

Reflections on a Ministry

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The Community Church of Sebastopol, UCC
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Hebrews 11 & 12 (selections)

On the third Sunday of June, 1978, a young and very nervous stranger stood in this pulpit, hoping that when he opened his mouth, something resembling words would come out – rather how I am feeling today! And here is how he began his ministry that morning: “You see before you this morning a solitary figure. To many of you I am a stranger. My voice and face are unfamiliar. It is said of me that I am the new minister. I and my family are newcomers to this church and this community. We don't really know our way around either one very well. But the very fact that we are newcomers gives us something in common with most of you. For you also were once new in this church and community. Yet you have made a home here and so shall we; you have become active participants in this community of faith, so shall we; you have grown to love one another and care for each other's joys and sorrows, so shall we... And, as we grow together in this pastoral relationship, in this shared ministry, the memory of these first, uncertain, tentative days in our relationship will inevitably fade.”

Who knew, back then, that I would still be standing in that same pulpit on April 24, 2016? After thousands of words, Frederick Buechner quotes, and Peanuts cartoons, still standing, still crazy after all these years. And what is even more amazing, you all are still showing up!

Historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, reports that on July 12th, 1492, the Nuremburg Chronicle in Germany, offered the opinion that the world would come to an end in 1493. In that time, writes Morrison, all of Europe seemed gripped by a dark mood of hopelessness and pessimism – the future seemed bleak. But, just as this dark news of the end of the world was being proclaimed from the housetops, three tiny ships, an expedition led by one Christopher Columbus, were whispering their way into the future. I suppose you could say that a world did come to an end in 1492, because a new world was being born. That's rather how I am feeling about this day. Yes, something is ending, and I am grieving that. But I am also convinced that this church is on the edge of any number of exciting and creative new beginnings. So even as my heart is heavy over the ending of my ministry among you, I am also excited for you. Something new is being born. Oh the places you will go.

Yes, in June, 1978, we, much like Abraham and Sara, set out together on a journey without really knowing where that journey might take us. And what a trip it has been. I feel so blessed that we are ending this portion of our journey today with sadness and joy, with tears but also laughter, with so many wonderful and fond memories, and, as I said last week, also with the sense of being not quite finished – that there is still more we can do – which, again, I believe bodes well for the future.

This has been my life, has defined so much of who I am, has given my life so much meaning and purpose. It will take a while for me to figure out who I am if I am not your pastor. I'm missing you already. But my heart is also so full and so thankful.

As I was thinking about this day, about what to say in this final sermon, I have been reflecting about the importance of place – place embraced and loved, understood and honored. I have been greatly helped in this process by Wendell Berry. He is a farmer in Port Royal, Henry County, Kentucky. On this small farm, where his family has lived and farmed since the Civil War, besides plowing fields, planting crops and working horses, he also writes novels and poems and essays. In the midst of what he calls a culture of “the one-night stand,” he long ago committed to farming his land over the long haul. Why? Why stay in this one place so long? He gives us a large clue when he says this: “During the last 17 years... I have been working at the restoration of a once exhausted hillside. Its scars are now healed over, though still visible, and this year it has provided abundant pasture, more than in any year since we have owned it. But to make it as good as it is now has taken 17 years. If I had been a millionaire or if my family would have been starving, it would still have taken 17 years. It can be better than it is now, but that will take longer. For it to live fully as it did before bad use ran it down, may take hundreds of years.”

The great old Baptist preacher, Carlyle Marney, recalled the time he had a couple of young ministers in his study – he called them “preacher-boys” – excitedly telling him all the great plans they had for ministry in their first congregations. In Marney's words, “These fellows were

going to bring in the Kingdom of God with bulldozers.” I suppose that might have been a description of me in 1978 – bring in the bulldozers! I’m sure when it was, but sometime, along the way, much like Berry working his field for 17 years, I began to understand that good work, that ministry, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, cannot be made answerable to haste, urgency, ambition or even my sacred agenda and timetable. I realized that if I was going to have a meaningful ministry among you, I would have to submit myself to this call, to this people and to this place. It included preaching and worship and teaching to be sure, but also the detailed, painstaking, day-to-day care of nurturing people and paying attention to God working in me and in you. “Inch by inch, row by row... gonna make that garden grow.”

It takes time to grow Christians; it takes to grow as a Christian. And what a gift – what a gift – for so long, to have been on the front line of seeing the gospel worked out in people’s lives. Bulldozers don’t seem to work very well in a church. One has to take care of things, pay attention to details, listen for that still, small voice... and that takes time. And a good dose of religious humility – for the Kingdom of God is defined, not in unchangeable pronouncements from some pulpit, but in particularity, one by one, a little different for every person, for each situation. As another scholar has said, “The Bible has no isolated meaning apart from the people reading it and the questions they need to answer.” But you only learn that if you decide to stick around for a while, to listen and learn, maybe even allow yourself to be changed along the way.

Charlie Brown, Violet and Snoopy are walking along. Violet is in a philosophical mood: “Sooner or later, Charlie Brown, there’s one thing you are going to have to learn. You reap what you sow! You get out of life exactly what you put into it! No more and no less!” They move on, but Snoopy stops and thinks about this for a few moments. Then he says, “I’d kind of like to see a little more margin for error!”

I think one of the blessings of place, of hanging in there with each other for so long, is that this is what we have been able to give to each other over all these years... a little margin for error – the knowledge that we are in this together, even in those moments when we may not be particularly fond of each other. Author and pastor, Gene Peterson, once offered some words of advice to pastors, words which I believe also speak to the life we have shared together. He said, “The only way to be a pastor is to love a particular group of people in one place over time. They’ve got to know you are on their side even if you don’t always give them what they want you to give. They are not going to know that just from hearing you from the pulpit. You can only convey that to them by being with them, by listening to them, by feeling their pain and suffering, and even by sharing their wrong ideas, but all the time giving witness whether verbal or silent to the work of the spirit.”

What a joy it has been, what a mystery, to have been able to do just that with you; to see so many stories develop and to be privileged to be a part of those stories. That’s what I will most miss. I know I have mostly defined myself, and often defined by you, as a preacher and leader of worship. But not being a pastor among you, not entering into sacred conversation with you, not seeing, when you least expect it, the glory that takes place, right there, in someone’s everyday world... I am going to miss that. For those encounters, day by day, have touched me and changed me.

And so, once again, we follow the path of Abraham and Sara and trust God to lead. There is so much already in place. Lydia and Rachel developing dynamic ministries – new families coming, seemingly every week. Kindred groups forming. As I was attending meetings in March inevitably the talk turned to the many things that would be happening after I was retired. Yes, it felt a little weird, but also good. So many good leaders have come forward to take positions of responsibility in the church – people already looking ahead to summer and fall programs. And in two weeks, you are going to meet a wonderful candidate for the senior minister position. Trust me on this, your best days are still before you. Another grand adventure awaits. Don’t be afraid to join in.

Friends, I and my family came to Sebastopol 38 years ago and stayed. Today I have tried, inadequately I’m sure, to share what being here among you has meant to me – my embrace of the importance of people and place. Over the years, I have attempted, faithfully, to run with perseverance the race God set before me. And now, this portion of the race comes to an end. You have touched my heart and shaped my life and faith – indeed the life and faith of my family. And so, even in the midst of the sadness I feel right now, I have faith, that what we have shared will never be truly gone or past. For we are all one spirit, one heart, one family of faith... Thanks be to God!