come to think of it, the carillon in the steeple mirrors in many ways those who gather beneath it. Stuttering, stammering people are welcome at church. Most of us struggle with putting words (stuttering is no laughing matter) and life together. All of us have our own set of faults, now don't we? The truth is, all of us who gather beneath the steeple for worship stutter to talk and stammer to live. We all walk with a limp. None of us who gather beneath the steeple have it all together. Yes, we are happy because we know Christ, and we want to know Him better and serve Him more faithfully. But, our lives often match our now stuttering chimes.

They can play beautiful music at times (so can we), but at other times, they struggle (so do we) to get it all together.

People are attracted to our steeple because it rises above the Carrollton landscape or because they hear the (normally beautiful) chimes. Who comes to the steeple? People who are hurting, stuttering, stammering, lonely, sad, broken, and confused, that's who. They come to the steeple because they hope that beneath the steeple is a sanctuary where they can find rest and hope.³

This Sunday I hope you will take your stuttering, stammering self to the church of your choice. "But Moses said to the Lord...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exodus 4: 10). Maybe Moses is the little man in our steeple.

Prison or Parish?

It might seem like an easy decision: jail or church? I read with a chuckle a recent article about what is happening in Bay Minette, Alabama, where non-violent offenders will have that choice. It is called Operation Restore our Community. The city judge there will let misdemeanor offenders choose to go to a place of worship for a year or go to jail and pay a fine. If the offender completes the one-year church attendance requirement, then the case will be dismissed.

Maybe it is not such an easy decision. It might depend on who is preaching. I've heard some sermons that bordered on torture (including some of mine). I wonder if the judge might reduce the sentence depending on the quality of the preaching and singing. I've heard some really awful singing in church, the kind that makes you grab the pew and hold on. Can the offender appeal to the judge if the singing gets unbearable?

³ Charles Poole, *Don't Cry Past Tuesday* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1991) 8.

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What if he picked a church where the preacher takes great pride in beating folks up with words? It's not true, you know: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It never has been true, and I have heard preachers work folk over like Mike Tyson did an opponent in the ring. And just when the hapless sinner is on the ropes, another zinger. So, can the offender go to the judge and ask for a change of venue if he is battered by an angry preacher?

I've been to some churches where you were not made to feel welcome unless you looked or dressed a certain way. What if he wears prison stripes to church, and the looks he gets say, "You're not welcome." Wouldn't we all have to be willing to let him sit by us in church? We don't have a section roped off that says, "For prisoners only." So, if he is not welcomed warmly, can he then go back to the judge and say, "I'll take prison."

You see, I'm just thinking of what a challenge that agreement would put on a church. The responsibility would fall squarely on our shoulders to be the kind of church that welcomes the prisoner, the outcast, and the troubled soul. We would need hearts of compassion to try and understand how he got to where he is in life—someone who has lived outside the law and made bad choices. In other words, we would have to practice what we preach.

I have a hunch that most churches I know around here would pass the test. I believe we would roll out the welcome mat. So yes, the would-be prisoner can have a seat on any pew next to the rest of us sinners.

But if that happens, please don't say, "Well, aren't you going to tithe?" In fact, tithing to a church that has bad preaching and singing may feel like paying a fine.

A Man and His Dog

He made me laugh, and I immediately felt a connection with him. Forget for the moment that he was dying from cancer and had at best a few weeks or a month to live. I liked his candor and good humor. A little dog, yapping at the top of her lungs, greeted me at the front porch of the man's trailer. I have forgotten the dog's name, but Hyper, would fit. He apologized for the dog's seeming hostility to strangers, and then with a wry smile said this: "I give her coffee in the morning, Mountain Dew in the afternoon, and a margarita at night." I almost fell out.

I have met some of the most wonderful and interesting people through Hospice. Several local ministers serve as Hospice chaplains, going to see patients who request a minister. I don't get called a lot. Sometimes I begrudge going, because I think I'm so busy that I don't have time. But the truth is, I never seem to regret the visits. My life is enriched by being around people who are facing death just around the corner. I am inspired by their honesty and courage.

One time I visited a man who had been in Vietnam and he had a confession to make. He made it to me. He had killed some innocent people in the war and needed to tell someone before he died, and I just happened to be that someone. I was overwhelmed by his words.

I almost feel unworthy to talk to folk who are dying. Many of them have had tough lives and more hardships than I can imagine, and they just want to talk to someone before they die.

Others are too young to be dying. Those are the toughest.

Some have questions about God and why this is happening to them. You know, "Why me? Why this? Why now?" They have questions for which I have no answers.

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Others will say “I’m alright with the man upstairs.” I have never been fond of calling God “the man upstairs,” but when a person is on their deathbed, it seems perfectly alright.

Back to the wonderful man with the dog, a dog high on caffeine and margaritas. My visit with him was brief, but I was touched by his thankful heart. A few friends had done some kind things for him, such as putting gravel in his driveway. He was humbled that friends would do stuff for him in his dying days. I left his trailer feeling like I had made a new friend. I said, “I’ve got to come back and see him again.”

But the weekend came, and the busy guy got busy. I got a call from Hospice late on Monday saying he was getting worse, and he had asked if I could come back. I couldn’t go Tuesday, after all, I am quite busy. I told them I would go out on Wednesday afternoon. He died Wednesday morning. Dang it.

I never got to make that follow-up visit. He must have felt he needed to talk to me before he died, and I sure felt like I needed to talk to him again. But a thing called death (and my busy schedule) got in the way.