

## **Acts 20:17-38**

*17 From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him. 18When they came to him, he said to them:*

*'You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, 19serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. 20I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus. 22And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. 24But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace.*

*25 'And now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again. 26Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, 27for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. 28Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. 29I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. 31Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. 32And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. 33I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. 34You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. 35In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." '*

*36 When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. 37There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, 38grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. Then they brought him to the ship.*

Faithful God, how blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Sanctify us by your Word and Spirit so that we may glorify you in the company of the faithful; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I was looking for a fun/funny title for this sermon and came up with the title from the final book of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series by Douglas Adams. So long, and thanks for all the fish. This was a message from the dolphins to humanity as they left Earth. Although nobody in the congregation has given me fish, that I recall at least, you have given me many gifts and blessings that I will treasure.

I think every minister that leaves a congregation wonders about the imprint they will leave. Will their work be remembered? Were the efforts they made appreciated? What will their legacy be in that congregation? If they are a good pastor, they probably wonder if, through their work, God used them to move the congregation forward on the path that God wants for them.

It makes me think about the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Of the 56 signatures on the Declaration of Independence only one of them is distinctively legible. John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, said, when he wrote his name to the great

historic document, "They may not know who I am, but they will not forget my signature." Then, with a flourish, he wrote his name at the head of the list with such bold and precise strokes that, from that time forward, the name of John Hancock has become synonymous with the word, "signature." We may know who some of the other signers are, because of their work during and after the revolution, but on this document, his is the most noticeable.

Our Epistle lesson is a farewell sermon from the Apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus. After doing some online research it looks like many ministers use it as a springboard for their last sermon with a congregation. I think this is a good idea. Not because I want to compare myself to the Apostle Paul in any way, nor am I trying to compare you to the church in Ephesus, but because it gives a nice outline to create some closure. In the sermon Paul reviews the past – celebrating God’s blessings; He helps the congregation receive the present – never regretting God’s leading; and finally, he reveals the future – anticipating God’s continued work and blessings.

Paul starts his sermon with, “You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house,”

For those of you who don’t remember, my family and I came into town on Saturday December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012. It was unseasonably warm that day, around 50 or 60 degrees and sunny, which both the movers and my family appreciated.

Things went great until the next weekend when we received 17+ inches of snow Saturday night, and I was being called to make the decision about whether to have church. Being the brand-new pastor from the big city, I was loath to make the call, convinced that someone would be upset that the city kid cancelled church for no reason!

When I came this congregation had been without an official pastor for some time. Karen Houtman and Steve Ascher were doing pulpit supply and acting as commissioned ruling elders, and they were doing a good job, but the church had gone into hibernation. The focus had turned inward with an emphasis on maintaining the community. This is understandable, and not necessarily a bad thing. Part of my job was to get people turned around, looking for opportunities to bring God’s word and love into the larger community. One other goal of mine was to stretch and expand what was worship for the church.

I knew I had my hands full when I went to the clinic and was talking to the receptionist, who did not know that there was a Presbyterian church in town. For being the only church that is on one of the main streets in town we were fairly unknown.

My first big idea was to open up the sanctuary and host community concerts. Not concerts from artists who were labeled as Christian, but artists that had a wider following. The idea being that if people came to a community event that was “safe,” and non-religious, they may decide to come and worship with us. If nothing else, they would at least know where the Presbyterian church was!

I am overjoyed and blessed at your willingness to take risks. The concerts never took off like I hoped they would, but I’m pretty sure that Ruth Ascher took the idea and ran with it for the Arts council and the Music on Monday’s concert series, including adding the dinner fundraiser beforehand. So the idea did help the community as a whole.

When I suggested we get a projection system there was some hesitation, but the majority of the session decided to make the investment, and I think most members are pleased with the changes that came with it.

While I was here, we expanded our outreach and mission. We now have a mission committee that distributes funds to those in need in the community. We have a section of highway that we clean, we have expanded our outreach at Hat Daze, and we have gotten more of the community involved in the Thanksgiving dinner that we host. And those are things that are just off the top of my head.

