

23rd Sunday after the Pentecost
Southampton, MA
November 13, 2022

Scripture: Deuteronomy 34:1-8

Moses, after leading Israel's escape from its bondage in Egypt and then through the wilderness for forty years, stood on Mount Nebo looking across the Jordan to Canaan. Before him was the land that God swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants. Moses would only see it. He would not enter it.

Israel's time in the wilderness has often been a metaphor for a congregation's interim time. Just as Israel's time in the wilderness gave it space between its bondage in Egypt and its beginnings in Canaan, a congregation's interim time gives space between the end of one pastor's ministry and the beginning of the next. Just as Israel needed the wilderness time to allow its time in Egypt to become its past and clear its way for a new future, the interim time does the same for a congregation. During this interim time, a congregation works to reimagine, reassess, reframe, and rethink its ministry knowing that it is no longer the congregation that called its last settled pastor. Over these three years, you've done that. You are not the same congregation you were when I arrived.

I can honestly and sincerely say that I have enjoyed my entire time with you. You also have a warm spot in my heart as my first time here in 2004-2005 led to the Berkshire Association finally ordaining me to authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ. Being able to reconnect with familiar faces and make new relationships have made this interim ministry particularly special to me.

It is also one of the ethical conundrums because though we have renewed and formed these relationships, they also end today. I regret this.

Wistfulness is one of the many emotions which arise when a pastor and congregation end their time together. One relationship aspect that develops in a church is the vulnerability we bring into this relationship. Whether it is in Bible study, working a service project, or even in worship, we open ourselves to each other in ways that we would not do in other social settings. The relationship, then, between pastor and congregant is an unusual combination of friendship and professionalism. Professional ethics, like any job, require certain boundaries to maintain a perspective, which we can call a non-anxious presence. This enables the professional to serve the organization and the relationship effectively without the emotional complications. However, the deep sharing that comes out of vulnerability adds a layer of friendship.

All pastors should be free to form their relationships with their congregants, which is why pastors must separate themselves from the congregation when they leave. This allows room for the next pastor to form their own relationships without a previous pastor's presence.

This is not to say that we are forever socially barred. Having served congregations near my house, I often see former parishioners. We chat. We might even work on something together. I'm also connected to former parishioners on social media. However, in the short run, keeping some distance is a good practice.

I also have come as far as I can with you. Compare yourself from three years ago to today. You were lost and wandering in a wilderness. I found sadness and disappointment because the hopes from Pastor Jenny's ministry did not blossom. I found anger. Was it fatigue or fear that I had to be your moderator in 2020 as no one volunteered? And then, Covid.

Which we got through together. That is worthy to celebrate. We can probably identify several lessons from the experience. Two inspire me. First, we were united in the way we responded to the pandemic. The church profile for the designated term pastor noted that we had

full compliance with our protocols, which is not something every congregation can say. Second, we adapted. By adapting we became more flexible in being the church so that today we can worship every month with two completely different worship styles and you can fill the pulpit each month with a lay person. You have far more confidence in your ministry today than you did three years ago, which I attribute to the empowerment that arises from your contributions to our worship life.

July 18, 2021 was particularly memorable for me. That was the first Sunday back in the sanctuary after leaving it on March 8, 2020 for Covid. More significantly, though, we followed that service with a community discernment session out of which emerged your vision to be a center for community life.

Since then, I have made many references to this. It was your first step to having a missional identity. It opened everyone to thinking and serving towards a common, actionable end. Furthermore, you have already taken some actions in this direction, such as renting to the “Punch Out Parkinson’s” program which meets twice a week in Parish Hall, renting the kitchen to a small business start-up, providing rehearsal space for K&E Theater Company, in addition to our longstanding use by Weight Watchers and the scouts. The increased interest by the community to rent our space has prompted us to re-evaluate our staffing, our building use agreement, and fee structure. It has also awakened this community to the church as a community resource and asset.

Being a center for community life, however, is just a start. The next step focuses that vision to be more specific. What are Southampton’s needs and how can this church be a community resource to meet them?

Our most recent book study, **We're Not Broke** by Mark Elsdon, linked mission to ministry. Elsdon noted that churches typically operate their missions with a two-pocket model. Our income goes into one pocket. We transfer it to the other pocket out of which we apply a portion to mission. Elsdon urged churches to look at its mission as also funding its ministry so that there is only one pocket. He also urged churches to think more expansively about its return on investment because the return is more than just income from capital gains and dividends. It includes gains in the local community due to the church's mission activities. He made clear that we limit our social impact when we only think of our money as filling the church's coffers.

Though the work of the church is never done, I, however, have reached my end with you. You are a different congregation because you feel empowered by the Holy Spirit. You have started to look outward into the community knowing that your mission field begins just outside your door. You have embraced the contemporary understanding of the pastor-congregation relationship whereby the congregation leads and the pastor is the resource who provides guidance and support.

Looking across the Jordan, Moses saw Israel's future. They left behind Egypt and were ready to enter the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses did what God told him to do for the Israelites, "to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:8-11) Moses completed his call. However, Israel would cross into the Promised Land without him.

I served you to the extent I can. You're ready to cross the river to claim the ministry God calls you to fulfill. You will shape your ministry to serve Southampton and in so doing incarnate Jesus. You will make Jesus alive in Southampton to make clear that though Jesus died on a cross, Jesus lives today through the work of your hands. The Holy Spirit is with you and will give you power and strength to continue the ministry Jesus began 2000 years ago.

Thank you for your support. Thank you for your kindness. Thank you for allowing me the honor to serve you.