

“Above All Else”
Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle
June 23, 2019
Colossians 3:12-17

I suspect that this won't be the last time that I preach from this pulpit. But it will be a while – and necessarily so. It will be hard for me, I admit. I love preaching, and I have loved preaching here, in this sanctuary, this sacred, beautiful space, for 26 years! I have loved reflecting on the biblical witness with you, how the scriptures enlighten and inform our lives as we seek to live faithfully in our day and time. How rich a witness it is! It is never exhausted, and it is always new. As we come to the scriptures in faith and expectation, we can trust that they will speak to us anew. But as the Apostle Paul says, we hold these treasures in earthen vessels, and no single interpretation, certainly no single voice, can fully plumb the heights and depths, the full range of the gospel. We need many voices, and we need different voices – we need new voices, perspectives and styles of communicating the awesome and gentle power that God, who is love, was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, entrusting us with the message and ministry of reconciliation.

Preaching is essentially a dialogue, and God's word is revealed and discovered in the mix of what is proclaimed and what is heard, trusting that seeds are planted, and that God gives the growth. It has been an awesome and blessed gift to preach from this pulpit.

You and your new pastor will need time for God to plant seeds in each other's hearts, time for love to grow between you. He or she will bring fresh eyes and ears, and new words to enlighten and inform; and she or he will need to learn about you, to catch the rhythm of the life of this community of faith – to begin to build, with you, new patterns of witness and service. I will look forward to coming back when invited by the pastor and the session, when and after those bonds of love and faithfulness have taken hold. I suspect that I will have new perspectives to share – for God is ceaselessly active in our lives. I plan to keep paying attention.

Preaching is not the whole of it, of course. Probably 15 or 16 years ago now, when it was looking like I was going to be here at Pebble Hill over the long haul (and Karen at Northminster), Karen and I attended a conference in Saint Louis on long-term pastorates, sponsored by the Alban Institute. I was looking back over one of the books we read for that conference that quoted a summary statement from Alban research on the topic: *“In a long pastorate, clergy soon exhaust whatever wisdom or knowledge*

they brought to the scene and must continue to scramble to grow personally or end up repeating themselves and boring others. But those who do grow, who do monitor the other disadvantages of a long pastorate, will be likely to have a ministry that is very rewarding and fulfilling. They can experience a closeness and intimacy with people that only comes with time."

The text goes on to affirm how it is the journey together that is ministry, that the destination is not as important as the journey. We – long term pastors – come to learn that the true essentials of ministry are not about theology, as important as that is, or about the number of meetings we need to attend. Ministry is about relationships: God and God's people; pastor and people; pastor and God. "The long haul (the text concludes) brings that clearly into focus and affords us the *privilege* of following God's call to be among God's people and to be about the proclamation of peace, reconciliation, and hope – a message this world so desperately needs."

I'm glad I looked back at that – because this has been borne out for me, and I hope, for you. I have spoken and written about how all along it has been a "privilege" to be invited into your lives and to share in both the difficult times and times of celebration – to be your pastor. I am sorry for the times I have not been there, for cues I may have missed. This, too, has to change now – and this may be the harder part, for a couple of reasons.

The first is that it's hard to let go. We've been together a long time! The current Deacon moderator (Laura) we baptized, confirmed, baptized her baby, and ordained her! It is such a joy to greet and give a hug to young and even middle-aged adults who were in Sunday school and youth group here who return home for holidays and come to church! (Imagine how Bette feels, who was here for 20 years before I got here!) And I know how their parents and grandparents feel, who greet and hug my kids when they come back to the congregation that helped raise them in the faith.

There have been many other times and occasions in the cycle of life in our families and congregation, and nation, when it has been both daunting, and a privilege, to be your pastor in and through them, including the mystery of this life's ending – to share in that humbling, trembling, holy process. And everything in between.

I've been talking with Sarah McTyre, who'll be preaching next week on my last Sunday with you, about what she should preach on. I don't know if this will be her sermon title

or not, but she thinks she's settled on doing something with the theme "the grace of letting go."

