

Saying Goodbye

DESCRIPTION

A two-week series for your final two Sundays before leaving a congregation. The sermons include:

- Four Things You Need to Know About Your New Pastor (Acts 14:8-23)
- The Church In My Heart (Philippians 1:1-11)

Four Things You Need To Know About Your New Pastor (Acts 14:8-23)

You probably noticed the title of today's sermon *[slide: photo of new pastor with the sermon title]*. Before the service began someone came up to me and said, "So, what juicy scoop have you dug up about Mike?" Well, none actually. But as you prepare to welcome a new pastor, I thought it would be helpful to share four important things about pastors. By the way, I will spend a lot of time on number one, and then only briefly mention number 2, 3, and 4, so don't get anxious about the clock. *[end slide]*

As I prepared for today's sermon, I thought back on my first pastorate out of seminary. I was young and I looked young. The moving van had just unloaded all our stuff when the doorbell rang. A visitor dropped by to meet the new pastor of First Church. I opened the door and said hello. My visitor looked quite startled. Finally, after a long silence, he said, "Is your father home?" Of course, that's not a problem anymore. At Brentwood the visitor at my door will probably ask, "Is your son or daughter home?" Anyway, my youthfulness did not fit this man's image of a pastor. People have a lot of stereotypes about clergy, which brings me to the first point on your listening guide.

[slide with Mike's photo: 1. Pastors are Human] We see this clearly in today's scripture reading. Acts 14 tells a story about Paul and Barnabus doing mission work in a town called Lystra. In this text, the people in Lystra made two common mistakes in relating to ministers. On the one hand, the Greeks in Lystra wanted to make gods of them. They were so impressed with Paul and Barnabus that they tried to worship them. This still happens today. Some church members elevate pastors, place them way up on a pedestal and view them as super human. The problem of course, is that no pastor can measure up to that. If you put your

pastor up on a pedestal, sooner or later he or she will greatly disappoint you. So don't follow the example of the Greeks and make a god out of your new pastor. The Jews in Lystra, on the other hand, wanted to kill Paul. In fact, they took Paul out and stoned him and left him for dead. This still happens today in some churches. Not literally of course. But some church members do attack their pastor, not with real stones, but with relentless criticism. Well, what a contrast. The Greeks of Lystra wanted to make gods out of ministers of the gospel. The Jews of Lystra wanted to kill them. But neither approach was appropriate. Somewhere between these two extremes is the right path. Paul tells us the right approach in the text. Read with me from verse 15, [add to slide: "Friends, why are you doing this? We are human just like you." (v. 15)] That's all any pastor is. No more and no less. Pastors are real people. They laugh but also cry. They have hope but also know despair. They can be kind but sometimes can be impatient. They have strengths but also weaknesses. They are, in Paul's words, "human just like you." **[end slide]**

Years ago I pastored a church in Arkansas. Early one morning, my wife Paula got up early to go to the grocery store. A while later, I got up to shower and shave. I had just lathered up my face when I heard Paula's car drive up. A moment later, I heard knocking at the door. I figured Paula had her arms full of groceries and needed me to open the door. Now, you have to picture this scene. I'm wearing two things and two things only: shaving cream and underwear. I go to the door. I open the door wide. And to my great surprise, it wasn't Paula at the door. Rather, it was one of the women of the church. If I had been fast on my feet I would have quoted from this passage in Acts 14, "We are human just like you." By the way, there is a great ending to that story. The next Sunday I saw this woman and told her how embarrassed I was about the incident. She said, "Oh, don't worry, it's no big deal. I've seen lots of men in their underwear." I think she was referring to her husband and three sons, at least I hope so!

Well, pastors are just ordinary people, we are human like you. So when Mike comes, don't be like the Greeks and make a god out of him or you will be greatly disappointed. And don't be like the Jews and stone him with criticism. Just accept that Mike is a real person with strengths and weaknesses and give him the freedom to be human. As Paul said, "We are human just like you."

Pastors are ordinary human beings. But pastors also have a unique role. Pastors are set apart by God for very specific service in the church. So in the few moments I have left, I want to

briefly review with you the three primary functions of a Christian pastor. These three functions are found in today's text, but they are also found throughout the Bible and in Christian history. Let's quickly review these three tasks.

[slide with Mike's photo: 2. Pastors Proclaim the Gospel. "And after they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples." (v. 21)] As we see in verse 21, a primary role of the pastor is to proclaim the gospel. We do that primarily through preaching, teaching, worship leadership and administering the sacraments. Every pastor has his or her own style of preaching. I have mine, and Mike will have his. But pastors have a unique calling to proclaim the gospel.

[slide with Mike's photo: 3. Pastors Lead the Church. "And after they had appointed elders for them in each church." (v. 23)] Verse 23 is just one example of Paul providing leadership in the church. Pastors are called of God and appointed by the church to lead their congregation, in partnership with the staff and lay leaders.

[slide with Mike's photo: 4. Pastors Care for People. "They strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them." (v. 22)] As we see in v. 22, part of a pastor's job is to care for the needs of people. Pastors weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. They marry and bury and counsel and pray and visit. Of course, pastors cannot do this by themselves, especially in a large church like ours. They need the staff and entire congregation to join with them as they provide loving care for the congregation.

