

## **Sermon 1-28-24**

### **Paul Purdue preaching**

Wednesday night, Gayle graciously allowed me to sit in on her final choir practice. She required that I actually sing and sit according to the seating chart; I did. The yellow laminated placeholder read “surprise guest”. You could feel love, community, and harmony filling the room; grace was palpable. Today, our community stands at the end of an era as we bid farewell to Gayle. We celebrate who she is, honor her service, and pray God’s blessing upon her. We take a breath, and next Sunday we welcome Dr. Matthew Webb to Belmont UMC.

In the Ministry Council last fall, Ed Batsel reminded us that 34 years ago there were tears and fears as Dan Stokes left. 34 years later we know how beautifully that change worked out for us all. We have so much to celebrate, to give thanks for, and to treasure in our hearts. Gayle has nurtured a beautiful musical community and shepherded us into so many thin places where it seemed like we could taste heaven.

So, it’s fine to be sad today. In Acts 20 and 21, the churches are sad that Paul is leaving. Luke writes, “when we heard this, we and the local believers urged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem.” Paul replied, ‘Why are you doing this? Why are you weeping and breaking my heart?... I am ready....’ Since we couldn’t talk Paul out of it, the only thing we could say was, ‘The Lord’s will be done.’ After this, we got ready and made our way.”

The New Testament should prepare us for these moments in between farewell and welcome. The Apostle Paul (with co-pastors like Barnabus, Timothy, Silas, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Aquila) planted churches all around the Mediterranean coastline for 30 years. The team made multiyear journeys logging over 10,000 miles by sailboat or on foot. In between visits, Paul’s people and the churches sent letters back and forth. The congregations collected Paul’s letters, copied them, read them aloud in worship, and passed copies to other congregations. In time, the collective churches named these saved letters as scripture. You know the names of these churches by their books - Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Romans, and Corinthians. The New Testament is full of letters from a former pastor to the churches they once served. Ponder that. The Bible is full of farewells and welcomes.

The Pauline writers often begin and end their letters remembering people at the church. “Brothers and sisters, we must always thank God for you... because your faithfulness is growing by leaps and bounds, and the love that all of you have for each other is increasing. That’s why we are bragging about you in God’s churches...” (2 Thessalonians 1)

In the closing verses of Colossians, Paul writes a chatty and personal message from prison. “Luke, the dearly loved physician, and Demas say hello. Say hello to siblings in Laodicea, along with Nympha and the church that meets in her house. After this letter has been read to you publicly, make sure that the church in Laodicea reads it and that

you read the one from Laodicea. And tell Archippus, ‘See to it that you complete the ministry that you received in the Lord.’” I love that ancient little tweet “tell Archippus to not give up on leading in church.” Romans 16 closes with Paul mentioning 30 different people.

What do we draw from all these hellos, farewells, shout outs, and warm remembrances? I want to suggest a few theological points: People matter to God. God uses people to do holy work. You matter to God. God longs to use you to bring healing, hope, and wholeness to others.

Individuals matter to God. Today, we celebrate Gayle. Gayle has helped us lift our candle on Christmas Eve, encircled us in light in the Feast of Lights, helped us find our voice, ring a bell, lead the youth group in enacting “Shut Up and Dance With Me” when travel got weird, shared lunches before bells, and welcomed the whole choir to her home. Right now, let us pause and offer a holy moment thanking God for Gayle.

Without thanksgiving and acknowledgement, we may stay bogged in our grief; we can forget the joys we have known and close the door to God who is always doing new things. If our farewells lose touch with the hope of resurrection, we may not step into the new thing God longs to do in our midst. Jesus tells us that sometimes our love of the old wine keeps us from tasting the new things God wants to bring into our lives. (Luke 5) We thank God for Gayle; we weep and “since we couldn’t talk Gayle out of it, the only thing we can say is, ‘The Lord’s will be done. Welcome, Matt.’”

Our passage reminds us that God is in the midst of our human connections. God uses people. “From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will, and Timothy our brother, to the holy and faithful siblings in Christ in Colossae. Grace and peace to you from God our Creator. We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. We’ve done this since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and your love for all God’s people.”

On January 7, we celebrated Communion and remembered our Baptisms. I stood in the wings with Keller, Kate, and Heather marking foreheads and hands with water. I do not know who it was who offered to hug me that morning, but it started a trend. When I got home, it struck me how many people had hugged me. As I pondered the hugs, I thought about my first year at Belmont. We held the same service, and I said the same words. I promise that I loved you guys because that is who I want to be and that is part of my job description (at least my internal one). The love I offered was sincere but generalized. Today, the love I feel for Belmont is personal, born out of 100 degree days at Pride and building homes in Waverly, forged as we sit around the table hearing stories. The idea of holy and faithful siblings sharing ministry is not a theoretical construct or an aspirational ideal, it is my experienced Belmont reality. I have heard Lori Pearce tell of an unplanned week in a hotel with 30 teenagers stranded by snow coming home from a ski trip. I sang Motown with Charlie and Jerome while framing in a home. I have heard John Kennedy tell of the grace he has known visiting with a prisoner on death row. God uses people. We belong to each other. We watch over each other in love, and as we do this our capacity to love grows.

For me, the Apostle Paul is always talking about grace, faith, peace, good news, hope and love. And what is the source of that grace? Grace does not begin with Paul, Silas, Lori, John, Heather, or Gayle, grace comes from God, often through people. God's radical grace, God's deep embrace, God's forgiving holistic presence with us is the good news that emboldens our service and giving. Paul offers this good news: when we "hear and truly understand God's grace then we begin bearing fruit and growing in grace out in the world." (Col. 1) When we know we are beloved, no matter what, we are empowered to embody love!

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul, the Apostle of love, tells us that all kinds of things we care about will fall apart and fall away. Beautiful arrangements, amazing sermons, careful theology, money, strategic plans... they will all fade away until only faith, hope, and love remain. I have served on the staff of seven churches over 38 years, my heart has been broken a time or two and I have failed at least 77 times, but what seems to linger are moments when we did something excellent, admirable, true, holy, just, pure, lovely, and worthy of praise. That sort of faith, hope, and love can come back into our hearts and minds comforting and encouraging us long after our farewells are exchanged. As Gayle shared with the choir Wednesday night, these blessings are part of "our eternal movie" that plays within us as long as love remains. So today we say farewell to Gayle even as we know the grace, the excellence, the lovely, the just, the admirable, the pure, the holy and those moments that are worthy of praise endure and go on with us and with her. (Phil. 4) Thank you, Gayle, for traveling with us for these 34 years. Matt, welcome to our journey of faith. Amen.