On a personal note I was an active member of the ministerial association and helped a lot with The Connection. I was on the board of the Depot Museum and was a signer for the Spanish booster club. I was a public presence for the congregation at school sporting events, concerts, plays, Veteran's Day and Memorial Day observances, and played cards with the senior citizens on Fridays. I am guessing that my card playing skills and risky bidding may continue on as legend among the card players.

This last year has been hard for everyone, especially the church. With restrictions on services, fears of infecting people with a potentially deadly virus, and learning new technology and new skills on the fly, it hasn't been easy for anyone. Some would say that this is not the ideal time to move away as a minister, and you are right, it isn't. But there really isn't a good time for ministerial change.

In today's scripture Paul is leaving the church of Ephesus because he is being called on the carpet by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. They have serious concerns about the message he has been preaching, and he is not sure he will live to see any of them again. Thankfully, that is not the case with our situation. I am not leaving because of wrongdoing on my part, nor has anyone in the congregation upset me and made me want to leave, and if there has been a coup in the works to get rid of me they have been extraordinarily good at keeping it secret.

As I mentioned in my farewell in the newsletter, I came with the intention of staying three years, especially at ¾ time. Yet you agreed to make me full time after 1 ½ years, and that, plus the wonderful relationship we have, kept me here for almost eight years.

Some folks had speculated that I might decide to leave after Morgan graduated high school, and I will not lie, that was one of the factors that was involved in our decision. When I put out my resume it was in hopes of finding a position closer to the Twin Cities, to be closer to old friends. I was not in any hurry to find a new position. I felt that we could wait for the right opportunity and didn't feel like we needed to take the first job that came along. I was fully willing to wait a year or two or more for something to come up.

The Holy Spirit was very active in my search. There was nothing available for me near the Twin Cities. Then the PNC from Grundy Center and Reinbeck contacted me. They weren't any closer to the Twin Cities (and if I'm honest with myself, they're a bit further), but they aren't far from Cedar Falls and Waterloo, which are pretty big, and I figured I could at least get some interviewing experience with them. I agreed to having a phone interview. The interview went really well, but I didn't hear anything from them for several weeks. At Easter they sent me an email saying they were still interested, and asking if I was too? I figured it wouldn't hurt so I said yes. Then I didn't hear from them for over two months. I let it go and honestly thought they had ghosted me, but they were just not meeting because of the corona virus.

They contacted me in late June, right after I had told the session here that there weren't any prospects out there for the near future, and they asked me to visit them in person. I realized

things were moving fast when I was then told that the Committee on Ministry and the Executive Presbyter for their presbytery were going to talk with me before the in-person meeting with their Pastor Nominating Committee. I had lots of questions for them, but they were able to answer them for me, and it just felt like this was where I was supposed to go. I've run into this feeling before; this feeling of God calling me, it's what brought me out here, and I know from experience that it's better to not fight it when it comes, so I agreed.

So where does this leave you? What does the future hold for First United Presbyterian Church of Canby? Well, the presbytery is working hard to help you prepare for this congregation's future. They have assigned Jenn Lamb as your liaison to the Commission on Leadership. She will help you assess where you are and help you with the next steps. Nathan Lamb, the pastor at Pipestone, will be your session moderator. I have the utmost confidence that these folks will help you to the best of their ability.

Our Executive Presbyter SanDawna Ashley will be leading worship for you on Oct. 11<sup>th</sup>. I don't know what that will look like exactly, but she is excellent.

Near the end of today's scripture Paul says, "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son." There are a lot of wonderful disciples in this congregation. God has a lot to work with here, and I firmly believe that God has a plan for this congregation and this community.

As to my impact on this congregation and on your lives, I would like to think that it was a good one. I would like to think that I have, always with God's help, lead you while building a legacy that will endure. I also pray that God will send you someone who does even better than me, for I also know that I have my flaws and have made mistakes and there are many other people that God can use to make this an even stronger example of God's presence in the world.

As Paul put it, "And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified." Brothers and Sisters in Christ, I thank you all for being a part of my life. So long, and thanks for all the fish. May God continue to be with you and bless you. Amen