

ONLY THIS FAR

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

April 15, 2018

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1-8; John 13:33-35

On July 4, 1939, (no I was not born yet), on the day of his retirement from the Yankees Baseball Club, Lou Gehrig stood in front of the fans to offer his valedictory speech. He began by saying, "...today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you..."

That speech made an indelible mark on me years ago because it expressed values that were important in my own home growing up as a kid. *"Be thankful for what you have. Don't regret what you don't."*

And I love that speech because in it he also mentions his mother and dad who gave him so much of themselves. And I know that my parents would be proud of me today as my mother was on my ordination day so long ago. Don't we all have those balcony people who are above us, who have inspired us to be the best that we can be?

I am so grateful to all of you as well for the love and affection, the kindness and forbearance, the patience and forgiveness you have always showered upon me. Though those people passing by this old church on Fifth Avenue this morning on their way to brunch may hardly notice the goings-on inside this sanctuary, I am today the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

I am grateful for all who came to wish me well in this final weekend of my pastorate, thankful for the trust you have placed in me through the years, overwhelmed by the generosity of gifts and kind words and visits from people who have come this weekend, people who have been a part of my past, and who have been kind and welcomed me in a way that has been a blessing and made my journey not a lonely one but a joyful one.

Someone has said that in any pastoral farewell you need to say three things. "Thank you." "Please forgive me." "And I forgive you."

I don't know whether you've noticed but I have a few faults. In spite of all the nice things you have said about me in the last couple of days, the last seventeen years, the last forty-six years of ministry, I have my faults. And let's not ignore the fact that I am anything but perfect, and abundant in shortcomings. How is it we say in the commendation of the funeral liturgy?

Acknowledge, we humbly pray,
a sheep of your own fold,
a lamb of your own flock,
a sinner of your own redeeming.

And if I am to be forgiven those human limitations, I want to quickly add a word of reconciliation and forgiveness for anything that may have stood between us through the years, where you have let your humanity, or anger, or disappointment show as well, in an unedited way. Edwin Friedman, the family systems therapist, says that the pastor should model for the congregation "a non-anxious presence."

And there have been times when I have wanted to say back to you something rather anxious or angry, or to clear the record or defend some point, when something accusatory or unfair has been

attributed to me. But nothing in telling the truth needs to be taken back, only that which was left unsaid that might have brought healing or hope or better understanding of one another. So let us here and now forgive one another even as we have been abundant recipients of forgiveness in God's grace shown in Jesus Christ.

Which brings me to that passage in Deuteronomy about Moses. Not that there are comparisons between Moses as a prophet and yours truly as a pastor, but the occasion of the end of Moses' leadership is a poignant time and one over which we might want to linger for a couple of moments today because there are some important similarities.

We learn from the outset of Deuteronomy that Moses is not going to be allowed to enter the Promised Land with the chosen people of Israel. It is fair to say that much as they loved Moses and respected and revered him, God drew a line there.

And that was hard. They had been through a lot of trials together. Slavery in Egypt, the deathly Passover which they had survived, crossing the Red Sea, wandering in the desert. There were some trials and tribulations along the way as well. Those rebellious times when they got impatient with Moses and started taking off their baubles, bangles, and beads - their bling - which got melted down and sculpted into a golden calf.

In the first and third chapters of Deuteronomy¹ there are reasons given for God's decision that Moses should not enter the Promised Land, an entitlement that would have strong sympathy among the people, for old time's sake if nothing else. After all why shouldn't the great liberator of Israel be allowed into Israel's future by at least planting his foot on Promised Land, or kiss the earth like the Pope kissing the tarmac at the airport, or drink a cup full of that Promised Land water, or even touch his tongue to the fabled milk and honey after all those days wandering, traveling, laboring to get there?

But by the 34th chapter of Deuteronomy it's clear Moses is not going in. This is *Israel's* future which he has helped to bring them to, but which will be *their* future, not *his*. Only this far, and no farther.

