

the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström
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Irvine United Congregational Church,

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A sleepy little town in Alabama is named after one of its most successful citizens. However, instead of just taking his last name, the town christened itself with the whole appellation and became known as the town of Phil Campbell.

Perhaps you have been following this story in the news, but in case you haven't read or heard about it, here's how it unfolded. The town of Phil Campbell sent invitations to anyone named Phil Campbell to attend a Phil Campbell Convention (and hoe-down) for their 100th anniversary. Brooklyn Phil Campbell had been a participant of the Phil Campbell Convention in the past before the novelty fizzled out, and he used a Phil Campbell page on Facebook to contact about 190 Phil Campbells around the world. Soon, people named Phil Campbell were onboard to be honored by coming to the town of Phil Campbell, where the only thing they shared was a common name.

In late April, a devastating tornado blasted the small southern town of just over 1,000 residents, where 26 people were killed and parts of the town were damaged or destroyed. A third of the residents lost their homes. Needless to say, the town decided to cancel the Phil Campbell Convention.

But this *upset* the Phil Campbells of the world, and the "I'm With Phil" campaign was born.

Juneau Phil Campbell is a Methodist minister in Alaska, and he raised \$5,000 in his own congregation for relief. Glasgow Phil Campbell is a Scottish musician, and he is doing a benefit for the cause. Brooklyn Phil Campbell arranged for a movie to be premiered in Phil Campbell for the town, and the Phil Campbell Band was onboard to entertain. A fund was set up by Phil Campbells (and a Phyllis Campbell) for a Habitat for Humanity house to be built in Phil Campbell. As of last week, over \$70,000 was raised by people named Phil Campbell, who collectively felt that if they had agreed to come to a town that wanted to honor them because of their name, they had to honor the town instead by helping it get back on its feet. The Phil Campbell Convention became the Phil Campbell Relief Effort.

Last week, the assembled Phil Campbells (about a couple of dizen) brought bottled water and supplies for the residents of the town. They dressed in matching blue shirts that said, "I'm with Phil," and came from all over the U.S. as well as

Australia, Scotland, Ireland, Canada and England. Some of the townspeople admitted that they shouted, “Hey Phil,” just to watch all of them turn around.

Most of the Phils stayed at the nearby Best Western Hotel, which had the unprecedented billing nightmare of how to deal with the fact that the bulk of their reservations were under the name, “Phil Campbell.”

On any number of online news clips, you can see the Phils working to fix up the town, each describing the sense of joy they shared in giving hospitality to the town, rather than receiving it, as was originally expected before the tornado changed everything. There are also solo clips of some of the Phil Campbells describing why they felt drawn to get on a plane and give something back to a town they shared nothing with but a name. They are humble men. The *New York Times* reported that these men discovered that in addition to their name, they shared receding hairlines and low bank accounts, which turned out to be a short-lived analysis after Texas Phil Campbell blew into town in a snappy, expensive car and a full head of hair.

The residents of the town were so grateful. Not only did their town’s namesakes work to put on new roofs, clear debris, and bring clean water and supplies to the small town, their ability to turn around what were supposed to have been acts of welcome and hospitality on the part of the town towards them, into such giving gestures, did much to lift the spirit of grieving and despair that weighed on the people there.

At the end of their stay, the town of Phil Campbell needed something to celebrate again, and gave the men a parade with a marching band, packing Phil Campbells upright into the open beds of as many pick-up trucks as were required, and driving them through the main street past small clumps of waving people, while a bagpiper (I suspect it was Glasgow Phil) played, “The Campbells Are Coming, Hurrah, Hurrah.” The local Brownies and Girl Scouts gathered to shout, “Good-bye Phil, Good-bye Phil, Good-bye Phil, Good-by, Phil...” as long as it took.

When this sermon is on our web-page, I will attach a link to the parade videos one of the Phils took from the back of his assigned truck bed.

It is an unusual story with an unusual set of circumstances, all tied up in one common name, owned by ordinary men and one ordinary town. But an act of such grace that brought them all together has made headlines and changed the participants in this story forever.

If a bunch of people can gather to do good works because of the coincidence of their name, how many places can we find good works to do because of our choice to be called Christians? How many ways can we pull ourselves together, put ourselves out there, and gang up for good?

Jesus walked through the city of Caesarea Phillipi in all of its grandeur with his disciples. There in that symbol of the empire that valued privilege for the few over the common good, he talked to them about hospitality being extended to everyone as a primary virtue.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Today is the 25th anniversary of the most active and visible outreach of our church—our pre-school. We honor a visionary (*Ruby*), our staff, (*Irma Rosales, Melissa, Stacey, Mary, Gabie, Sheila, Rosario, Rebecca, Jackie, Ophelia*) and our volunteer leader of 15 years, *Doreen Smith*. For 25 years, the Irvine United Church Early Childhood Center has been reaching out to this community with great care and concern for our youngest citizens, and has made an effort to do so as affordably as possible. You, who serve on our staff and as volunteers, are the reason we gather to celebrate a quarter century of exemplary service. On behalf of this church, I want to thank you and let you know how much you are appreciated.

Today is also a day to celebrate for another reason. Our church is a growing, progressive Christian Witness in Orange County—an Open and Affirming, Just Peace Church; filled with spirit and ready to move into a new chapter together.

As Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” we add, “Whoever you are and wherever you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here.” Our church leadership spent the weekend together at a leadership retreat, and we are together in committing to continue making sure that welcome is offered, and that we in turn serve each other, our community and the world beyond our doorstep.

Today, you, our leaders, are all “Phil Campbells.” Before I invite our team to come forward for a dedication of church leaders, I want to ask our outgoing leaders to stand and be recognized: Lyle Norton. Don Bjorklund. David Carruthers. Cheryl Arguile. Kathy Smith. Lesley Wheland.

Thank you for your leadership, care and friendship on these boards.

Now, I will ask our Admin Board, our Ministry Board and Committee chairs to come up to the chancel.

Let’s close in singing our closing, “Alleluia”

Sermon Resources

New York Times, June 18, 2011.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/18/us/18alabama.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=phil&st=cse

WAFB 48 News coverage <http://www.waff.com/story/14926412/im-with-phil-weekend-kicks-off-in-phil-campbell>

“Riding with all the Phil Campbells in a parade through the town in trucks” <http://imwithphil.com/>

Scripture for Sunday, June 26, 2011

Matthew 10:40-42

40 “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 42 and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”