

39 years ago, come this August, I preached and led worship for the first time in my First Call, which was at Zion Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids. Zion was a large, multi-staff congregation, and I was called as their Associate Pastor. Naturally, I was somewhat apprehensive, and my apprehension was increased by the advice the Senior Pastor gave me right before the first worship began. Meaning well, he told me, “I hope you’re prepared for this. The Associate Pastor before you was one of the most competent people I’ve ever known, but he did poorly on his first sermon and left a bad first impression that a lot of people could never get past for all the years he served here.” Not at all the reassuring words I might have wished to hear, but somehow I managed to make an acceptable first impression, and my ministry there went well. The fact is, though, that most of us *are* aware of the importance of first impressions, of starting well---whether it be a first date or the first day on a job. We *know* that how *beginnings* are handled matter, and we pay attention to them. We could look even to the life of Jesus to see this truth confirmed; Christ’s beginning, His birth, was choreographed with care. He is born very intentionally to a peasant couple in an occupied country in such humble and chaotic circumstances that a cow’s trough must become an improvised cradle for the newborn. Clearly, God makes a statement here of how God stands in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and those caught up in the craziness of their times. This first impression that God makes in the Incarnation is significant and has claimed a hold on humanity’s imagination for over 2000 years in the event we call Christmas. Quite a start! We all know that *beginnings* matter.

In today’s Gospel though, we are focusing not on the *beginning* of Christ’s time on earth but on the *ending*. The setting is Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper; Jesus will be executed the following day, as He well knows. This is the last meal that He will share with His disciples prior to that death on the cross. And particularly in the Gospel of John, we see how carefully and intentionally Christ goes about making His *farewell* with them. He is teaching us that it’s not *only beginnings* and first impressions that matter; it *also* matters how we say *goodbye*, how we handle closures and endings. This service today, which includes a

Conclusion of a Call liturgy for my final service here, is *also* about saying goodbye and paying thoughtful attention to closures and endings. Someone asked if I'd chosen this text specifically for today, but actually I didn't; it's the assigned Gospel for the 6th Sunday of Easter this year. Providential, perhaps, in that it turns our attention to this crucial task of making meaningful farewells; of bringing closure to important times with intentional love and care. *That's* what we are doing for each other this morning; I am seeking to do that for all of you; and all of you are seeking to do that for me and my family. In undertaking this, we are doing something holy, we are following the example of Jesus, who understands that just as beginnings are crucial, so are endings. How we say hello matters; and how we see goodbye matters, too.

This reality is often driven home for us at the time of a death. For thousands of years, humans have utilized sacred ritual to assist in the process of grieving someone's loss. Within our faith tradition, we generally have a funeral or memorial service, during which we cry, laugh, share memories, and find hope in our faith. But particularly in more recent years, possibly acerbated by the Covid pandemic, there has been a tendency to short-circuit that farewell ritual. Services around the time of death don't always happen, or maybe they happen in a very abbreviated manner that doesn't really allow us to acknowledge the depth of our loss. It's detrimental to our ability to move past a loss if we never truly acknowledge it, and any time that happens, I hear people expressing regret over what they missed out on, which was, essentially---a sacred ritual that would honestly recognize the need to grieve and to hope.

Church denominations, including our own, have recognized the importance of this acknowledgement of grief within the leaving of a Pastor from a congregation, as is happening among us. For this reason, our Synod lays out a careful and intentional process from the time a Pastor announces their leaving, as I did in January, until they actually are gone. The process looks to create a space for grief and transition to occur in a way that is respectful and healthy. It is *valuable* time for both the pastor and the congregation; it is also can become an *irritating* time, during which everyone involved may begin to feel anxious or impatient. Obviously, everyone here wonders what will happen next. When will an interim pastor come? When will a long-term pastor be

called? How will this transition unfold? And why couldn't the process happen more quickly, to allay some of those future-oriented anxieties? Well, it's because sometimes we need to fully close one door before we open up the new door. Having done right by this process of farewell and closure, you will all be much more able to open those new doors for the future with a clear mind and lighter heart than if you had short-circuited the process. I am grateful for the patience, care and attention that have been shown to me and my family and to this time of closure, and I am grateful not only for my sake but for yours----there is a reason that both Scripture and Church practice model this process of leave-taking for us; it is the best way to grieve, celebrate, and then anticipate, that we can find.

