



"Getting In The Last Word"

Rev. Dr. Scott Field

Philippians 1:27

June 9, 2019

10:00 AM Service

The Final Attempt

A few weeks ago, Lynda and I watched a movie called *Get Low* with Robert Duvall. It is about a cranky hermit in the hills, feared by many but known by few, who wants to plan a funeral while he is alive. He wants to have a party before he dies.

Sometimes the past few weeks have felt a little like we're getting ready to say a final farewell.

Or maybe not.

But this is the final attempt at preaching.

And I am a little nervous about it.

When I think of last attempts, well, there's baseball great Babe Ruth, the Sultan of Swat, 714 career home runs, 2, 217 runs batted in, a career batting average of .342, who, on his last at bat (May 31, 1935) hit a soft infield grounder and was thrown out at first base.

How about Michael Jordan who holds the record for highest average number of points per game during the regular season at just over 30 points per game? On April 16, 2003, Jordan played his last game in the NBA, scoring 15 points in a 107-87 loss to the Philadelphia 76ers before hanging up his sneakers for good.

Or how about the last game of the Bears season? January 6th. Just seconds left in the game. Bears down by one point against the Philadelphia Eagles. Ready for the field goal, a victory, and on to the playoffs. Could the Super Bowl be on the horizon?

On to the field comes kicker Cody Parkey – after a Philly time out – he delivers the infamous double doink heard around the world.

Cody Parkey and the infamous double-doink to end the bears season last fall.

Defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

These three examples, among many, many others, are a warning that the last might not be the best. So, if you are coming to hear the greatest sermon ever, you should scale back your expectations because this ain't it.

So, we announced a LONG TIME AGO, 15 months approximately, that I would be leaving. Many of us are ready to move the recycling bin to the curb and welcome the new pastor. But before I wander off to Happy Valley, I have three words to share.

Appreciation

The very first word has to be a word of appreciation.

Both Lynda and I are honored that some have traveled from Naperville to be here this morning. Wheatland Salem Church was our ministry setting for thirty-three years. They grew us up, loved us, encouraged and challenged us, and took major risks to extend the message and ministry of Jesus in that area. Their impact is felt in places like Tanzania, India, Poland, Peru, Paraguay, Papua New Guinea, and Haiti, as well as through countless lives touched and blessed through their local ministry. Though all followers of Jesus are called to love, serve, and witness, the Wheatland Salem congregation also recognized, confirmed, cultivated, and encouraged a LOT of people to follow the Lord's calling into Christian ministry. We backed up our praying with paying 1/3 of the cost for seminary education for those whose calling required it. So, depending upon how you count, twenty-one people heard and responded to God's calling and now serve as pastors, church planters, missionaries, chaplains, church staff members and two PhD theology professors. Wheatland Salem Church, we love you! Thank you for allowing us come along for an amazing ride.

And our family here at First Church – you are so dear to us! You've been the ones who have moved from survival to new levels of service, from maintaining to regaining fresh vision and engagement with the Jesus mission. Your love and friendship are imprinted on us. Besides, you've been showing Lynda and me how to live in this season of our lives, how to love adult children and welcome grandchildren. I have often said that we are following your taillights as we head into the future. You have been a wonderful gift to us.

As an important note to the family of faith here at First Church, I want to express my gratitude to the staff members: Pastor Cesar Hernandez, Katrina Jackson, Karen Klaus, Tyler Hughes, Janet Yaworski, Jan Vera, Mary Pedersen, our Preschool Director, and Sean McNamara (along with Joy) who take care of our audio visual needs. You may be here to celebrate the Lead Pastor, but what you may think to be *my* ministry is actually a *shared team-approach* to serving the needs of the congregation. This is the group that spends every day focused on the people, the community, the resources, the mission, the threats to and the opportunities before First Church. They are worthy of your support, respect, and partnership going forward.

Before and after pastoral ministry, I have to lift up my family. Without doubt, one of God's greatest gifts to me is that strikingly beautiful lady sitting in the third row. In one way we should probably be totally baffled that any of this has worked out because Lynda was dead set against marrying a pastor. A missionary? Maybe. But not the pastor of a local church. That would be fine with me, because I had no interest in being a pastor. Yet, as the Prophet Gomer Pyle said on more than one occasion, "Surprise! Surprise!" Look at us now. Often people have asked me how it was that I remained as pastor of Wheatland Salem Church for 33 years – it is an extraordinarily long time for a United Methodist pastor to stay in one place. The most direct answer is, "They didn't want Lynda to leave." Similarly, several people here at First Church have observed that when Lynda is here on Sunday mornings, the line after worship to shake hands and receive hugs is much longer than when I am here alone. Point taken. I couldn't have served through the past 41 years without her.

And not to forget our children. We have had the outstanding privilege of being parents for Emily, Nathan, and Adam. We're blessed by our son in law Greg and daughter in law Erika and are now learning the ropes of grandparent hood with Jakob, Elly, and Sierra. Like all of us and all people everywhere, our children didn't have a choice about becoming part of our family. And the children of pastor's have a notorious reputation for their renegade and rebellious ways. That particular plague bypassed us and them. They have been loved by a community of people all through their growing up years – even when they might not have been so keen on the whole project.

