

“Benediction: Blessing and Sending Forth”

Jeremiah 29:11-14; Joel 2:23-32

June 19, 2016

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One definition of “benediction” is “blessing.” In the context of a worship service the benediction is that blessing that comes at the end of the service.

Somewhere along the line someone taught me that the function of a benediction is “blessing and sending forth.” A benediction is meant to both offer a blessing to the gathered congregation and to send us all forth into something else – to send us out into the world to do something to put our faith into practice. And though I no longer remember where I picked up that tidbit, that has been the formula I use for the benediction at the end of pretty much every worship service I have ever led. Blessing, and sending forth. Many of you recognize that as the formula I use. I know you recognize that because many people have commented on it.

Today the whole service is a benediction of sorts.

With the exception of our first hymn that called us in to worship by praising God, all our hymns today are sending forth hymns – hymns that would normally be used at the end of a service. Folks have asked if I’ve been working my favorite hymns into recent services. I do love to sing my favorite hymns. But I love a worship service with a tightly woven theme even more. So that’s been the real guide to choosing hymns these past few weeks – and of course for today.

You will notice that the two sending forth hymns in the middle of our service today include many references to how we live our faith in daily life – how we put our faith into practice. The hope in worship is always, I think, to extend the fruits of worship into daily life – into how we face the tasks of our everyday life; for the fruits of worship to blossom in action.

Each week when I offer the benediction, I begin with something like: “and now as you go out from this time and place into whatever the week might hold for you...” As I do this, I often scan the congregation. I see your faces. And sometimes I know something of what you will be facing in the coming week, and some piece of your story comes to mind. Or if I don’t know, I wonder and imagine what the week might hold for you. And I have hopes that your faith will make a difference in how you navigate your week, and even that whatever you receive by coming to worship will help sustain you for what you face in the week.

As I was thinking about today’s benediction – about the entire service – I was thinking that this time I am sending you forth not so much as a collection of individuals, into your respective weeks – but instead sending you forth as a congregation, into all that the future will hold for you.

Planning ahead is great – until you get to a particular week and realize that you don’t want to talk about the scripture you dutifully chose some weeks before. The passage from Joel was chosen with your future in mind, chosen to convey the hope that God’s spirit will be poured out upon you, that together you will dream dreams and see visions that carry you forward together.

But you know what? In a way I have been sending you forth into your future for weeks now, even months. I went back and counted at least five entire sermons in recent months plus pieces of other sermons that highlight your dreams and visions for the future. I've been saying quite a lot about where you are headed – where I believe God is calling you, and the work you all have laid out for the coming months. Every sermon emphasizing the DNA of this congregation and charging you to be who you are, to carry your DNA forward – every sermon talking about the Pathway process – every sermon highlighting the visions for ministry that have emerged in our three areas of ministry emphasis – all of this is to some extent a way of sending you forth into your future as a congregation.

I knew all along that today would be a time not only for me sending you forth, but a time for us to send each other forth, you and I. But if I have already said so much about where I imagine you all are headed as a congregation, maybe today is a time to talk a bit more about what you are sending me forth into.

Back to my benediction formula: blessing and sending forth. I don't entirely know what the blessings of our time together have been for you. But I know what they have been for me. Two areas of blessing stand out.

A huge blessing for me in my time here is how much I have learned and grown as a pastor. I have learned and grown so much. So much of what we have worked on together in these years I didn't know how to do before I got here. There has been tons of trial and error and over and over I have learned new things step by step along the way. It really hit me this week, as I've been reflecting back, how very much I have learned. I have grown both personally and professionally.

A second huge blessing has been the relationships here. Thank you for being such wonderful people. Thank you for letting me into your lives. Thank you for working so collaboratively with me. Thank you for touching my life in such meaningful ways. I just don't have enough words or the right words to say what my relationships with you have meant to me.

Some weeks ago as I began to think in earnest about how to wrap things up here, I decided to go through the church directory and make a schedule – really plan out how to spend more quality time with all of you. There were just a couple of problems with that idea. One is that I would have had to extend my time here by several months, in order to have the time with you I would want. The other is that it was always only a fantasy, to imagine that somehow I could spend enough time with you to feel complete; to feel ready to say goodbye.

In truth I am ready to be done with this work, at least for a time. I am tired. I'm ready to get some more rest. But I am not done with you. There are a number of last tasks I have been able to check off my to-do list this week, several things I've been glad to complete. But I can't check you off a list and say that I am done. I don't know how to call a relationship complete. So even today I do not feel complete. I am still not done wanting more time with you – time that I won't have with you. And that simply is what it is.

You are a thoughtful and reflective group. Perhaps you can identify with some of the reflection I look forward to in the coming year.

Here is some of what you are sending me forth into: for some time now I have been sketching out questions to explore in the coming year. What in my work has been most life giving to me? Where have I experienced delight? How have I grown – and what does this tell me about ways I might continue to grow? How does my professional role fit with the role of being a beloved child of God called to follow Jesus – and how do I feel about the ways I have and have not been faithfully following Jesus? What do I want to do about it? How do I feel and what do I think about church, at a time when the place of church in our world is changing dramatically? What role do I want to play in this thing called church?

I am looking forward to this time for reflection.

The second scripture I chose today was the reading from Jeremiah. It's a passage I love. The thought of God having a plan for us is comforting in a time of change. Though I have to say that I don't believe God has a plan, not exactly. But I do believe God has an intention – an intention for each one of our lives, and for our world. I believe that God's intention is for life and love and growth and hope. I believe that God's intention is for justice and peace. I trust that going forward from here, God calls you and God calls me to live into that intention and that, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, if we seek God with all our heart we will find God. And in this way we will continue to live into God's intentions for us.

So, to you, the people of the Davis United Methodist Church: I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the abundant blessings these five years have held for me. I thank you for sending me forth with such love and support. I thank you for your sadness at our parting, because it honors the time we have had together. Through wherever our paths lead us, may we all seek God with our whole hearts. And may you stride boldly into the future with ministries that bear fruit consistent with who you are as a spirit-filled, welcoming & affirming, & service & justice oriented congregation. Amen.