

¹⁷ From Miletus Paul sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him. ¹⁸ When they came to him, he said to them:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. ²⁰ I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ²¹ as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus. ²² And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. ²⁴ But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace.

²⁵ “And now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. ²⁹ I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰ Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them.

³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴ You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. ³⁵ In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

³⁶ When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. ³⁷ There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸ grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. Then they brought him to the ship.

So, from now on, we know no one in a human way; even if we have known the Messiah in a human way; however, now we no longer know him in this way. So, if anyone is in the Messiah, new creation! Old things have passed away. Look, new things have come into being! (My translation)

Most of us have come here today aware that something new is coming for this church, something as yet unknown, something we can only imagine in our minds. But we *are* expecting a time of change and challenge in this congregation. (Frankly, this can be scary for all of us.) Indeed, today we both observe and celebrate the end of a pastoral relationship. This is important for two reasons. First, we need to make a break with the old before the new can happen. You will have a new pastoral relationship one day, but only to the extent that you let go of the old one and invest yourselves in the new one. We must untie this knot if a healthy relationship is going to flourish with a new pastor. After all, we can easily get stuck somewhere along the way and not move on to the place where God is calling us. So, it’s important that we say goodbye to the old and get ready to welcome the new.

Yet, if we’re honest, we’ll have to admit how difficult embracing newness can be. Maybe the word I’m looking for is “growth.” It’s difficult to grow. We have growing pains. You learn a lot about yourself on moving day. Things you haven’t seen or used for years suddenly take on new value as you rummage through dusty closets. Our old stuff—if we may dare to call it that—

gets stuffed into a packing box for the new destination. As you and I come to "moving day" in this church, we could repeat the same scene, pulling out, dusting off, and packing up our old stuff for the journey ahead. It *could* happen. We know how hard it is to leave the old and accept the new.

Surely, Paul would've agreed that newness doesn't come easily. He knew firsthand how difficult it was for a devoted Pharisee like himself to change direction and embrace a crucified Messiah, of all outrageous things! Yet he would've gone on to say: "But God—but God can help us accept the new." Listen to his excited words to the Corinthians: "If anyone is in the Messiah, new creation!" God is doing something new, something dynamic in our lives. Indeed, God invites us to move into a new world today—a world where the old has passed away and the new has come. The difference between us and other people is that we're in touch with a new creation, not tied down to every old thing. Yes, new things can actually happen among us.

Of course, we may not know ourselves to be new creations. After all, we often feel and act like old creations. Yet the new creation is a totally new thing. Though well-intentioned, all of our efforts cannot bring it into being. The new world Paul describes is out there just beyond our reach. And, when the new thing comes, it's because God has acted through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Listen to Paul again: "If anyone is in Christ—in Christ, mind you—new creation!" The power to be renewed comes from outside us today. It's the power that raised Jesus from the dead. God stands among us today, motions to us, and says, "Come on, enter the new world." The future of this church depends on our constant contact with the living Lord. If he really lives, if he's truly among us, if we're in him, we can embrace newness. So, our ministry must be a ministry of Jesus Christ in which we exalt our Lord above everything else. Then, and only then, will it achieve what God wants.

Second, as we observe and celebrate the end of this pastorate, we have an opportunity to give thanks to God for 25 years of common ministry. We are all veterans of good times and bad times together. Ordinations, installations, confirmations, youth work, committee and congregational meetings, fellowship lunches, weddings, baptisms, sicknesses, deaths, funerals, services of worship, Advents, Christmases, Ash Wednesdays, Easters, Ascensions, Pentecosts, mission trips, building projects, Sunday School classes, weekly Bible studies, and new programs of ministry, to name a few things we have shared together. (The only thing I won't miss are the meetings.)

It's so hard to give up this relationship, because, over a period of 25 years, we've grown to love and appreciate one another. We can give thanks to God for this friendship. After all, things might have been cold, indifferent, or even rancorous among us. Yes, we can be thankful that we worked together in harmony and accomplished as much as we did in 25 years. We agreed without being cliquish; we disagreed without becoming embittered.

