

The Last One

I Corinthians 3:5-9

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One of the exercises that ministers often use when they get writer's block is to try to imagine that the sermon they are working on is the last sermon they will ever preach. Supposedly this exercise helps us to clear out all of our extraneous distracting thoughts and get right to the heart of our message driving our writing through a sense of urgency. I find, however, that knowing this is the last sermon I am going to be preaching to you doesn't create a desire to deliver a profound message that will surpass everything I have ever said, but instead makes me feel that if you haven't gotten the gospel by now from my preaching, it's probably too late to try to be profound! In fact, whether it's my first or last or just one of 1800 sermons, I have never thought of preaching as a singular experience, as if one sermon could ever summarize the entirety of the gospel and the struggles of our faith lives. For me, preaching should come out of our time worshipping together and praying together, out of the discussions we have about current events, out of our times of sorrow and our times of joy, even out of the mundane work of church meetings and administrative tasks because it is in all of those things that we — together — come to understand what Christ means to our lives. Throughout the years of my preaching, I have never tried to deliver to you the "truth" as if I alone have an exclusive doorway to God's mind; what I have tried to do is to filter the gospel message through the experiences and struggles of all of us here and so no one sermon can summarize the breadth of that ever-changing experience.

In fact, if you have ever said to me, "I felt like you were preaching that sermon right to me," it was because I was, but I was also preaching it to the person in the pew next to you and the person on the other side of the church, and most of all I was preaching it to myself. I have always been the primary audience for my sermons because I know that I am just as in need of hearing God's word as any of you. When I was in seminary, a professor reminded us, "What is most personal is most universal and what is most universal is most personal." The struggles and questions and doubts and heartaches that we think must be ours alone turn out to be universally shared by others in this congregation, and the joys, sorrows, and faith life that we share as a congregation have a particular and unique expression in each of our lives.

So today, as I prepare to leave you, I want you to remember that just as no one sermon will ever encapsulate the breadth and depth of our faith life together, so too there will never be one person in the church who can encapsulate the breadth and depth of God, not even the person standing in the pulpit. (Or I would say, *especially* not the person standing in the pulpit since I am better acquainted with the person standing in the pulpit than any of you are.) In fact, I believe and have always believed that the whole purpose of the church is to force us out of our limited spiritual experiences. You could, after all, stay home on Sundays and pray on your own, or take a meditative walk in the woods, or pour over the scriptures in the privacy of your study, and you would certainly be able to have a genuine faith life as a result. You don't need the church to have some sort of faith life. You would, through your solo efforts, be able to see a glimpse of God but the problem with solo spirituality is that the God you would see would end up looking a little too much like yourself. The God you came to know would be your own convictions and experiences and personality writ large.

In the community of the church, however, we are forced to rub elbows with people whose opinions and personalities are very different from our own and yet who, we are assured by Christ, are also God's children and also loved by God. That means that week after week when we come here we have to grapple with the recognition that maybe God is bigger than our singular experience. I read an article once in which someone said, "I try to open my heart to the expansive love of God by walking down the street and saying to myself, "God loves that person." "God loves that homeless man begging for change," I say. "God loves that rude man who just shoved me aside on the subway. God loves that strange woman who decorated her hat with flowers this morning. God loves the tattooed tongue-pierced girl sitting next to me. God loves us all."

And as I finished the article, I thought to myself, you don't need to walk down the streets to do that; just come to church week because here you will find a pretty rag tag motley crew who will force your heart open to the greatness of God's love. Maybe in this church we all look outwardly a lot alike, but our backgrounds and personalities are all over the place and our diversity of humanity can be a challenge to cope with. But when the church is doing what the church is called to do, you will find no better place to force you to move beyond your self-centered limited spirituality to discover a broader and deeper understanding of God and of God's amazing grace.

