

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
September 20, 2009
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Selections from Philippians

Saying Goodbye to Say Hello

So for a while I thought I would just write and preach a normal sermon. I would use the lectionary text and approach this sermon just like I have approached all my sermons with you over the last 7 ½ years. This is a worship service. It is centered on our worship and praise of God. I am not the subject. You are not the subject. God is the subject. But as a friend gently reminded me earlier in the week, “Shannon, you need to come to terms with the fact that this is not going to be a normal Sunday. This is a big deal. And it is a big deal not just for you, but also for this place. It is a time of change for everyone.”

He was right. As much as I wanted to deny it, this is not a normal Sunday for this congregation or for me and my family. Because it is a Sunday on which we say goodbye to what has been, in order to say hello to what will be. But honestly, as I told the congregation at The Remington last week (your Worship TEAM and staff bring quarterly worship and communion there), this whole goodbye process is not a process with which I am very skilled.

I have realized throughout this past month that I am not very good at saying goodbye and releasing. I am not very good at unclenching my fists and opening my hands. Rather, I would prefer to hold on for dear life—hold on to my children, to my family, to my friends, and to you. I have found myself wanting to hold on tightly to who we have been in ministry together over these last 7 years, wrapping my fingers around it, not letting it go, certainly not giving it back to God so that it can be given to someone else. And I know from some of you that I am not the only one having a hard time unclenching my fists and opening my hands. Some of you share that struggle.

The desire to hold on to who we have been as partners in ministry makes good sense. It has been a very good seven years. This congregation has grown stronger in its witness to God’s grace. You have become healthier as a community of faith. You have grown not just in numbers and in diversity, but also in your sense of God’s active mission in this world.

And I certainly know that I have grown in my ministry and in my personhood over the last seven years of being your pastor. My goodness, I arrived at your front doors at 29 years old with a 5 month old daughter, having been an Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults for 3 years. I had never been to a Finance meeting, a Property meeting, a Stewardship meeting, or a Long Range Planning meeting. I had never had the experience of preaching weekly nor moderating a Session meeting. I was wide-eyed and nervous.

But you were open-hearted and gracious. And you fully welcomed me and my family into your hearts, being open to my leadership, and giving me the space to learn and to try things out. As Julie and I have said over the years, you all will let us try just about anything, once. And other than my unfortunate incense incident a few years ago, when trying to be creative, I filled this whole place up with smoke, sending some of you gagging into the narthex while the choir got ready to revolt; other than that, many of our new efforts in ministry flourished and brought us all into a deeper sense of God’s presence.

And I cannot adequately articulate the power of your openness and warmth. Your openness and warmth have made ministry with you very meaningful and so much fun. And those qualities are certainly not

something that I brought to you. Those qualities of this congregation are stitched into the fabric of who Woodhaven is as a community of faith. God is the one who has given you, Woodhaven Presbyterian Church, the spiritual gifts of an open heart and an open mind.

Somehow in your birthing as a church, those faith-filled qualities became a part of your DNA. Julie and I have just had the privilege of nurturing those inherent gifts and helping to bring them out. And trust me when I tell you that your openness to all of God's children and your genuine warmth of spirit are not qualities that every congregation has learned to appreciate and nourish. So please don't take those gifts for granted, but continue to grow into them more and more. Your openness and your warmth are foundational to your call as a church. I believe that God has called Woodhaven to be a unique Christian voice of compassion in a culture that is becoming more and more polemical and strident in tone.

Who you are is why, to use Paul's words, I thank my God every time I remember you. And I know that my gratitude for these years that we have shared will only grow deeper with time. Because I have no doubt that had it not been for my time as your pastor, I would not be ready to answer God's next call for my life—to be pastor to the congregation in Black Mountain. You have given me strength and courage. You have given me hope. You have given me your trust. And I am so grateful for all of those gifts.

And now, God has brought all of us to today, to this new space. God has brought all of us to this time during which we can thank God for who we have been together as family and as partners in ministry. And now God asks us believe the promise in Isaiah that God is doing a new thing for which we are to open our eyes and perceive. God is calling us to open our collective hands to release who we have been, to offer it back to God, and then to keep our hands open. Because God is also preparing all of us to receive the new blessings and new life that God will surely bestow upon us.

I am receiving the gift of a new ministry in a new place with a new people. And you will be receiving the gift of a new ministry in the same place but with a new pastor. Who you will become with this new vision and energy is a twinkle in God's imagination right now. But I have no doubt that the future witness and service of this congregation will be blessed and glorious and strong. You cannot help it. It is just who you are, and it is a part of who you will be, as well.

So no, this is not a normal Sunday. But we are still not the subjects of this time together. We are not the ones who have orchestrated all of this. God is. And the God who has been so faithful in our past will continue to be so faithful in our future. For we worship an Easter God and we are an Easter people. We are a people who know that the spaces of endings are always the labor rooms of new beginnings. We are a people who know that Good Friday grief always blossoms into Easter Sunday hope. We are a people who know that we can say goodbye to what has been precisely because God is already preparing us to say hello to what will be. We are a people who know that no matter what, we will all remain in God's strong embrace, knit together as the body of Christ, forever.

So dear friends, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. It has been an honor to have served as your pastor and your friend. You will always occupy a space in my heart.