

## **“Blessing the Journey”**

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This week, I wrote a letter telling you, my beloved congregation, that as of July 15 of this year, I am resigning from my ministry with you. It was a hard letter to write. And by some twist of fate, we were shorthanded in the office this week, so I did most of the stuffing, labeling, stamping and mailing of the 300 hundred letters myself. It turned out to be a good thing, good as in valuable to me. There was no handing off the text and suddenly – BINK! – it’s out. There was something valuable, I think, in reading each one of your names, putting the letter into YOUR envelope and wondering how you might feel when you opened it. It was starting to get real.

So if you’ve been away and there’s an unopened stack of mail still waiting for you, or if somehow you didn’t get the letter, or if you saw the church’s return address and thought it was a solicitation – we understand, it’s pledge week - you may not have heard about this before just now. For that I am sorry. There is no unpainful way to say this – I am going in July. And this morning, I am asking you, all of you, to bless me on my journey. I am offering you my blessing on the journey you will embark without me.

In this sermon I will talk about parting, and about my hopes for the last few months we have together and beyond. If this is your first Sunday visiting the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, it may feel very strange to be talking of endings and partings and hope and grief. But I promise that you will hear something useful to you in thinking about any leave-taking. There are important things to understand.

In my letter, I said that I had been wishing for some time for my own pulpit and the opportunity to lead a congregation. I went into search this year, and unfortunately, didn’t make a match with a congregation. And still, I will be leaving at the end of the church year. I will join the pool of interim ministers for our denomination, and Robert and I could end up just about anywhere. Now right about here seems to be where I lose people, where they tend to look puzzled, so let me offer an analogy. If you think of this as a trip where you’ve bought your tickets, planned your itinerary, packed your bags – just to find out the flight has

been canceled due to weather – well, of course you’d turn around for home, sleep in your own bed, eat your own food and wait for the next flight. But what if it was more like this – what if you bought your tickets, planned your itinerary, packed your bags, and *boarded a train*. And for some reason it just whizzes by your stop. You blink a few times. You can’t quite believe it. Now you are not going on the trip you planned and saved for, but you are on a moving train. Have you ever felt this way? I’ve heard that people who struggle with infertility feel this way. They will not have the child they dreamed of conceiving together. But through their experience they’ve changed. Maybe they’ll adopt, as a lot of you have. Maybe they will nurture the children of others. Whatever they do, they cannot go back to being the people they were.

This is how it feels for me. As any of you who have served on a ministerial search committee can attest, the process in our denomination is long and rigorous. It runs from November through March and involves the exchange of online profiles and packets about ministers and churches. There are phone interviews and weekend interviews, and what seems like months of nothing but waiting. It asks a lot emotionally from everyone involved. You can’t really participate unless you give your heart to the process. It changes you. And for me, doing all of this has meant that I have boarded the train. I feel what Dick Gilbert describes as “the strange and anxious excitement of moving on to new places to call home” – even if I don’t have a clear idea of what that home will be.

I realize now that I need to do whatever will take me closer to my dream of having my own church, and this means getting more “solo” experience as an interim. An interim assignment would last one or two years, while my husband and I start the long and arduous search process again. This, as you might guess, can be a tough sell to a spouse. Mine said, “Go for it.”

I chose as our ancient reading the story of Abram setting out for Canaan because I could really relate. The direction to get going is clear. The promises of blessing are enticing. But, as Robert Alter points out, God doesn’t say what’s going to happen to Abram and his family, what these so-called blessings will involve. Abram doesn’t get to make a pro and con list, or do a cost-benefit analysis. God doesn’t even say the name “Canaan” in his instructions, or maybe what direction he should set out in. “The land I will show you” is pretty vague. In fact, there’s a lot more about what he’s leaving than what he’s going to. The text says the same thing three times, “Go forth from your land and your birthplace and your father’s house”. The commentators call this a triplet - a literary device designed to draw our attention. So we hear, “your land and your birthplace and

your father's house" perhaps so we might feel with this man, 75 years old when the story begins, and what he's leaving. Think of his friends and his community and his home and decades of familiar habits, plying his trade. What he is leaving is so much more evident than what he's going to. And that's usually true for us, isn't it? This week, I became quite aware of going forth from Wilmington, my church, my people's home.

This week I see the things I am leaving in Living Technicolor. All the things I'll miss. Like hearing Scott sing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas". And having Terry Walls spoil me rotten, doing things for me that I've forgotten to ask him. And teasing Rev. Josh about how much he loves to write board reports about executive limitation #3. (It's great to have a senior colleague who cares for me and supports my ministry, and who takes his job, but not himself, too seriously.) I'll miss greeting each of you as you come in the door to worship, and looking out at all of you singing hymns. And eating pancakes and sausage served to me by men in yellow-flowered aprons at the Fall Festival. And hearing about the ways our Caring Friends care for people who are sick or homebound or bereaved or in crisis. Their kindness never fails to move me. Or any one of the myriad personal ways you have allowed me to be a part of your lives. All of you have taught me something about sorrow, loss, joy, and living a good and decent life. About what it means to live our faith. I'll miss you so much.

