

“Handing Over the Car Keys”
Deuteronomy 34:1-10
Mark 8:22-34
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The Lord 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 descendents’; I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab. Moses was 120 years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended.”

This has been a week unlike any other in my entire life. I've never had this many invitations to breakfast, lunch and dinner. You are very kind and generous and I am ten pounds heavier. Thank you for the cards, readings, and handshakes, the hugs, the prayers, and for your patience with the all too human side of me.

I have said farewell to churches at other times in my life but the feeling in this experience is like comparing a rose to a roadside weed. It is difficult to let go; it is hard to say farewell precisely because my time with you has been so engaging, so demanding, and so responsive and so vulnerable. I have been honored to fulfill an important role in the life of our Church, a congregation that has decided it wants to be transformed into a genuine faith community but has a long list of conflicting ways and different opinions on how to do that. I have taken part in the planting; I would like to share in the harvest.

I have shared a few my mother's sayings with you; I now need to share one of my dad's, “If you're going to ride a horse bareback make sure you grab the mane and not the tail.” This has been a wild ride from time to time, because of those conflicting ways of moving forward. But please understand, even that conflict is a good thing. Indifference is catastrophic! YOU are anything but indifferent. You care passionately about this church, about its calling, its strengths and weaknesses, about its facilities and its people. You are thinking, acting and decisive, you have spirit and personality and a pulse! Those are not curses. They are the raw material from which a future can be built.

The most interesting conversations in the past week have been with my colleagues. They all ask the same question and it is not what you would expect.

Non-clergy ask, “What plans do you have for your free-time?” Clergy ask, “What are you going to say in your final sermon? I have some suggestions.”

I've heard the stories of ministers finally feeling free enough to say what they want to say, and laying it on thick layers. Well you need to know two things. I really don't have a secret self that would like to say more but is afraid to, or a hidden self that would like to say it differently with a sharper edges and pointed teeth. Every moment that I have been in this pulpit I've spoken the truth as God gave me the truth to speak. The only restraint has been to avoid mistaking my personal agenda for God's agenda. For better or for worse, what you have heard from me in the pulpit or in any setting is the best I could do at that moment to speak the truth in love.

This morning that truth in love message is that God is in charge of time and timing. To quote one of my favorite hymns, “God of our lives, our years are in thy hands; we come to thee.” There is a sense that our lives are unfolding before us; that in the midst of our world of experience flows a stream of God’s grace. We can choose to ignore it and deny its existence, or we can dabble our big toe in that stream while we make a decision.

We can be like Peter the disciple and step back thirty feet, get a good running start, grab our nose and do a cannon ball dive into the stream of grace. Or we can form a committee to study all such streams, sacred and secular, study the characteristics of God’s stream, the potential costs and benefits of yelling “Geronimo” while taking a wild leap, as opposed to the toes-ankles-knees version.

Next week will come, as will the weeks, and months, and years that follow, and new voices will be heard on both sides of the pulpit and new faces will be seen on both sides of the pulpit, but to quote a line from the unfairly discredited hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*, “Crowns and thorns may perish, kingdoms wax and wane but the Church of Jesus constant will remain.”

When you have some time this week read Chapter 34 of the book of Deuteronomy with special attention given to verses 1 to 12. Moses led his people out of Egypt, out of slavery, through the desert, through hunger, thirst, fear, and rebellion. The people have loved Moses, the people have hated Moses, the people have worshiped YAHWEH, GOD and when Moses went up on the mountain to receive the word of God, their faith was so weak that it fell apart. They returned to their old ways and build a golden calf.

The faith of Moses also blew hot and cold. At times he was rock solid and other times sinking sand, but always Moses returned to faith in God and lead the people on guided by faith alone. Finally we come to the promise land. Moses will see it but never step foot in it.

If you read this text you will find no word of complaint, no word of regret, no word of lament or cry of injustice. Why is Moses silent, why does the narrator not comment? Because Moses does not operate from a human reckoning of fairness, or entitlement, or indebtedness. He has served God when the time was right in ways that were right. He celebrated his victories, grieved his mistakes, and asked for forgiveness. It is now time for Joshua, time for a new generation of leadership, time for the planters to step aside, time for the harvesters go to work.

Oh, if I were ten years younger, which I am not. But I tell you this, we have put in some hard time in the last five years and not because we saw ourselves fighting demons. Just as God kept the dream alive in the heart of Israel during the wilderness years, so God kept a vision for the future alive in our hearts during our own wilderness wanderings.

Christine Chakoian came to us a year ago. Who would have believed that so much good and so much healing and so much spirit could be awakened and accomplished in 12 months?

And we have yet to cross the river. I've seen the dream beginning to turn toward reality and it is enough. It is time, not your time, or my time but God's time. The work that I was called here to do is finished.

And that is why it is possible to look back at five years with you and forty years of ministry in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois and say “Thank you God, for leading me to that country roadside. Thank you, Christ, for calling me to Delaware, Ohio; New Carlisle, Indiana; Granger, Indiana; Gary, Indiana; Ogden Dunes, Indiana; Youngstown, Ohio; Park Ridge, Illinois; Chicago, Illinois and Lake Forest, Illinois. I wouldn't have missed it for the whole world. Thank-you God for raising up another generation of harvesters.”

My dad used to say, “The moment when a boy becomes a man is when you hand him the car keys.” It's a great act of trust. I believe that when we hand to each other the keys of the kingdom, it is the greatest act of trust that two humans can share.