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As many of you know by now, Doug's restaurant in Solon has opened. It has been an awesome experience to witness the opening of a brand new restaurant. I had no idea of the layers and layers of work and preparation that go into a venture such as this.

For those of you who've been there, you already know how beautiful the building is. And you already know how great the food is. While these things are true, the most interesting thing for me has been the people—the hired staff, in particular. Between the dishwashers, the cooks, the bartenders and the servers, it is an amazing collection of people.

They are diverse, as well...there are different races, different economic backgrounds, single moms, a wide assortment of religious and spiritual beliefs, an interesting variety of piercings and tattoos...all working together for the single purpose of serving people. In church language we call this "many members, one body." In their kitchen, they call it "working together to feed a restaurant full of hungry people."

Their official opening was Thursday, and after the kitchen closed, Doug and his business partner Matt got the staff together for a quick meeting. I happened to catch some of it, and I was surprised by what I heard...

They didn't begin by telling the staff what they need to do better the next day.

They didn't begin by reminding the staff of things they had forgotten.

And they didn't begin by pointing out the failures of the staff.

They began by telling their servers, cooks and dishwashers how proud they were of them. It was interesting to see the effect of this on the sweaty and exhausted faces of the servers and cooks, who had managed to serve hundreds of people in a few short hours. They looked surprised. A few told me later they were braced to be reprimanded for the things they'd done wrong, that they were shocked to be told straight away how proud the owners were of their hard work. They felt appreciated, valued and even loved.

This made me think of you.

It's no secret this is a tough time in our parish and in our denomination as we are faced with challenging issues. And I think sometimes this puts us always on the defensive, because there are some people in the world who too quickly like to point out the failures and shortcomings of others. But that staff meeting made me realize something about my pastoral leadership in this parish for the past twelve years.

And that is, I don't tell you often enough how proud I am of you. Even now, when your faces look a little bit like the faces of Doug's staff, maybe not as sweaty, but certainly faces that show exhaustion and commitment, even faces with that familiar deer-in-the-headlights look. But it's true, I am so very proud of you. You are here today, even now, when we're working through some tough stuff, and for that I thank you. And I'm proud of you for it. And I love you for it. And more importantly, Jesus Christ loves you. And that's what really matters, far more even than my love for you. Because while I will inevitably fail you, Jesus will not.

This is not unlike so many situations St. Paul faced, as I have mentioned before. As he traveled here and there, as the church was getting off the ground 2000 years ago, as he faced issues that shaped the church we have today, as he encountered controversies and challenges and some congregations in conflict and some congregations not in

conflict, most of the time, Paul lovingly begins his letters to the churches with reminders of the love that God has for them, and how proud he is of their faithfulness right at those very times when they felt like they were getting their backsides kicked. (Except for in his letter to the Galatians, in which case he simply greets the church and then launches into a tirade about their lack of faith; but most of the time, he follows his greetings with sentiments of thanksgiving and honor and love to these churches who worked so hard to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.)

And so this is the simplest sermon I have ever written. It offers no super deep theological insight. It presents no astonishing revelation. It has no complex message. It is a bold and clear message from pastor to people that I am proud of you for your hard work and commitment to the faith that claims you in good times as well as in challenging times, and to assure you of the love that I have for you. I am sorry for the times I have made mistakes along the way, but I am not perfect, just as Paul was no saint, either; well, he is a saint now, but we only call people saints when they die and I am still alive, so if you want to call me Saint Sarah after I'm dead, I think that would be ok. None of us can claim perfection, except Jesus Christ.

When Jesus came to this earth, he knew he would encounter opposition and challenges and ultimately death, as we all do. I really believe that Jesus walks with us during hard times, personally, globally and universally. I think this because I have encountered his presence in my life, as you have in yours, in people and circumstances and relationships too significant to be merely coincidental.

Sometimes the simple things in life are the best. A good cup of coffee is a very good thing. A soft pillow is a very good thing. The smell of a child's hair is a very good thing. And a simple message of "I am so very proud of you, and thank God for you and love you so very much" is also a very good thing, perhaps not the most fiery sermon ever preached, and perhaps very simple, but perhaps that is ok, from time to time.