And personally, I think that this church's greatest strength is that being intentionally inclusive of the breadth of the human experience has been woven right into its identity. When the church was organized in 1922, the founders wanted to provide a Sunday worship for the non-Seventh Day Baptists in town, and think about this for a second: they could have done that by inviting a denominational church to be established in Alfred, but they didn't. Instead, they said, "We want to welcome people of all denominations to worship together and we're not going to ask them to agree to any particular creed. We will be for Sunday worshippers of all sorts." I don't know if the founders realized it at the time, but their decision to remain open to a variety of church backgrounds came to influence the way this church thinks about community in general. Because the tenet of inclusiveness lay at the heart of our identity, later congregations would welcome different forms of baptism, different kinds of membership, and different ways of celebrating communion saying, "We are an inclusive church." Even more boldly, this church would come to believe that being inclusive meant supporting women in leadership positions, forming interfaith alliances in town, and affirming the faith of LGBTQ+ people. And unlike many churches, being inclusive for us is not just a social justice stance; it is who we are and so it plays out on the smallest scale in the way that this church welcomes every single person who walks through those doors to become part of our community. Every person here — young or old, rich or poor, fat or thin, graceful or awkward, mellow or anxious — every single person here has a place at our table. This church knows that God is bigger than any single one of us and that the best way we can experience the immensity of God's grace is to share grace with an immense openness to all.

My final word to you then is to trust who you are and who you, as a church, have always been. Since 1922, you have been God's servants working together, sharing your experiences of God, your questions and thoughts and your commitment to faith. You have truly tried to be a priesthood of all believers where every voice is welcome, every person is valued, and no one is elevated above the others, not even the minister. The head of this church is Christ alone. And whether I am here in the pulpit or Louise is here in the pulpit, or someone else is here in the pulpit, in the words of Paul, your primary calling is to be Christ's servants working together, and I am absolutely confident that you will continue to do great work together on Christ's behalf in the coming months and years. Because it is who you are.

On a personal note, I want to end by thanking you for these 38 years. I've talked a lot about the ministry side of things but I am also grateful for the life this church has enabled me to create outside of the job. I grew up on six and a half acres of land four and a half miles from the college town of Geneseo, and because of you I was able to buy 8 acres of land four miles from the college town of Alfred and recreate the life that I loved so much as a kid. Because of you, I have been able to build a house and will retire with a completely paid off mortgage, a mortgage that you offered to hold because no bank would give me one. Without your support I don't know if I would have considered adopting a child as a single parent, but with your support John came into my life and he was raised by a village — or at least by a church. And without the church, I wouldn't have Stacy and Mathew in my life, a true blessing not just to me but to my entire family. My life is what it is because of this church and for that I am profoundly grateful.

I also want to extend my gratitude to the other church staff that I have had the privilege of working with over the years. Having Peter and Laurel providing music has been a true joy to me not only because they are excellent musicians but also because they are excellent people and so easy to work with. I have said many times that there are few churches as small as ours that can boast of the quality of music that we experience week after week, and because music is so important to me, they have been the highlight of my own worship life. Thank you, Peter and Laurel.

I also want to thank Lana Meissner. I have been graced with many great secretaries throughout the years, and even though I may be biased because I am her friend, I have to say that the church currently has one of the best in Lana. I know that during the transition, Lana will help keep everyone organized, and the church running smoothly, and she will be invaluable to Louise as you all move forward. Thank you, Lana.

Finally, last year when the nominating committee met, I watched to make sure that the boards were filled with strong committed people who would be there to do the work needed during the transition and I can assure you that I am absolutely confident that the volunteers and leaders that you have right now in place are the people you need to see you through this time.

2022 will be different for all of us both on this side of the pulpit and on your side, but the one thing we can be certain of is that in the midst of all of the change, there are two things will not change:

1. This church will continue to be a witness to the inclusive love of Christ for the world and one another.
2. Christ will be with all of us wherever we are and wherever we go, now and forever. Amen.