

In the Leaving
A Service of Parting and Farewell

Text: Psalm 16: 5-6; 148: 1-14; I Corinthians 13: 1-7, 13

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January 12, 2020

Jan Richardson¹ is a pastoral poet ...and fills my thoughts this morning. Her words often inspire me, though in this case I admit to blending in a few of my own. May they become as a blessing on all that we have known together.

*In the leaving, in the letting go,
let there be these
to hold onto at the last:*

*The delight of surprise.
The fruits of accomplishment.
The whisper of grace.*

*The power of faith.
The persistence of hope.
The endurance of love.*

*The experience of purpose.
The arms of community.
The blessing of peace.*

*(For, among you, and as your pastor
you have given these to me,
as I trust you have also received.)*

My family and friends ...these are the gifts of leaving I want us to reflect on together on this last Sabbath Day with you. And especially so, as I speak from this historic pulpit which you and the calling of God entrusted to my care for just a little while.

Let me lightly trace through a few of the strophes with you. Though they are couched in easy phrases, it could honestly take me another 15 years to unpack the treasures that lie beneath. I think we might find that, simple though they be, they are not simplistic at all.

And I think three pauses would be just about right, even though many of us default to lingering longer in matters of good-bye. It's hard to sum up what to say and how to say it right - with our beating hearts at stake and the love of pastor for his people.

Still the Gospel does not tarry. So brevity wins! You who love this church have work to do here. And Pam and I have packing to do, and a house to sell, and a new life to create. And I certainly don't want to distract us from those tomorrows by speaking too long.

So, let's start by coupling two of those strophes into one ...the delight of surprise with the whisper of grace. Surprise and grace! These have surely been with us, though, in honesty, we all did hold our collective breaths those nascent days.

Sometimes my good memory haunts me. Like this. One of you said early in my time, after reminding me of a probationary 90 days, "I wasn't so sure about you at first." To which I smiled and said, "Funny thing to hear you say that. Me neither about you!"

But such banter aside, we would be utter fools if we thought that this season of healing and renewal has been only because of who we are: you know, First Church, West Hartford! I prefer the Psalmist clearer knowing: "Come! See what God has done!"

In fact, you can find that invocation any number of places in the Psalms. Like this: "The lines have fallen for us in pleasant places." "This is the Lord's doing." We played only a part. But the significant rebuilding that kindled for us has not been by our hands alone.

Let's take now a triplet ...of those poetic phrases. The power of faith, the persistence of hope, the endurance of love. Any one of them alone is its own life-force; but as three wrapped together they can transform the world.

Like this. A few years ago, five of us gathered in my study. The crisis in Syria was exploding. Refugee children were drowning. I made some calls. Michael Pincus whom I like to call my Rabbi came over along with Mark Deters, Stacy Emerson and Julie Emery.

Alone we felt paralyzed. We knew that the only meaningful response was to join hands with our frail measures of faith, hope and love. Within a month the 5 of us turned to 12 turned to 36 and then 75. Two years later 5 Syrian families had a new future in our town.

How did Paul bundle-up this power? "So, faith, hope, love abide, these three." We did not any one of us do this ourselves. We did not have the resource alone. And though we took pride in the outcome, it was a pure moment of "Come! See what God has done!"

One more poetic visit ...and let's triple three more. The experience of purpose, the arms of community, the blessing of peace. And, as the others, these alone are quite stunning, but taken together they are ginormous!

The harvest tells a story. We traded a labyrinth of stairs for an elevator. We fielded the changes on the religious landscape of the 21st century and have held our own. Not easily mind you. It has been no small challenge. But we are steadily finding our way.

We became open and affirming to the GLBTQ community; took new initiatives being a Resource Church in the entire region; engaged afresh in interfaith dialogue and relationship; and provided amazing programs to keep our faith actively growing.

OMY. We provided safe space for anger and grief in the wake of senseless violence in Orlando, Sandy Hook in Newtown, Tree of Life in Pittsburgh, Las Vegas – I pray that the list would end. And still shaping now, have become a founding partner in the new GHIAA (*Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance*.)

Those poetic strophes again ...and they come so much closer:

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I leave you with this. They are words from the Apostle Paul that I take as my own. “I thank you for your partnership from the first day until now. I am sure that God who began a good work in us will bring it to completion. We have been partakers of grace together.”

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the heart of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear that you stand firm in the Spirit, striving side by side for the peace and justice, the joy and love, the challenge and the comfort of the Gospel.”

Thank you, my friends. Thank you, sweet family. And thank you, dear God, source and destiny of life, for every first and last one of us – whether we know it or not. I don’t know how to say it any better. And I don’t think I need to say anymore. Amen.

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¹ Jan Richardson. Circle of Grace. Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015, pp. 166.