

Waving Goodbye

A Sermon on Deut. 30:15 - 31:2

*Glenview Community Church
(United Church of Christ)
Glenview, Illinois*

Dr. Kent Ulery, Interim Senior Pastor
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“Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.”

- Deuteronomy 30:19b

Unlike Moses, I am not 120 years old and I can still get around...which is all good. One is supposed to retire in the slow-go rather than the no-go years. But, like Moses, God has made clear my go-go years are over and another is called to lead the next part of GCC's journey. So, congratulations to the search committee, blessings on Rev. Jim, and here is my last sermon.

For some reason beyond my comprehension (unless it has something to do with the poet's "closeness that we wish for"), we human beings are fascinated by last words, hanging on to the final thing a person says as if it is the fullest encapsulation of a person's character, or the ultimate wisdom gleaned from years of living, or the most honest thought ever shared – so profoundly insightful it must be captured and clung to forever and ever. Amen.

That could be the case...like the last words of musician Bob Marley, who died at 36: “Money cannot buy life”...or the last words of chemist Michael Faraday, when asked what occupation he would have in the next life, responded: “I shall be with Christ, and that is enough”...or the last words of Apple's founder Steve Jobs: “Oh wow! Oh wow! Oh wow!”

But there is no guarantee anyone's last words will be wise, truthful, profound, inspiring, or courageous. Consider the last words of Winston Churchill: “I'm bored with it all.” Or Humphrey Bogart's last words: “I should never have switched from Scotch to martinis.”

So, please, never set your expectations too high for any preacher's last sermon. The natural tendency of retiring preachers is to drone on and on. Best simply to hope and pray I will not become too long-winded this morning.

True story. Posted on Facebook by a UCC Conference Minister I know. Forty years ago, I confirmed her as a youth into the Christian faith. To verify the story, she posted pictures.

This Conference Minister attended the farewell service two weeks ago of a pastor who had served the same church for twenty-nine years. Just as he was about to begin preaching, two women suddenly appeared at the back of the sanctuary, walked down the center aisle, one pushing and the other pulling a cart, like flight attendants on an airplane. To great howls of congregational laughter, they passed out brown-bagged snacks and water bottles to help those in the pews persevere the oratorical ordeal of their preacher's last sermon.

My intent is not to go that long today...though Moses certainly did in our scripture lesson. His farewell discourse went on for hours...if not days!

According to the biblical narrative, Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt; parted the Red Sea so they could escape Pharaoh's pursuing armies; received the Ten Commandments atop Mt. Sinai; and put up with people grumbling for forty years in the wilderness. The book of Numbers ends with Moses on the plains of Moab, plans being made to cross the River Jordan and lay claim to the Promised Land.

The next biblical book, Deuteronomy, purports to be Moses' farewell address. If so, Moses' manuscript was thirty chapters long! It was delivered in three parts...so maybe snacks and water were passed out during two intermissions! That, or he delivered three different last sermons at three different retirements. He would not be last to do so.

In any case, in his final discourse, Moses "rehearses the mighty acts of the LORD, solemnly warns of the temptations of the new ways of Canaan, and pleads for loyalty to and love of God as the condition for life in the promised land." Moses reaffirms "the covenant between God and the people of Israel." But the Ten Commandments are "not just repeated; [they are] reinterpreted in contemporary terms..." Hence the title of Moses' farewell discourse – Deuteronomy – "the second law." Essentially, Moses calls upon God's people to a "rediscovery and reinterpretation" and reapplication of what he taught them previously.¹

As the New England poet James Russell Lowell penned: "new occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth."²

As the United Church of Christ teaches, it is the right and responsibility "of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own..."³

As God's people moved from slaves and wanderers to a settled people in a new land, they needed to rethink God's will under new circumstances and with the next generation's leader, Joshua...just as Glenview Community Church needs to rethink how to conduct ministry effectively in a post-modern, post-COVID, post-civility world, with Rev. Jim as your new leader.

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (eds.) New York: Oxford University Press, © 1991. OT Page 217.

² *Once to Every Man and Nation*, 1845,

³ *UCC Constitution*, Preamble, Paragraph 2.

Before waving goodbye, Moses concludes his final discourse with these last words: “Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.” His successor, Joshua, reinterpreted Moses’ last admonition in his own farewell address, saying: “Choose this day whom you will serve... As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Last Sunday, I heard Rev. Jim calling us to choose the ecclesiastically “weakest and least powerful” form of Christianity -- the type of church that is “less certain...tolerates doubt...is allergic dogma, but...is radically open to all.”⁴

If you need a last word from me, pick Moses’ “Choose life...,” Joshua’s “Choose...to serve the LORD,” or Jim’s “In a world of conflict and a country divided, choose to love Jesus and to tend his sheep with respect, tolerance, and loving acceptance.” I am content to be associated with all three...for all three are reinterpretations, by different generations, of the same truth that, in my time, was phrased: Choose “to accept the cost and joy of discipleship.”

Oh, if I can be permitted a second last word...

Several have asked if I have another interim lined up or if I’m really going to retire this time...as if retirement is not something clergy are allowed to do or can do. After all, Kent, you have failed retirement three times. Once ordained, always ordained. How can you now leave the ministry?

I know too many clergy who did not know when to retire for the final time. It proved detrimental to the churches they served and disappointing to them. They fell into the trap of claiming their identity from their ordination. Without a congregation to serve, they do not know what to do.

The real question in retiring is not “Who am I without a church to serve?” but “Whose am I?” I remember my *Heidelberg Catechism*. Question 1: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” Answer 1: “That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ...” Certainly the comfort of having one’s identity based, not in one’s vocation, but in being a beloved child of God, extends to clergy, too.

To clarify further: one never retires from ministry; but one does retire from ordained ministry. My plan is to continue doing the ministry God entrusts to everyone by virtue of their baptism -- the ministry of serving God out in the world.

To be ordained is to be set aside by the church, to serve within the church, so the members of the church can be prepared to serve outside the church. Ordained ministers are entrusted with six duties, and it is only from those six tasks that I retire. No longer will I preach and teach the Gospel, celebrate the rites and sacraments of the church, or exercise pastoral care and leadership, except upon invitation from an active ordained minister.

Now, I know from experience how parishioners’ minds work. So, please stand if you are able, hold up your right hand, and with no fingers crossed repeat after me:

⁴ Matarazzo, James. “Called and Needed.” August 28, 2022

Before God and these witnesses,
I do solemnly promise,
under any and all circumstances,
never ever, not even once,
to put Rev. Jim
in that awkward and awful position,
where he is left with no choice,
but to invite Kent back,
so help me God.”

You may be seated.

We will have none of “It would mean so much to our family, Rev. Jim, if you would invite Pastor Kent to help with the memorial service...” or “Jim, next time you are on vacation, why don’t you invite Kent back to preach?” Jim is your new settled pastor. Your pastoral relationship needs to be with Jim. Completely with Jim. Not with me. Not with Elizabeth. Not with any predecessor.

Besides, if you try, you just might find Meg and me in the convertible, top down, Beach Boy blaring from the radio, headed west on Route 66.

On this day, I am acutely aware that my life has been blessed far more than I ever dreamed or deserved. I am grateful for the privilege of serving within the church for these last 47 years, finishing up here. And I look forward to returning to the pews and serving God out in the world, as a baptized minister like all of you.

So, here is my final, final word as I wave goodbye: Thank you, Glenview Community Church (United Church of Christ) for allowing me to serve you through the interim season. And thanks be to God. Amen.