God makes a concession as Moses is about to die. God helps him up Mt. Nebo overlooking the plains of Pisgah, Moses leaning on his walker, short of breath, each step a kind of prayer of thanksgiving. Old Moses gets a look from afar at the land that lies in front of him, a Promised Land, promised to Moses, promised to Israel. But this is as far as he goes.

He stops and leans over his walker, and in my mind's eye I see all the generations yet to come gathering around him, people in every direction kneeling and standing like at some great family reunion except none of them have been born yet. And God takes out his cellphone and takes a picture, *"Everybody get a little closer, scooch together."*

Because this is a moment, the only moment that Moses has with the future of God's people.

And the Bible says God showed Moses the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain - the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar.

God said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

And Deuteronomy goes on bluntly,

Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. [Then listen closely to this.] The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

And the next sentence begins,

“Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom...”

And thus passes the mantle from Moses to Joshua.

The editors of Deuteronomy wanted to make sure that the people focused not on Moses, but on God. It was after all really God’s work that Moses was doing, and Moses lived and did what he was supposed to do, and then he died. And the text is very specific. Moses not only dies, but he is laid in a grave that is unmarked and unknown. And so there will not be an altar or a headstone, or a monument at the place where Moses’ earthly remains are kept so that people can come and offer prayers and revere Moses’ mighty deeds, and lift him up above all others.

He is laid in an unmarked grave. They mourn for him for thirty days, and then Joshua, son of Nun takes over the helm.

In other words, its okay to grieve for a short time when God’s elect leave or die, but 30 days in this case, are sufficient for the great Moses, and then Joshua, son of Nun enters stage right. And the story goes on.

This church is about to change, about to enter the promised land that lies ahead. Ours has been a time marked by great events and significant changes that have affected our lives. Two days after my first sermon here, came 9/11, and the world has continued to change in dramatic and unexpected ways that were often not of our making.

We worked our way through and with the labor and sacrifices of the Covenant Network which I was honored to co-moderate with Deborah Block – we were a part of the changes to the wrong and misguided policies of the Presbyterian Church which forbade the ordination of Gay and Lesbian officers and clergy. We worked to overcome the prohibition of marital rites for same sex persons, and I have been honored to marry many of you who have longed to be married and were not permitted to do so in the church before that time. We continue to work for justice for the poor, the homeless, to address inter-racial issues, and gun violence, and work for women’s rights, simply putting our faith where our feet are in a time when all of that has been newly threatened.

We raised more money than had ever been raised before in this church because of your generosity, and improved our facilities dramatically. And the work underneath the scaffolding out front and above us has just begun, paid and promised in full.

It has been an amazing journey. Much has been accomplished, much is yet to be done. And this old church 301 years old, is a great light set on a hill for all to see. The best that a Presbyterian Church can be.

But I am standing on Nebo and I am only going to see it from afar, this Promised Land that lies ahead of you. You must make the next part of the journey with the vision and leadership of someone new.

My heart is full of thankfulness today, and I am confident that God will keep you going forward with strength.

I am leaving your best pastor with you. God, who is the great shepherd of the sheep, who will tend and guide you and keep you together. Jesus said it best, “I will not leave you comfortless but will send you my spirit.”

You will also have Bob Dunham with a steady hand on the wheel as your interim pastor, who though he is new to you is a friend of many years, a member of that Moveable Feast group about which I referenced Easter Sunday. We have a wonderful staff, experienced pastors, able officers, the best congregation, bar none, in New York City.

Which is why it is so hard to leave you. I have come to love this church and you as a congregation, the children who are so much a part of our life together, the music, the choir, Candlelight and Carols, Christmas Eve singing Silent Night with tapers in our hands, Easter morning with my Top Hat shaking hands at the door, the funerals, the weddings, the baptisms. They all make it hard to leave. You have inspired me and drawn out the best in me. You make me believe that the church can be all that it needs to be and God wants it to be.