This is what Jesus is about in our lesson today, and He has much to say to his disciples at his Last Supper with them; scholars call this section of John's Gospel the "Farewell discourse" and it lasts for 7 chapters. Maybe the disciples on that evening felt impatient at times, too, but Jesus will not be hurried; He has carefully thought out both his actions and his words for this time of farewell; just as I have done, just as you all have done, for this morning. Jesus understands what His disciples need. Unlike Jesus, they don't know what the next day holds, but they do know that they are in a precarious and dangerous situation, where their Lord is in peril from both Jewish and Roman authorities who do not care for the way He is challenging the powers-that-be. Jesus tells them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you....do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Why does He say this? Precisely because He recognizes that they are *not* at peace; that they *are* troubled; that they *are* fearful. Not surprisingly, because that's how humans respond to change and turmoil. We here this morning may *also* be feeling a lack of peace. We may feel troubled, anxious, fearful, or at the very least---unsettled. That's true for *me*; I've been Pastor Susan for 39 years, with the privileges, joys, duties, and responsibilities that office confers. What will it mean to step away from that pastoral office? I'm excited about becoming a Grandma, about moving closer to family, about having more time at my disposal and discretion. But, of course, I am also grieving significantly the loss of what it has meant for me to be *a* Pastor and to be *your* Pastor.

Likewise, many of you have known me as your Pastor for *decades*. I have been the first solo Pastor of this congregation, allowing us to really come into our own. What's next for you? What if the next Pastor doesn't sing first soprano and isn't a Scrabble whiz? What if her husband isn't a guitar player and doesn't know squat about parliamentary procedures? More significantly, what if the next Pastor doesn't preach, lead worship, make visits, or teach, in the way I do? Because almost certainly, they won't! They may do all those things differently but much better, who can know? But undoubtedly there will be awkward times of transitions because, as the Jewish Talmud tells us, "All beginnings are hard." And so are all endings. All of this, however, is not as scary or unsettling as it sounds, because of what we discover in our Gospel lesson today. We meet up with Jesus, in His farewell, gifting us with peace and with the Holy Spirit. This peace to which Jesus refers isn't like worldly peace; it isn't simply the *absence* of outright conflict. This peace is that Hebrew "shalom", a concept that indicates not just the absence of conflict, but the *fullness* of wholeness, of all being well. Jesus tells us His disciples that in spite of troubled or fearful hearts and minds, *all will be well*. The shalom of God is given to them—and to us.

Jesus also points to the presence of God's Holy Spirit, sometimes called Advocate, or Counselor, or Comforter. As Jesus is not with us on this planet, the Holy Spirit is God's presence with us now, as close as our next breath, as refreshing and ever-present as the winds off of Lake Superior. The Holy Spirit keeps us close to God, giving us that shalom. And the Holy Spirit keeps us close to *one another*; we are bound together in God's Spirit in love. This is true even in death, as we speak of the "communion of saints", that mystical reality which keeps us connected through the Spirit. It is *certainly* true of life, and the Holy Spirit can easily span the distance between Blaine and Knife River to keep us connected in love and faith. I find that comforting; I hope you do also.

Jesus had some very intentional things he wanted to share with His disciples in His farewell. We also, when we bid someone farewell for whatever reason, often have some things we want to say. I am no exception this morning. I would like to reiterate some of the sacred themes that I believe have repeatedly shown up in my

thinking, teaching and preaching. Among them would be this: that God is always good. That grace abounds. That there is a radical welcome to the Lord's table and to the community of the church for everyone and anyone who seeks it. That we can cultivate an awareness and sensitivity to God's Spirit that enables us to be open, curious, and compassionate, discovering in the world and people around us the presence of God. I have probably said far too often that we are *blest to be a blessing*; but really, isn't that fundamental? Why else *are* we blest, if not to pay it forward and make a difference for good for others? So, I would like to leave you with those thoughts, as well as with the knowledge that I have loved you, have loved being your Pastor, and will miss playing that role deeply, even as I gladly anticipate a new chapter in life. I could little know 39 years ago in Grand Rapids when I was nervously working to create a new beginning as a Pastor, how quickly those years would fly by, and how beautifully they would be rounded off by my time here with you. Now that beginning has led to an ending and a new beginning, for me and for all of you. I have every confidence in this congregation, because I have experienced you to be welcoming, gracious, generous, open, and courageous. I still cherish the description of this congregation as "the little church that doesn't seem to know how to say, "we can't do that". That's so true! This is a "can-do" congregation, and just as God has been up to great things among you during my tenure, God's Spirit will continue to work and move through you in the times to come. This morning, let us all take to heart these words from Christ: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." All will be well. Amen.