

1

What do I say this last Sunday after all these years? Some of you I have known for 21 years—7 of those while I served as an editor with our denominational publishing house in St. Louis, 14 of those years as your pastor, beginning at Hillcrest and then together here at Crossroads. We've experienced many joys and struggles together.

Jonathan was only two years old when I arrived, and now he's a young adult studying gravitation physics in Germany and next year at LSU. Rebekah was born into this community of faith, and now she's in the school of education at UMSL with the dream of being a special education teacher. When we accepted Vyganté into our home from Lithuania, you welcomed here for nine months. You have provided a nurturing and caring place for their faith to develop and grow, and for that I'm truly grateful.

You provided a safe place for both Lisa and me as we decided to end our marriage. Although it may not have been easy, you avoiding taking sides, choosing instead to support us both through the process. For that I am truly grateful.

When Staci and I happened to meet one another in the same apartment building, I invited her to church. You embraced her as a visitor, and when we eventually began dating and married, you continued to accept her as part of the community of faith. I am grateful for your embrace of her.

You have nurtured me as I explored my role as a minister, for two decades ago as a recent seminary graduate I was still exploring the meaning of ministry. I first came to this area to edit curriculum at our church publishing house in St. Louis, but through my experience with you I have come to love my role as your pastor.

So what do I say on this last Sunday with all of you? I feel somewhat like the Roman official in Luke's Gospel who sought Jesus for the healing of someone dear to him. The official wanted to help, but he was unsure whether he was the right one for the job, something at times I've experienced as your pastor. There have been times I wanted to help, but I've not always known what to do. Maybe you have experienced this same situation—ever want to help, but feel inadequate for the situation?

2

In Luke's story, the official sent some elders to find Jesus to request him to heal his servant, but as Jesus approached the Roman official sent word to Jesus, "Master, you don't have to go to all this trouble. I'm not that good a person, you know. I'd be embarrassed for you to come to my house, even embarrassed to come to you in person."¹

This Roman captain, who gave orders all the time to those under his leadership, felt inadequate and unworthy for Jesus to enter his home. Interestingly, when the elders approached Jesus, Luke tells us they had indicated that this Roman official was worthy, using a Greek word that literally meant "to bring up the other beam of the scales," a word used when weighing objects. When the other side of the scale comes into balance, it becomes equal to what lies on the other side of the scale; it becomes worthy.

Although this official felt inadequate, Luke tells us that others saw him as balanced, as good enough, as adequate. I imagine each of us has felt like this official from time to time, as though we aren't good enough, feeling inadequate or out of balance. When we can't seem to find enough time to get everything done that

we want to do, we feel unbalanced. When there seem to be more bills due than money coming in, we feel unbalanced. When we feel more anger than joy, life feels unbalanced. When we want to help but don't know what to do, we feel unbalanced.

Even in the church, we can feel a bit out of balance if we spend more time doing the business of the church than engaging in Bible study. If we worry about how to get more money than celebrating what God has already given us. If we spend more time discussing what we cannot do than celebrating what God is already doing right now. If we spend more time worrying about problems than praying to discern God's vision for us.

When we don't know what to do, when we feel inadequate, prayer may be the best solution—not to tell God what to do, but for us to recognize what God is already doing.

A seventeenth-century rabbi, Leona Medina, explained [prayer] this way: If you watch a man out on a boat grab a rope and pull his boat to shore you might think, if you were confused about weight and motion, that he was really pulling the

3

shore to his boat. People have much the same confusion about spiritual weight and motion: In prayer, some believe that you are pulling God closer to you. But in fact the heartfelt prayer pulls you closer to God.²

Prayer not only draws us closer to God, but the words we speak can also draw us closer to one another. It's often through our words of prayer and the words of those around us that we begin to sense we are not alone, and we begin to understand what God has in mind for us. I know for me, my prayers with you over the past 21 years have helped me experience God's presence among us. Through our worship together, our Bible study, and even our business meetings, I have grown to sense God's Spirit more deeply.

As your pastor, I experience God's presence each time I offered pastoral care through the many times we've shared together in the hospital. I have sensed God's presence through the

- 18 baby dedications
- 21 baptisms
- 27 weddings

- 12 seminary students I have mentored through placement here in our congregation or with Beacon
- 66 funerals for members of our congregation, families members, or people in the community who requested me to do their funeral

As I added up the number of these events, I came to the startling discovery that they are all divisible by three. This number reminds me that through the holy Trinity of three God, the Spirit, and Jesus Christ have been a part of what we have done here together for the past 21 years—with even the number of years together being divisible by three! Something mysterious and holy has happened among us.

I am grateful for all the humorous times we've had together, the laughter and joy we have shared together. I found two cards in my office given to me that reflect a bit of that humor. (*Read cards*)

I will also cherish all the times I've had experiencing God's presence in the broader community:

- My opportunity to serve in SEGA, especially as the Moderator of the Area Board, and my many years as counselor or director at church camp. (*Note from Bekah*)

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- Experiences with other faith traditions through the Metro-East Interfaith Partnership, an organization I helped begin in response to the event of 9/11 as way to build bridges of understanding between faith traditions in our community
- The conversation with students at McKendree University helped me hear the voices of young people in regard to religion and spirituality
- Our ministry with Beacon as we hauled furniture, offered rides to those who needed assistance, listened to those in need on the phone, engaged in Bible study with Relational Ministries, seeking shelter for the homeless
- The voices of seniors through the services funded by the Area Agency on Aging, for I have served on their Board for many years due to the invitation of Betty Doehler—a member of our congregation. Through this connection we hosted a Meals on Wheels program here for many years

I think of the many conversations we've had in hospitals, in my office, in Sunday school, on Wednesday nights in response to the video and Bible study, here in this sanctuary, and in your homes. I

have discovered the deep faith within your lives, which leads me back to the story in Luke's Gospel. Jesus was amazed at the Roman official's faith, for the man indicated he trusted that Jesus only needed to speak a healing word and his servant would be healed. I have seen profound faith within this congregation as you have offered healing words to one another, and I encourage you to continue speaking words of healing love to each other.

In closing, I offer these last words, trusting that God's Word will continue to offer a healing and loving presence with your lives. I trust that God's Spirit will continue to fill this place and your lives, that God's Spirit will be present in my next ministry, and that God's Spirit will continue to bind us together in the family of God. May God bless you and keep you each and every day. Amen.

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language* (Lk 7:6-7). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

² Rabbi David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (HarperOne, 2008), 142.