

Holding One End of a Love

May 23, 2021

I share with you today a farewell—not with the hugs and mutual smiles and, perhaps, tears that I'd prefer—but across the ether, through these few pixels of light, and that will have to be sufficient. It has been for over a year—and I lament that I won't be able to be with you again in person, walking up and down the center aisle, greeting you in your favorite pew, joking with you about the discipline section (you know who you are), and welcoming guests in our midst. I will miss that profoundly—as we've all missed it for over a year. I've joked with many people during the pandemic that I've not felt like a pastor—I've felt like a video performance artist. And I joke like that because I've *missed* being a pastor so much...as I will miss worshiping with you.

When I began my ministry at Union among you, I was SO ENTHUSIASTIC...probably a bit much so, as I've learned about the staid and sober history of our church since then. You didn't clap in church, and where I came from, in Philadelphia, if you didn't clap you hadn't had church! So, for those first few weeks, I was perhaps a bit of a shock. In the middle of a hymn, as moved by the Spirit, I'd grab a drum, or my saxophone, and join Ray—to his surprise, and, perhaps, dismay. But it was all new, and I was so excited to put into practice the kinds of things I'd been teaching about for nearly two decades at the Seminary.

That was three years ago—countless newsletter or email blast articles, Adult Education classes, and long sermons that mixed fiction, and history, and theology; fellowship with the middle school youth (love you all!), and coffee hours, and a protest march or two, and thousands of emails and text messages, and hundreds of meetings with community partners, and meetings with Outreach and Education and Membership and Common Ministry, and speaking with Green Bay Common Council, and organizing the Brain Center Board of Directors and Development Plan, and grant-writing, and repurposing a grungy youth room, and cleaning out closets and finding some archival tidbits (and lots of flotsam and jetsam), having random conversations in my office (when random conversations were still possible), and making some amazing music. And now, when I finally know almost all of your names—or as Ed Tucker put, “we’ve just broken you in,”—I’m leaving. I’ve loved it. I will miss it. It’s a death, of sorts. And I feel grief, just like Jesus’ disciples did back on the first Pentecost, as they gathered together, huddled in fear, waiting for a future they did not know.

My own words fail to describe fully how I feel about you, and about leaving. Annie Dillard, one of my favorite writers, puts it well in her beautiful little book, entitled “Holy the Firm”: *And you can get caught holding one end of a love . . . you reel out love’s long line alone, stripped like a live wire loosing its sparks to a cloud, like a live wire loosed in space to longing and grief everlasting.*

That’s maybe a bit melodramatic—but that’s close at least to how I feel. I’m caught holding one end of a love, and, perhaps, to a degree, you may feel that way, too. I hope so. Because even holding on to one end of a love is a reminder, even through the pain, of how powerful and eternal true love is.

There’s so much I still wanted to do here at Union...from small to large.

Somebody please put a little brass plaque under the picture of Lincoln across from my office, explaining why a church called UNION, which at least housed one runaway slave, would have a picture of the author of the Emancipation Proclamation. Just a little explanation so that people might notice, and be reminded, of our amazing history.

And somebody please improve our signage. Our wonderful church is a maze, and I got totally lost on my way to the interview, and I'm relatively certain I'm not the only one who has wandered aimlessly looking for where they were supposed to be.

And somebody turn that kitchen into regular, ideally daily, use. Food for Soul, started by the Chef Massimo Bottura, is the example I've suggested—having area chefs prepare gourmet meals from unused food from area restaurants or grocery stores to serve to hungry people in our Fellowship Hall (note the generic name!) Food for Soul—both green and generous.

And the chapel is gallery space, isn't it—or at least as I imagine it. That space would lend itself beautifully—as would the hall leading up to it, as a space to feature young community artists, openings, rotating every few months to connect us to the vibrant arts community at St. Norbert, and UWGB and the Arts Garage, and others. And it could bring creative folk through our doors.

And Jazz at Union had only begun to explore the possibilities when the pandemic curtailed everything. What an amazing array of musicians—what joy was brought to us through new music by Pegasis, and Adam Gaines, and Dave and Gary Hassel, and so many more, who brought into our worship Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald, Sly and the Family Stone and Stevie Wonder, Jazz Christmas and LGBTQ Jazz, and on and on. We wanted to take the Union Jazz Collective on the road—to schools, to concerts in the park, to other churches around the U.S. with jazz ministries—and there are many.

I'm holding onto one end of a love...

But the Spirit helps us in our weakness—whatever it might be. The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And the Spirit searches the heart: search yours!

Change is hard, I've found. One of the questions we asked the seven venerable members of the church our middle school youth group (note generic name) interviewed was “How has the church progressed?” Usually, the answer was: we became Open and Affirming. But that was 20 years ago.

What are the obstacles blocking Union's flourishing? My final take on my three years here is that I discovered a healthy church with some unhealthy patterns. Most of those unhealthy patterns have to do with “traditionalism,” with doing the same things over and over again, without really asking why. For instance, here is the implicit, and hard, question: what are the ways white supremacy continues to dominate our collective life? To be stuck in traditionalism—like white supremacy, is to be stuck in the dead faith of the living. Tradition itself—the broad, deep, and wide tradition of the church (not to mention those wonderfully diverse indigenous, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist—and other traditions out there) is to be in touch with the living faith of the dead.

May it be so among you, Union, as I say farewell. May you be true to that Living Spirit bestowed upon the first disciples of Jesus, who changes everything, and who makes a way so that our sons and our daughters shall prophecy. You have an exceptionally competent and gifted preacher and pastor in Bridget—from whom I learned a great deal, and the lay leadership of this congregation never failed to surprise and delight me with its commitment and integrity. Thank you.

So, my last words will be of love. Please don't leave the service today without listening to the Postlude, "As," by Stevie Wonder, played so beautifully by Matt and Rissel that when I heard them record it, I cried, tears rolling down my cheeks. It's a beautiful song, and its lyrics convey what I hope you hear from me now, and what you have experienced from my presence with you as a pastor:

As around the sun the earth knows she's revolving
And the rosebuds know to bloom in early May
Just as hate knows love's the cure
You can rest your mind assured
That I'll be loving you always

As now can't reveal the mystery of tomorrow
But in passing will grow older every day
Just as all that's born is new
Do know what I say is true
That I'll be loving you always

Until the rainbow burns the stars out in the sky, Always
Until the ocean covers every mountain high, Always
Until the dolphin flies and parrots live at sea, Always
Until we dream of life and life becomes a dream

Did you know that true love asks for nothing?
Her acceptance is the way we pay
Did you know that life has given love a guarantee?
To last through forever and another day

Just as time knew to move on since the beginning
And the seasons know exactly when to change
Just as kindness knows no shame
Know through all your joy and pain
That I'll be loving you always

As today I know I'm living but tomorrow
Could make me the past but that I mustn't fear
For I'll know deep in my mind
The love of me I've left behind
'Cause I'll be loving you always

Did you know you're loved by somebody?

Until the day is night and night becomes the day
Loving you
Until the trees and seas up, up and fly away
Loving you
Until dear Mother Nature says her work is through
Loving you
Until the day that you are me and I am you...

Thank you for loving me for these three years. I will never forget the joy we shared, and the struggles. And I hope I've left you with more love and joy than when I arrived. That is the Spirit's work, finally—to spread love, always, in surprising and delightful and effective ways, with power. Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl
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Romans 8:22-27; Acts 2:1-21
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