My deepest appreciation, however, goes to the Lord Jesus Christ who interrupted my plans and re-directed the blueprint I had for my life with the invitation to life that is abundant and eternal. He saved me from being a successful physician – not that there is anything wrong with either physicians or success. But, as one older Swedish pastor remarked to me, "If you become a physician, the best you will be able to do is to help people camp out in the valley of the shadow of death. If you become a pastor, you will have the opportunity to help people find the way through that valley to the other side." Along with the Apostle Paul I can say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." (Romans 1:16).

Apology

The second word is an apology.

On my first Sunday here, I included an apology to all those who had been hurt or disappointed by the church – whether this church or some other church along the way. It seems appropriate that I also include an apology on this last Sunday. While I have been here as the lead pastor, it may be that you have been hurt, let down, disappointed, or disillusioned in some way with the church, with the Christian faith, with our ministry here, or with me personally. Where that is my responsibility, I ask for your forgiveness. I can say that honestly, I have not intended to disappoint or disillusion or disrespect anyone, but you may have been hurt or offended regardless of my intent.

I am quite aware that some of my decisions and initiatives have created discomfort.

I am restless with the status quo, think that we as church people spend way too much time concerned about our own comfort and preferences, way too much money on ourselves, and I wonder – sometimes out loud – when it's going to be the turn of the people who have been overlooked, down and out, people of different languages and skin colors and politics and nationalities. So the reason I hung a world map over the computer in my office as soon as I arrived was because I did not come to serve Crystal Lake exclusively, but to serve as a catalytic leader in Crystal Lake SO THAT the congregation in Crystal Lake, known for its servant heart, would take some new risks on behalf of the community immediately at hand AND THE WORLD in which we find ourselves.

This means that my way of operating can sometimes seem impatient. I am not asking to be forgiven for my impatience. In fact, I hope you may have caught at least a mild case of the virus. There is a world of need and we are, Jesus said, the light of the world.

Affirmation

The first two words, appreciation and apology, look to the past. Today marks an ending, but also a releasing for the future. So the final word, a word of affirmation, is in order.

The Scripture verse I have chosen for today as we conclude the relationship of pastoral partnership with First United Methodist Church and the beginning of retirement from local church ministry overall is Philippians 1: 27.

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come to see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.

I presume you are counting on us to conduct ourselves, Lynda and me, in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. You don't expect us to go off the rails just because we're not here with you every week.

I am frequently asked, "What are you going to do?" I almost feel like a graduating senior in college. Well, the first answer is that I'm going to take a sabbatical for 3-6 months. And I intend to do fewer things better or more deeply and certainly more slowly. I don't have as much runway left before I take flight, so I want to make good choices. When you are 25 or 35 there is time for several do-overs. When you are 65, not so much.

Lynda and I anticipate being actively involved in a local church, a small group of other believers, Bible study, and serving. The exact dimensions of that remain to be determined. We have come this far by faith and have no intention of quitting now.

We have this same expectation of you: live a life worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life" who can satisfy the hunger of your soul. (John 6:35)

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the World" that will not and cannot be overcome by darkness, deception, and confusion (John 8:12).

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Jesus also told the story of the shepherd with a flock of 100 sheep who would leave the 99 behind in order to go search for the one sheep that had wandered away, was vulnerable to harm, and who couldn't find the way back. Maybe you feel like that this morning – or some mornings. Wandering. Lost. Vulnerable. Not sure how to find the way back to God.

Jesus said, "Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends" (Revelation 3:20)

We can come to the Good Shepherd, Jesus, today – and every day.

Then, whether we come to see you or only hear about you, we will know that your stand firm in the faith of the gospel.

On Memorial Day weekend, I officiated at a wedding. At a golf course. In the afternoon. A sunny afternoon. It was a beautiful setting.

During the reception, Lynda and I were seated at the table with the bride and groom, the two bridesmaids and the two groomsmen. One of the groomsmen, who was the life of the party, the raconteur with stories, witty remarks, and one-liners, silenced everyone at the table when he looked

across at me and said, "Pastor, I have a question for you...and I don't want any theological stuff. I want a straight answer."

He had our attention. He had my attention.

"Does God grade on the curve?"

I said, "Absolutely. It's called grace. It's forgiveness. But the real deal, if you want to get it, is you have to know somebody. And (wait for it...) his name is Jesus!"

Amen!

This is Jesus.

There is none like him.

He is Jesus, the One and Only.

You can't out live Him,

And you can't live without Him.

The Pharisees couldn't stand Him, but they couldn't stop Him.

The witnesses couldn't indict him.

Pilate couldn't convict him.

Herod couldn't kill him.

Death couldn't handle him.

And the grave couldn't hold him!

So, sisters and brothers, with whom we have shared life and whom we hold in our hearts, whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether we come and see you or only hear about you in our absence, we will know that you stand firm in the gospel!

Praise be to God!