The story in Genesis is missing any sort of description of how Abram might have said goodbye. The departure of a family like Abram's would be deeply felt in a tribal community. Did Abram and his family vanish in the night? Did the community say nothing to them as they set out? The story talks about blessings, but it leaves out how God will bring them about. Our faith, Unitarian Universalism, would say that they usually come from human beings. This is where our children's story, the story of Snow White and Rose Red, gives us some clues. In this story, the blessing comes from a real person, a witch. (And feminists, don't you love a witch that has a little character, that has a little more going for her than poisoned apples and wounded vanity?) She offers a typical blessing, a form of riches and protection. When we do things that require great faith, whenever we set out into new territory, we need the blessing of others.

Blessings are important for us to give and to receive. They are far more than just conferring approval or permission, as in, "My boss blessed my new project proposal" or "You can tell her with my blessing." It starts with approval, but it goes on from there. A blessing is a heartfelt wish for the best things for another person. It is the sense that your heart or your spirit goes with them. Think of

sending your child off to college. There is the considerable tuition check and the shopping trip to Bed, Bath and Beyond. But these things must also be given with a blessing.

Think of the blessing that parents give to their children's marriages. We no longer think of it as a requirement for marriage. The habit of asking for the bride's hand is, Hallelujah, becoming a quaint notion. But a blessing is different. I know a few couples who, sadly, have married without the blessing of one of their families - usually because of race or gender. They have happy marriages, they have lives full of friends and people who stand in. But they feel the absence of blessing. Because we need it. We need to be blessed.

We have an opportunity to bless this last period of time we have together. To be generous with each other. Like it or not, things have already started to change. As soon as you read my letter, or as soon as you heard that I was leaving, our relationship started to change. The journey for both of us has started, even though I'm still here.

Right about now, it would be easy for us to just say, "Hey good luck" and DUCK - withdraw from each other and not have much contact. Or to pretend we don't have any sort of feelings about this. Especially if there are unresolved feelings - ways in which I may have disappointed you, or ways that you've disappointed me. In nine years, after all, it could happen. More likely, we will need to say how it feels to leave one another, and what we have meant to each other. "You know how I feel" is not going to cut it. I had to leave behind "You know how I feel" when I left Lutheran Minnesota. I expect more from East Coasters, and I promise you more in return. But for us to bless each other on this new journey, we need to say these things. It can be in coffee hour, or stopping by my office, or a phone call, or an e-mail or facebook message or a good, old-fashioned written note. I imagine there will be a party or two before the whole thing is over, too.

Another blessing we need to give is to say a real goodbye to one another. Goodbye is a word we choke on. If you've ever left a town and a circle of friends, you have probably experienced something like this - you get together one more time, and as you part, your friends say, "We'll call you before you go." And you know they won't. You forgive them because it's human nature to say such things. But you are cheated from saying a real goodbye. It's not complicated, it's just hard. It means looking each other in the eye and saying the word: Goodbye.

Which of course means *God be with you. May you be safe from harm. May good things come.* A blessing.

When I leave First Unitarian Church, I will no longer be your minister. We will both need to let go. This letting go includes little things like Facebook. I shudder to use this word, but I'll need to "unfriend" you – for a year or so. And I'll be very sad doing it. If you e-mail me or call, I will thank you sincerely for thinking of me, but I will keep it brief. And it includes letting go of some big things. After I've gone, and your son is engaged to be married, please know that I will wish you and yours all the best in the world. And if you ask me to conduct the wedding, I will say no. The same is true for memorials. I will say no. I'll say that you have a new minister and that I have full confidence that he or she will do a wonderful job. It won't feel very good, I imagine, in the moment. But doing the right thing often has moments like this. It requires faith, and a sense of abundance – in this case, an abundance of love. That the ministry that has passed between us is important, and will endure even though we don't see each other. That another minister can love you as I have.

Entering a congregation as a new minister is no easy task. When I first started here in 2002, I had to do some things that felt very strange. I had to barge into hospital rooms of people who had never seen me before. I had to call up people who'd just lost a loved one - but introduce myself first. I had to conduct the funerals of people I'd never met. (This still happens, but I usually know at least one person in the family!) I did each of these things because they were part of my job as the new minister of pastoral care. And it was *weird*. But I could do these things because you *let* me do them. You had blessed your previous ministers and sent them on their way, so there could be room for me.

Here's the tricky part. Now we know all this. We know I am going. We know we won't have real contact after I go. We know you will need to embrace a new minister. And - I haven't gone yet. I'm still here for a few months. That means the work of saying goodbye is beginning. This is our job over the next few months, to bless one another. May we be brave and generous in our work.

May we fully know, as Dick Gilbert describes, "the poignancy of welcome and farewell, the anguish of defeat, the exuberant joy of birth, and the tender touch of those who call us friend." Amen. So may it be.