But I can only go so far. I have felt your support in so many ways, and I have loved you in return. I thank God for the privilege and trust that you have placed in me. I can honestly say to you that I have done the best I could during my years. Now it is time for someone else to come and do what I can no longer do, which is to see you through to the next stage of this congregation's life.

Someone has asked, "Why retire now?" And the answer to that is that it's better to retire when people wish you could stay longer, than to have people saying, "How can we help you find your way out?"

I also have asked Christian to wait a long time for me to come home. And he has been a great supporter to me, a wise counselor, a patient mate, and always a supporter, corrective of any self-serving impulses I may have, bringing me back down to earth, my best cheerleader and defender. You have no idea!

I have been here sixteen and a half years, which is a long time in pastoral years and in a time when the average pastoral stay is about seven years. In fact, I have been here so long that Facebook did not even exist when I first came.

And ministry takes a toll on you. It breaks your heart when people you love go through hard times; and it also lifts you up to heaven because of those same people who become a part of your life - and who really are better at living the Christian life than I am.

I think of this church full of admiring and heartbroken people at Stuart Buice's memorial service - so many people, so much love. Or the sea of blue coats and white gloves of NYPD officers filling the entire north sanctuary to honor our member Officer John Perry who died on September 11th.

I remember the silhouette in this dark sanctuary framed in the doorway by street light as Cara Wall on Duane's arm started down the aisle in a candle lit wedding ceremony, because the Con Ed plant had exploded and left us powerless and in the dark, no lights, no organ, only candles and breathtaking beauty.

I remember Chris Beacham's father toasting at his son's wedding reception, welcoming Adam into the family and saying that Adam was precisely the best son-in-law that he and his wife could hope for their son.

I remember the countless times that Betty Jones sat at someone's bedside keeping vigil in the hospital, or spoke to the social worker there to find just the right rehab facility for one of our members.

I remember visiting Virginia Thoren many times at home and celebrating a birthday at which she lavished more attention on me than modesty permits. How she loved her men! And she particularly liked Will because he was the younger male pastor. And Gene Cannava and Karl Davis coming here the week before Advent every year to delicately set out the creche with the baby Jesus in the manger and the green cloth spread and positioned just so on the table.

I remember on several occasions coming into this empty sanctuary accompanied by a young couple who had just lost a baby in stillbirth. And as dusk was falling and the stained-glass dimming, I read scriptures and prayers with those parents.

I remember the baptisms where I took the easy, quiet sleeping ones in my arms, and passed to Barbara the yelping, crying, screaming ones.

I remember the hours of counseling where you came to me with burdens that were breaking your heart, and together we tried to figure out where to go from there.

Ministry takes its toll on you, if you're lucky, and the congregation lingers in your thoughts and prayers always.

Jonathan Edwards that great New England divine spent 8 months here as an unordained supply pastor in 1722. When he left New York City in April of 1723, Edwards wrote: "As I sailed away, I kept sight of the city as long as I could; and when I was out of sight of it, it would affect me much to look that way, with a kind of melancholy mixed with sweetness."² I'm sure that on the day not long from now when I leave New York, I will feel that same mix of melancholy and sweetness in the rear view mirror.

I can only go so far with you now because our paths must separate, and the ties of our lives must disentangle so that you and I can make ready for a new weaving.

I want you to miss me, I wouldn't be honest if I didn't acknowledge that. But most of all I want you to love the one who is yet to come every bit as much if not more than you have loved me. When Moses was gone, the people mourned only for an appointed time, and then... Joshua son of Nun.

Whatever I have done for the good, will be confirmed when you move forward and embrace a new and beloved pastor.

That's my prayer, my hope, my best thought for you and for me to be ready when the time comes to love again.

Ave, atque, vale. Hail and farewell. And may God bless you all in the years ahead.

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¹ Deuteronomy 1:37; 3:23-29

² George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 46.