A Work in Progress

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at Light Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore,
on Sunday, July 10, 2016.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
1 Corinthians 3:5-11

In my twelve years here as pastor, I think this is probably the most difficult sermon I’ve ever had to preach. I’ve been wrestling all week with what to say to you this morning: How to thank you for calling me to be your pastor and for your support and encouragement over the years. How to tell you what it has meant for me to be part of your ministry here in this place. And finally, how to say goodbye.

You know when I came here in 2004, I was only five years out of seminary. I had four years of experience as an associate pastor, but I had no experience pastoring a church on my own. So, you took a chance in calling me as your solo pastor. I had never baptized anyone. I had never conducted a wedding or a funeral by myself. I had planned worship services and preached sermons before, but not every week, Sunday after Sunday. I had moderated a few Session meetings, but not every month.

The point is, I came to you as a work in progress. I had much more to learn about being a pastor, and you taught me a great deal. (There’s an awful lot in ministry that seminary doesn’t prepare you for.) So, in many ways you helped form me into the pastor I am today. I have you to thank for helping to shape my ministry. You are a part of me. Everywhere I go, I will take with me all that I have learned from you.

Of course, I am still a work in progress. It’s a funny thing: the more I learn and grow, the more I realize I have to learn and grow. I never actually arrive. I just keep going as the journey continues. That’s life, after all. Isn’t it? Putting one foot in front of the other – keeping on keeping on. One of my mentors always used to say “the journey is the destination.” The longer I live, the more that makes sense to me.

Each of us is a work in progress. Each of us is on a journey. Each of us is in the process of becoming. And every experience we have, every person we encounter, every image we see, every sound we hear, helps to form us – for good or for ill. So, our choices about what we read, watch, or listen to, our choices about what we do with our time and who we spend it with, make a difference in who we become.

I hope your experiences here at Light Street Church have been positive ones for the most part. I hope the people you have met here have enriched your lives. I hope your participation in the life of this congregation has helped you to learn and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. And I hope that in some small way, my presence here as your pastor has helped you to strengthen and deepen your Christian faith and to see the importance of putting your faith into action in the world.

Indeed, when I think of the highlights of this church’s mission and ministry over the past twelve years, most of the things I think of have to do with how we engaged with the world. Early on we entered into a sister church partnership with a Presbyterian congregation in Cuba. Some of us have visited our Presbyterian sisters and brothers in
Cuba, and more of us have met Cuban visitors when they have come here to visit us in Baltimore. As a More Light Church, we installed 8-foot-high rainbow banners on the front of our church building to make visible to the public our commitment to being a welcoming and inclusive church. We were advocates for lifting the ban on gay ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and we supported marriage equality for same-sex couples. The Session took Susan Quass under care and supported her through the ordination process to become a Minister of Word and Sacrament. And in 2006, we celebrated our 150th anniversary as a congregation. We opened our church’s doors to the United Workers in support of their campaign to win a living wage for day laborers who cleaned Camden Yards and M&T Bank Stadium. And later we supported the Occupy Baltimore movement, giving them a place to meet as nights grew colder. We became one of the first Earth Care Congregations in our denomination, celebrating Earth Day Sundays, holding Blessing of the Animals services, and becoming a wind-powered church. We held church retreats on the Magothy River, at Rehoboth Beach, at Dayspring Farm in Germantown, in Dickeyville, at The Center of Baltimore Presbytery, and at Woodberry Crossing. We hosted concerts by “LYRA”—the Russian Vocal Ensemble from St. Petersburg, by flutist Andrew Foley and our own Erika Knepp on piano, by the new Baltimore-based chamber orchestra Symphony Number One, and by piano duo Tian Lu and Yury Shadrin, a year before they played their first concert at the Kennedy Center. As families with babies and toddlers began to join our congregation, we started a monthly “Joyful Noise” program, which has since been integrated into our weekly Sunday worship. We held Bible studies and book discussions, made the switch to the new Presbyterian hymnal Glory to God, and initiated an Easter Sunrise Service in Federal Hill Park. We joined together in the Deep Shift and New Beginnings discernment processes. We supported the House of Ruth, South Baltimore Emergency Relief, the Baltimore Station, Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, the Heifer Project, and Bread for the World’s annual Offering of Letters. And let’s not forget all the community outreach and fundraising events we worked on together -- the Flea Markets, Silent Auctions, Pasta Dinners, Community Yard Sales, Spring and Christmas Teas, and our most recent venture – the Federal Hill Farmers Market. We’ve done a lot together! But, of course, there is always more to do!

Churches, too, are works in progress. That’s what I think Paul is getting at in this passage from his first letter to the Corinthians. He offers two metaphors for the church: the church as “God’s field” and the church as “God’s building.” In the first, Paul and Apollos are gardeners or field hands, God’s servants working together with a common purpose, nurturing the Corinthian church like a garden. “I planted,” Paul says, “Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” In the second metaphor, Paul is “like a skilled master builder.” He laid the foundation for the church in Corinth, which is Jesus Christ. Paul leaves the building to others. “Someone else is building on it,” Paul writes, “Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.”

I didn’t plant Light Street Presbyterian Church. That was the work of J. Henry Kaufman, a graduate of Princeton Seminary who was employed in 1853 by the women of the First Presbyterian Church to organize a Sabbath School and, if possible, a new congregation here in Federal Hill. Kaufman succeeded, and this congregation was officially organized as the South Presbyterian Church on April 26, 1855, with the Rev. Kaufman elected as its first pastor. Since then generations of pastors and parishioners have come and gone, each of them watering and nurturing what the Rev. Kaufman
planted, each of them making their own distinct contribution, building upon “the church’s one foundation,” Jesus Christ our Lord.

Like Apollos and others, as a servant of God I have done what I could to water and nurture this church, to keep it alive, to give it the chance to grow and thrive. I have done what I could to build on what has come before. And now it is time for me to move on and for others to join you in the task.

As you worship, study, and serve together into the future, I hope you will continue to practice the radically inclusive love of Jesus Christ. I hope you will continue to become more multiracial and multicultural as a congregation, and that you will do the hard work, individually and collectively, to counter racism in yourselves, in the wider church, and in society. That public witness is desperately needed now more than ever, as the tragic events of the past week so urgently remind us. The church needs to be a voice for racial justice and economic justice, it needs to be a force for nonviolent social change in the world.

As you move forward together, I hope you will remember that the church began not as an institution but as a movement, and at its best, the church is still a movement today -- a movement for personal transformation and social change, a movement for liberation and reconciliation, a movement for justice and peace. Being part of the church means being part of that movement, which continues the work of Jesus Christ in the world -- modeling the reign of God on earth and being a catalyst for the transformation of society.

Thank you for calling me, for giving me the opportunity to share in ministry with you, and for your support and encouragement over these past 12 years. It has been an honor and a privilege for me to serve as your pastor. And while Susan and I are certainly excited to be moving to the Southwest to start a new chapter in our lives, know that we will miss you greatly. There will always be a special place in our hearts for Light Street Church. God be with you! Amen.