[slide with Mike's photo: 1. Pastors Proclaim the Gospel. 2. Pastors Lead the Church. 3. Pastors Care for People.] Well, pastors proclaim the Gospel. Pastors lead the church. And pastors care for people. These are the things I was sent here to do over the past ten years, and these are the things that Mike is now being sent here to do. I hope and pray you will accept Mike as a human being, with both strengths and weaknesses, and I hope you will support him as he proclaims, leads, and cares. ***[end slide]***

I have a pastor friend in Arkansas named Lloyd. Years ago Lloyd went to a new church, and, as is usually the case, things went great for about eight or nine months. But then the honeymoon was over. They had some conflicts and problems and several members got frustrated with Lloyd. Nothing out of the ordinary, just normal routine church stuff. About a

year into his pastorate, Lloyd was preaching a sermon, and he said, “I know I’m not all you want in a pastor.” This was a Baptist church, so there were a few good natured “amens.” He repeated his statement. “I know I’m not all you want in a pastor.” Then Lloyd stared at them for the longest time and finally said, “But look at what I’m stuck with!” Well, they laughed long and hard. They laughed because they knew Lloyd was not perfect and they knew they were not perfect. But they also knew God had brought them together, and that if they could accept each other in spite of their weaknesses, good things would happen in the life of that church. And that’s exactly what happened. And, that’s what has happened between you and me. And that’s my prayer for you and for your new pastor.

Listening Guide

1. Pastors are _____
“Friends, why are you doing this? We are human just like you ...” (v. 15)
2. Pastors _____ the Gospel
“... They proclaimed the good news to that city and made many disciples.” (v. 21)
3. Pastors _____ the Church
“... They appointed elders for them in each church ...” (v. 23)
4. Pastors _____ for People
“They strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them ...” (v. 2)

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The Church In My Heart (Philippians 1:1-11)

A pastor had just been sent by the Bishop to a new pastorate. As he set up his office he came upon a letter in the top drawer of the desk. Stapled to the letter were three sealed envelopes numbered one, two, and three. The letter was from the previous pastor. It said, "Welcome to First church. When things get bad open envelope number one. When things get really bad open envelope number two. When things get unbearably bad open envelope number three." The new pastor thought, "Gee, what a negative guy." He promptly pushed the letter and envelopes to the back of the drawer.

Well, things went fine until about a year later when things got bad. The pastor remembered the letter and envelopes and opened up number one. It said, "Blame the previous pastor." On Sunday morning the pastor said, "I know we've been having some problems around here, but you know, it's all the previous pastor's fault. He messed this church up something awful." The people all said, "Amen, that's right" and everything smoothed over. Things went along pretty well for awhile but about a year later things got really bad. The pastor went to his drawer, got out envelope number two and it said, "Blame the denomination." On Sunday morning the pastor stood up and said, "I know we're having problems here, but it's all the denomination's fault. Our bishop and district superintendents are out of touch with the churches, and the bureaucracy of the Methodist church is awful." "Amen" said the people, it's all the denomination's fault."

That settled everything down and things went along well for another year. But then, after three years, things were unbearably bad. The pastor hated to use the last envelope, but he had no choice. He went to his desk and opened envelope number three. It said, "Prepare three envelopes." (hold up 3 envelopes)

What do you say on your last Sunday after a ten year pastorate? The temptation is to do what parents often do right before their kids go off to college. They give their child a long speech telling them to study hard, and hang out with nice people, and eat healthy, and get enough sleep, and don't go to wild parties and drink ... But nobody is listening! If our kids didn't get that stuff in 18 years, they are not going to get it in a final speech before going off to college. So I'll refrain from rehashing all the lessons I've tried to teach you over the past ten years. I

hope some of what I've shared over the past decade sticks. But if you haven't gotten it yet it's too late now. However, I will give you the speech that I gave to my daughter when she left for college. It was very short. I said, "Just be who you are—and you will do great." I feel the same way about this church. Just be who you are—and your future will be very good indeed.

In the time I have left, I want to share a simple devotional from Philippians 1. You probably know that the church at Philippi was Paul's favorite church. In his letter to them he said, ***[slide: background image of our congregation (inside of the people not the building) "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart ... I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus." (v. 7-8)]***

When I read these words a few weeks ago, tears came to my eyes and I knew this was the text I would use for my last sermon at LFUMC. Just as the church at Philippi was Paul's favorite church and in Paul's heart, this church in Lebanon has been my favorite church and is in my heart. Very quickly, I want to look at today's text and note several ramifications of having LFUMC, in the words of Paul, "in my heart."

First, since this church is in my heart, ***[slide: (same image) 1. I am grateful for you. "I thank my God every time I remember you." (v. 3)]*** Like Paul, every time I think of this church, my heart wells up with thanksgiving. My experience here has been, without question, the best pastoral experience of my life, and I am full of gratitude to God and to you for the privilege of serving here.

Second, since this church is in my heart, ***[slide: (same image) 2. I will pray for you. "In all my prayers for all of you ..." (v. 4)]*** For the rest of my life I will remember this church in my prayers. I will especially pray for you over the next few months during this time of transition.

Third, since this church is in my heart, ***[slide: (same image) 3. I have confidence in you. "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion." (v. 6)]*** As I leave LFUMC, I am not worried about you. This is a strong church with a strong staff and a strong congregation and strong ministries. You will do well in the future.

Finally, since this church is in my heart, **[slide: (same image) 4. I continue to have dreams for you. “That your love may abound more and more ... that you may be pure and blameless ... and filled with the fruit of righteousness.” (v. 9-11)]** We’ve seen some wonderful things happen in the church over the past ten years. But there is still plenty to do, so I still have big hopes and dreams for the future of this congregation, and look forward to following your story in the years to come. **[end slide]**

Several years ago I told you about one of my favorite authors, a woman named Ann Lamont **[slide: photo of Ann Lamont]** In one of her books she said, in the end, there are only two prayers. The first is **[add to slide: “1. Help me, help me, help me.”]** and the second is **[add to slide: “2. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”]** I think she’s just about right. As I prepare to leave this place and go to Brentwood—a huge church with major challenges, my prayer is “Help me, help me, help me.” And as I think back on my past ten years here in Lebanon, my prayer to God, and to you, is and will always be, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