The other reason for this being the harder part is that, as you know, we will still be in the community, near neighbors to some of you. We'll likely see each other at the grocery store, at Syracuse games, at concerts, at interfaith gatherings, maybe some rallies and demonstrations. We're allowed to say hello and speak with each other – even to be friends! But I won't be your pastor anymore, though I will always care for you and care about you and pray for you. This will be very different for all of us. If I were going to another church or retiring in a different community we wouldn't have to be so aware of these things. So when we see each other I won't ask you about Pebble Hill, and I won't be offering any advice – so don't ask me!

A number of you have asked me, or asked Karen, what I'm going to do. I'm going to wash my car! It really needs it. I never seem to have time to do it myself– and when you take it down to the place on Erie Blvd there always seems to be at least a half hour wait. So, there is that. I hope to paint our house later in the summer, at least the front this year, get started on some landscaping. So there are those near-term things. Karen isn't retiring yet (she says because she's so much younger than me), so I'll be worshipping with her – we haven't been able to do that for a long time – and to help out in an "unofficial" capacity with a few things there. I told her that I won't be attending any evening meetings.

I plan to stay involved with InterFaith Works, and will continue to serve as our presbytery's representative on the roundtable of faith leaders there. I am committed to that work, and I think I have become a better Christian by being part of it. I'll stay involved with work around issues of racial reconciliation, justice and peace. I expect I'll be doing some writing, and maybe some teaching, and preaching - and I'll find ways to keep going with music. But I'm going to take some time before I commit to very much.

I knew that I'd be turning to one of Paul's letters for the scripture lesson for today. I haven't preached a lot from Paul, and I think I want to do more of that. I have generally focused on the assigned gospel lesson for the given Sunday – and the life, the teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus provides an endless source of sermon material, as does the Old Testament. But Paul's letters, and the other epistles of the New Testament, offer a direct word to the church – because that's precisely what they were.

Paul really never dwells on the life of Jesus. He writes letters to the churches, most of which he founded, during his missionary journeys after his dramatic conversion - from being a persecutor of early Christians, to being the greatest champion and evangelist for the faith. His letters to these churches who were trying to figure out how to live together and be together in this new life in Christ pre-dated the writing of the gospels, and were considered important enough to hold equal footing as scripture with them. From those letters it is apparent that it was a pretty rocky road. There were conflicts over issues of leadership and of service – who was supposed to do what – how should the community be ordered, who should be included, how they should relate to the larger society and world.

In these ways their issues were not too different from ours – especially, you might say, when a congregation is about to embark on a new journey in its life. There is a kind of starting over – and it will be a precious opportunity to look at who you are, who are the folks around you, what are the needs of the community and world in which you are ministering. You have already begun that work, and as you live into a new way of being together with a new pastor you will be guided by the grace that has led you thus far, who you have become.

I admit to being biased, but what I see is a congregation that cares deeply for one another, and serves one another in love. I see a congregation that brings a sense of wonder and a spiritual yearning for God’s presence in your lives; for equity and justice in the world God so loves. I see a congregation that faces challenges, to be sure - but has the maturity of faith, the brains, the creativity, and the guts to take on those challenges with love, with grace, with determination, and with good humor. You are willing to step into unfamiliar and even uncomfortable territory. Don’t give up, and don’t give in to the cultural pressures that want to determine for you what constitutes success.

Welcome the gifts of others, including especially those who have more recently become a part of this body of Christ – and those who are not here yet. Hold the children at the center of your life, and honor those who have lived long in the faith and who have much to teach.

And above all else, Paul writes to the church at Colossae, and he writes to Pebble Hill Church, “put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Paul puts love “above all else” because love will bring peace to the heart of the community. Now, this is easy when everyone is polite and gentle with each other – but Paul means for it to be in force especially when there are disagreements and difficult decisions facing the

community. As it is God who gives the growth, it is God who creates the harmony – as we put on love above all else.

And I love how Paul brings this section of his letter to conclusion: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Paul invites the community to practice this difficult task of living and being together in love with song. There will be difficult decisions to make, and there will be disagreements – but you will keep singing. My dear sister Bette has helped release that song in my heart – and I know in the hearts of this congregation.

Keep singing – beyond my time with you, beyond Bette’s time with you – another 20 years from now! - because a singing faith is a faith that results in thanksgiving to God, to whom be all the glory, now and forever.