

“Finally, Brothers and Sisters, Farewell”

Rev. Julie Wells Blythe

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1<sup>st</sup> Scripture Lesson Micah 6:6-8

2<sup>nd</sup> Scripture Lesson Philippians 4:1-9; 2 Corinthians 13:11 – 13

Since making my decision to leave this congregation, I have had many pastor friends give me suggestions as what to say and what not to say in my final sermon. Those ideas are as varied as the friends from which they have come. And the fact is, there is little left for me to say to you that I have not said sometime in the past two years. The truth is, I will miss you.

I will miss having the honor to journey with you through the joyful and the painful times in your lives. Those of you who have lost a loved one during my time here know that I believe to walk with someone through the valley of the shadow of death is to walk on holy ground. I thank you for the privilege of accompanying you on those journeys.

I will miss the theological discussions that I have shared with many of you – sometimes in the office, sometimes in your homes or during a lunch meeting. I have learned from you during those times as I hope you have learned from me.

I will particularly miss doing the children’s sermons. The children have been such a joy and such great sports as I have run them around the congregation and asked them to say “Amen” at the end of the prayer with enthusiasm and joy. I have heard throughout my pastorate here and other places and from friends who are pastors that there are times when the children’s sermon is what they got the most out of on a particular Sunday. I hope mine have been informative and uplifting as well as fun.

Please remember that the church is not the building and it is not the pastors – it is you, the people, sitting in the pew, doing ministry and mission in so many ways both here and in the community. Pastors come and go – Dale has been witness to and worked with more than 30 pastors including heads of staff, associates, and interims in his 29 years here. (Pastors may come and go – organists.....? perhaps not!) But I digress...

Westminster is a special church – you all know that for a variety of reasons. The first is that you experience it every time you are here for worship or fellowship. The second is the way the people of this congregation care for one another. And a third reason ( I hope!) is that for the last two years I have been reminding you of how amazing this congregation is and I am hopeful that you all believe me!

This church is the place where I grew up. It helped me grow in faith and has supported me through the greatest joys and sorrows of my life. Beginning with Bob Blythe – who, when we were dating in high school invited me to be in the New Expressions Youth Chorale – the youth choir that went on tour the two years we were both in it. David Mitchell, our director, taught me as much about singing, choral singing in particular, as any teacher I had had in school up to that point. He had great expectations of us and we rose to meet them. I am and will always be grateful to him for my wonderful experiences singing the praises of God in my teen years.

During those same years, the youth pastor was the Rev. Gregg Dana. In so many ways, he saved me. My home life was not pleasant due to an alcoholic father. Gregg recognized early on that I had significant problems in my life. He offered a safe place to talk about them and counseled me through my junior and senior years of high school. His ministry to me and his counseling helped me to understand that I was not responsible for my father’s choices or behaviors and I did not have to spend my life reacting to them. Gregg and Anne and their children are an integral part of my extended family. This story is just one of so many examples of the long history of youth pastors in

this congregation, making incredible differences in the lives of the youth who have also grown up here. It is my hope and prayer that Westminster will always keep youth in the forefront of its priorities in ministry. You may never see the lifelong impact that youth group and mission trips have on those that participate. But my friends, God's mission in the world is strengthened by the people of Westminster, the youth it has brought up in God's family and their witness in the world.

The women of this congregation come together in amazing ways to do God's work. I was one of the women who helped start the Hannah and Elizabeth circles. Those groups were such an important part of my life when I was raising my children and when needed a supportive group of women. I am so pleased to know that I leave with Elizabeth Circle going strong.

And for the last 26 years, it has been my great privilege and great joy to sing God's praises under the direction of Dale Rogers. Dale is my friend and my director. He is someone whose grace and care for people, whose love for music and whose God given talents are a great gift to all who know him. I thank him for being my listening ear, my confidante, and my companion in this work at Westminster. He is as much as pastor to the musicians and children of this congregation as any of us with the title Reverend in front of our names.

The pastors that I have known at Westminster have all impacted my life in one way or another. From some I learned what it means to care for people, to journey with them through the dark and frightening places in life and to rejoice with them in the light and joyful places. From some I learned what it means to be in leadership of a congregation. And, if I'm honest, from a few I learned what not to do. But the most important lesson I learned and I think it is helpful for you to remember is that the church is not the pastor. It is the people of God, gathered to work together with the pastor's leadership, open to the spirit's guidance and faithfully journeying with one another through this earthly life.

In both of our readings this morning from Paul's letters, one to the Philippians and one to the Corinthians, Paul is saying goodbye to congregations that he has ministered to. And in both of these letters he is trying to give them one final shot of faith building love before he leaves them. He is encouraging them and telling them that if they remain faithful to the one who sent him, they will be alright. The same is true for you.

Paul knew what he was doing. He knew what the people needed to do to keep their church vital. And like Paul, I ask you as I leave, help those who are working to keep this congregation faithful, "for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Dale Rogers and the rest of my co-workers. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

You are a congregation which is blessed with abundant gifts, individually and corporately. You are a light in this community and a safe place for children – from the youngest to the oldest. Let that light shine out for everyone to see. Share the love that you have for one another with the rest of Springfield and beyond. Be open to the workings of God in your midst.

"Finally, [sisters and brothers] farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, [work] with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Please pray with me: Gracious and Loving God,

These, your people, and I, your servant, have been through so much together, it is hard to find the words to make my parting prayer for them. I praise you, Lord, for the joys we have shared in our journey together. Thank you for being at work to help us all grow stronger and wiser. Thank you for the honor of being with them these last 2 years.

Prosper them, Lord, in the ways of truth and service. Bless each task they undertake for the sake of the people beyond these walls. Keep these saints-in-the-making strong and faithful, diligent in their care for one another, and bold in their witness to your power.

The coming of this day stirs up many feelings in the hearts of these people and in my own. Help us each look back on our time together with gratitude for our friendships and achievements, and forgiveness for our failings. Help us all look forward in trust and hope to the next stage in our growth as your people, confident that we remain always in your tender care. Amen.