Of course, we aren't saying goodbye to our friendship or our high regard for you. Absolutely not. It will endure as long as we live, because you will always hold a special place in our hearts. We are going to miss every one of you greatly. We are going to miss Beverly and our wonderful choirs who lead us in music. We are going to miss our other staff: Renee, Kim, Dee, Ron, Kristen, Sandy. We are going to miss this sanctuary and its grand organ. We are going to miss working with the Session where we plotted the course of this church. I am going to miss being in Front Royal on an almost daily basis and the other friends Liz and I have made here. You are like family to us; indeed, you *are* family to us. (Unfortunately, at the stroke of midnight on September 30, we will lose our beloved church family and have to go hunting for a new one.)

Because we're a family, we do the kinds of things Paul describes in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Here Paul and the elders of the Ephesian church say their final goodbyes before he sails off to Jerusalem and what will turn out to be his arrest, imprisonment, and trial. Like any pastor, Paul is concerned about what will happen with the church in Ephesus during his perhaps permanent absence.

Watch out for yourselves and the whole church, he says.¹ You all will need to become pastors to one another in this interim period. There are people in this congregation who are shut-in, sick, or going through some personal crisis. Remember to pray for them, call them, or visit

them. (I know you will—you always have.) You "old timers"—if I may call you that—will need to nurture and encourage the "newcomers" among you. Go out of your way to make them feel at home and useful. Yes, useful—we wouldn't want them to be idle, would we? And your ruling elders will certainly be out there ahead of you doing this pastoral work themselves.

Continue, Paul also says, to study the Scriptures as you have in the past.² By now, you know I have a strong commitment to education, because I have focused a lot on teaching as your pastor. Holy ignorance is still ignorance. On my first Sunday 25 years ago, I told you that I came to this church expecting to grow as a Christian—and that I needed your help to do it. In the process, I hoped maybe you would grow along with me, too. How did we do? This church will grow and be transformed only to the extent that it submits itself to the life-changing power of the word of God which comes to us through the Bible. Indeed, the Holy Spirit uses the words of Scripture to bring us out of our own limited visions into the wider vision of God's new world. The gospel I have preached over the past 25 years did not make a comfortable pew for any of us. Yet, it's the only thing that will draw us from spiritual lethargy into the wide-eyed excitement of the divine life.

Finally,—I saved the best for last!—Paul says, it's more blessed to give than to receive.³ This proverb, Paul reminds us, originated with Jesus himself. No preacher thought it up for a pledge drive. And Jesus had a lot of experience in giving rather than receiving. Certainly, it wasn't easy for Jesus to do that. For much of his ministry, he had no place to lay his head; he was homeless, impoverished, and dependent on others. Yet he made the choice—time and time again. And the decision to give more than receive finally led him to the point of giving his own life on the cross. Still, don't you think Jesus was the happiest person who ever lived? He was always talking about his joy. If we remember him at all today, if we still hold up his example, it's precisely because he gave—in joy he gave himself away for others.

And that same blessedness is ours when we give. For as we open our hearts to others, God's grace streams into our lives. And who knows what happiness will come! So, sharing who you are and what you possess isn't something to hang your head about in despair. Giving is the door to the good life. What does Jesus say? Kick up your heels, for God smiles on those who give. Maybe we can measure true happiness by how much we give of ourselves and what we have. Judge for yourselves. Who is happier? A person like Paul who spends his days and nights giving what he has and what he is? Or a person who, afraid of what the future holds, spends his days hoarding what he can gather together to head off some imagined disaster? Sure, buy insurance, put aside a nest egg, get a better job, but remember this one, overriding principle: "There is more happiness in giving than receiving." That's the gospel of Jesus Christ in a nutshell. And that's my final answer. Amen.

¹ Acts 20:28.

² Acts 20:32.

³ Acts 20:35.