

“Love on the Move”

Jeremiah 1: 4-10, I Corinthians 13: 1-13

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My life has been moving in slow motion lately. Ever since I announced I was leaving, I hoped this day would not come. It seemed so far away at the time. After all, it was only the beginning of December. February loomed on the distant horizon. I fantasized that I was Bill Murray in the movie Groundhog's Day. If I could choose a single day to repeat over and over again, today would be a good one. We could shower one another with gratitude and love and I would never have to leave. I must admit, even a day of celebration can become stale if it happens over and over again.

I understand we don't get the chance to redo any particular day. That only happens in the movies. Tomorrow I will awake as I usually do and my children will prepare for school in their new transitional homes; the first day of our new life. I will no longer come here ready to tackle whatever God throws at us. Instead, I will attack the mountain of boxes that await me in my basement sorting through the remnants of my life, deciding what stays and what goes. Today is our day to look back, to give thanks, to remember and rejoice. Tomorrow is our day of new beginnings and I know that even in the midst of it all God will be there.

That is what I know to be true. There is nothing we cannot do, nothing we cannot face, nothing that is beyond our ability because God is in the midst of it all. The scripture lessons for today are rich with wisdom. It would have been tempting to forgo the lectionary and preach on a favorite text. Thankfully, when I explored the passages there was what we preachers often call, “an embarrassment of riches.” Not only do we have the story of Jeremiah's call (one of my favorite), but we also have the often heard yet, not always fully understood “love” passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In the interest of time and a lack of courage, I decided to forgo preaching about Jesus being run out of town for speaking the truth in love to folks in his hometown.

What I love most about the story of Jeremiah's call is his healthy sense of humility. Today one might say Jeremiah suffers from low self-esteem. Why me Lord? You must have gotten it wrong. I am only....a boy, a nobody, the son of a priest. Who is going to pay attention to what I have to say? I can relate to his reluctance. The life God calls him to embrace is a difficult one. I appreciate Jeremiah's “spirit of prophetic humility,” as the writer Bruce Epperly puts it. When I was in college I felt strongly that God was calling me to become a minister. I shared this with my chaplain, Rev. MaryAnne Morefield. She did not discourage me or discredit my claim, but she received my news with a healthy sense of skepticism. She allowed the Spirit to do its work while she helped me clarify my calling. I will always be grateful for her wisdom, kindness and attentiveness. She embodied the kind of love Paul talks about in his letter to the Corinthians.

Answering a call to pursue anything meaningful is scary. I felt God urging me to pursue a new call long before I began searching. I knew in my heart it was time to become a solo or senior minister, but instead I came up with reasons why I shouldn't. Ministering among and with such amazing people makes it easy to drag one's feet. I thought it was time for a change as we began the capital campaign in earnest. I told myself, I cannot go when we are in the midst of such important work. So, I stayed. I thought it was time to go when my friend and colleague Karen Ziel announced her intention to pursue her call to the wider church. How could I minister without her? I was reacting from my grief. God told me it was not yet time to go. So I stayed. God sent us Liz Miller and I am so grateful that God's timing was different than mine. I have loved working with Liz. I

remember my first call fondly and realize what a privilege it is to minister with the next generation of amazing pastors. I am thankful that God still had plans for me here at South Church. When we finished the new building and were ready to move into an exciting new future I thought maybe this is the time. Finally, God agreed. You are ready. You can do this. I will be with you. So, I prayed, I shared this decision with trusted colleagues, I prepared my profile and I set out on that journey.

I am grateful that the search took a slow and meandering path. It gave me more time to be your pastor; one more mission trip, one more woman's retreat, one more Christmas among you. The extra time has been a welcomed gift, but now it is time to say goodbye. You have been my teachers. You cared for me through the most difficult time in my life and have been gracious as I have moved into a more hopeful future. You have loved my children deeply and provided for them a most amazing spiritual home. You have helped to shape and mold me into the minister I have become. That is a long and slow process. It takes time. I hear God speaking to Jeremiah this morning and I know God is speaking to us as well. God has a plan for each of us. That plan is unique and different and challenging, just as we are unique and different and special and wonderful in our own ways.

Jeremiah is a wonderful role model for ministers. His confession is not meant to be a statement of unworthiness (at it might be for many of us) but an affirmation of his connectedness. I cannot do this alone. I am merely a servant of the Lord. I am committed to seek God's will and wisdom instead of following my own Ego. He speaks a word that is not easy to hear, but comes from God.

I imagine Jeremiah felt very alone in his ministry. His task was daunting and dangerous. God assures Jeremiah he is never alone. He was chosen for this work before he was born. God will give him whatever he needs. God will even put the words he needs to speak in his mouth. I admit ministry can be a difficult vocation. We are called to places where we share great joy as well as deep sorrow. The mantle we wear affords us entrée into the lives of many people and then places a boundary between us that when observed covetously can leave us feeling lonely. This is part of the cost and joy of discipleship, lived out in a unique way for those called to ordained ministry. Even when we feel lonely, we are never alone.

Paul's advice to the Corinthian church serves us well. Our life is grounded in love; love for our God and love for one another. As pastoral leaders we are part of a beloved community. We could not minister without all of you. We do well when we look beyond our own gifts and viewpoints to see the value and giftedness of others. You possess so many amazing gifts. It has been a privilege and joy to be your pastor. Our work is always more fruitful when we listen as much as we speak. "I don't know," or "I could be wrong," or "I need to listen more deeply," are confessions that not only enrich our work together, but deepen any relationship. You have helped me to understand that healthy balance between speaking and listening.

In this much beloved portion of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, he helps us see what love is and what it is not. It is hard to nurture a relationship with someone who is boastful, envious, arrogant, and rude or continually insists on their own way. There are moments when we will behave this way. When I do, I trust that someone will call me to look closely at this behavior. When I place my life in God hands, I trust that I can be transformed to love as Christ loves us. Finally love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but instead rejoices in the truth.

Love that is healthy and life giving is easy to identify. It is patient, and kind, it does not

insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. Paul describes the ideal way of loving, something to which we aspire but rarely achieve. Achieving this ideal love is not easy; in communities nor in our most sacred relationships. Even so, God yearns for us to love this way. God is our partner in these loving relationships. Therefore, we can pray for God to strengthen our resolve and heal us of the things that lead us to stray from loving this way. This love we aspire to bears all things, believes all things, and ultimately, hopes all things.

True love, a love that is ordained by God, never dies. From this moment forward we will relate to each other in new ways. I will no longer be your pastor, but you will never be far from my heart. My love for you will never diminish. I will cherish the laughter, the tears, the struggles, the joys and the sorrows we have shared. I trust in God's sacred love to bind us together, even as God takes us in new directions. As I gathered with the Wednesday School youth the other night we shared words of wisdom from "theologians" through the ages. One of my favorite theologians is Winnie the Pooh. He says, "If ever there is tomorrow when we're not together... there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is, even if we're apart... I'll always be with you." With my deepest love for you all, may it be so. Amen