

Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen

The title for today's sermon, like the title for my sermon at the end of last month, is borrowed from a TV show in days gone by. It may surprise some of you that the TV show in question is *not* part of the "Star Trek" universe. "Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen" was the title of the most-watched television show in history when it aired in 1983 and it held that title until 2010, surpassed only by that year's Super Bowl. It is still the most-watched episode of any television series. A two-and-a-half-hour television movie instead of the normal 30-minute episode, "Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen" brought to a conclusion a successful run of 11 years for the television show, which nearly quadrupled the three-year history it purported to cover. I'm talking, of course, about "M*A*S*H," the toned-down-for-TV but still counter-cultural satire of the Korean War, based on the 1968 book by Richard Hooker and the 1970 movie directed by Robert Altman.

My selection of this sermon's title with its pop culture allusions and my choice of scriptures for this morning are actually related, although I realize it may not seem like it at first glance. Obviously, like the TV episode, this morning's sermon is a valedictory, a closing statement to my ministry among you, although not, I think, as Lee Campbell suggested the other day, a parting shot. Indeed, I hope in some small way to communicate the great love I have for you all, much like Paul for the church in Philippi, and my gratitude for the 16 ½ year "run" I've had here – longer than any other pastor, longer even than M*A*S*H! And the Psalm with which we issued the Call to Worship this morning is the regular Psalm to accompany the reading from Philippians in the Lectionary, but it also connects with my topic for the morning and, believe it or not, with that final episode of M*A*S*H.

So, let me start with that amazingly successful television comedy and its final episode. Just as the book and movie did before it, the series ends with the homegoing of some or all of the characters. In the book and the movie, it is Captains Hawkeye Pierce and Duke Forest (a character who does not appear in the series) who get their orders to demobilize and return stateside. In the series, the end of the war sends everybody home. But in any case, it is the answer to the most fervent prayers of the characters and, indeed, anyone caught up in a war zone: to go home safely. Now, I do not regard being at Good Shepherd as equivalent to being drafted into a war zone – far from it, as I hope to show in a few minutes. But I cannot deny the powerful pull of "going home."

That may surprise some of you. After all, I've spent only about twelve years of my total near-61 years living full-time in the St. Louis area. Although I was born there and lived there until I was two, my first memories in life come from Clearwater, Florida, and my family of origin also lived in two different counties in England and on Long Island before we returned "home" when I was nearly 10. But that "return" was important. As long as I can remember, no matter where we lived in my childhood, my mom and dad were quite clear that St. Louis was *home*, their agreed-upon professional substitute for the small towns in Missouri and Arkansas where they grew up. So, the magnetic pull of the Gateway City has been a part of my life for a very long time indeed. It's probably a little more expected from Connie, who lived on the same street in South St. Louis County her whole life, time in college excepted, until she married me.

So, although our joy at going home is scarcely unalloyed with grief at leaving you all, there is for us every bit as much rejoicing as there was for the men and women of the 4077th. And while I

Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen

mostly commend Psalm 126 to your attention for the way in which it uses return from exile as a metaphor for our lives of faith, the language about return to the Promised Land has some literal truth for us just now. And while all of us may feel that we are “walking while weeping” this morning, the Psalmist’s promise of returning to gladness is still a promise for us.

But let’s turn now to Philippians. I’ve mentioned here before that Philippians is one of my favorite books of the New Testament. To understand my delight in Philippians and, indeed, to understand Philippians, you must know the about Paul’s relationship with the church. As we look at that connection, it should quickly become clear that the beauty of this letter stems from a very special relationship, one that every minister hopes to share with a church, and that Paul’s fervent prayer for his friends in Philippi is one that applies to every Christian and is one that can move us deeply in our quest for a Christ-like existence.

For Paul, the church at Philippi represented his first foray into the great missionary field of Europe; a first, successful step towards Rome, which must have been his ultimate goal. This, in and of itself, is enough to make him think of them with joy. We also know from other scriptural evidence that Paul visited Philippi at least once more and possibly twice. They have had enough time together to build a deep friendship. The Phillips translation of verses 7 & 8 reads, “It is only natural that I should feel like this about you all -- you are very dear to me. God knows how much I long for your companionship, with the deep love and affection of Christ Jesus.” Based on what Paul writes to them, we can ascertain that the church has been faithful to his teachings; that they have grown and flourished although not without opposition. We can also read in Philippians about how the members of the church have supported their founding pastor with funds and even personnel during his travels and especially during his times of imprisonment. As Paul writes in our passage this morning, they have indeed “shar(ed) in the gospel from the first day until now... share(d) in God’s grace with (him), both in (his) imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.” The Letter to the Philippians was probably written during Paul’s final imprisonment in Rome, when he was waiting for the ultimate decision on his freedom or death. That he could write such a joyous, hopeful letter in such circumstances says a great deal about the quality of the relationship between the Apostle and this church.

Now, I didn’t found Good Shepherd Baptist; Bernie Turner and the good folks at University Baptist did that and a fine job they did of it, too. But I’ve been your pastor for a heck of a lot longer than Paul was actually in Philippi and you all have supported me and my family through thick and thin all this time, so I feel completely justified in co-opting his words to them to express my feelings for you. “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now... It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me... For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.” I am deeply grateful to God for putting us together all those years ago and grateful to all of you for how you have worked with me, prayed for me, struggled with me, and even fought with me. I am not only a far better pastor now than when you called me, I’m a better man and I think you all get a large part of the credit.

Paul also wrote to the Philippians, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” My confidence in the

presence of the Holy Spirit among you is equivalent to Paul's for the church in Philippi because it is, of course, the Holy Spirit to which Paul is referring when he says, "the one who began a good work among you." In our case, the Holy Spirit worked through your first pastor and those folks at University Baptist who dreamed of an ABC church in Lynnwood rather than through a team of missionaries, but the effect is the same. And just as the church in Philippi continued to apply Paul's teaching, as I have said many times before, you all have done a wonderful job of living out Bernie's frequent admonition to "Love everybody!" I think that is the strength of Good Shepherd Baptist Church. You all love and genuinely like each other. All of us have folks that we're closer to than others but I don't think I've ever been part of a church where there was so little issue with cliques. You do a good job with love.

It is that same strength, I believe, that led you to extend hospitality to me and my family and that led you to extend the most amazing hospitality to the community. Not only have you opened the doors of this hard-won building to community groups, recovery groups, gardeners, and other churches over the years, but the decision had pretty well been made before I got here to donate half of the property for affordable housing for seniors. People in the community *still* talk about that. The thousands of dollars-worth of construction help we've gotten from Walsh Construction since the building of Shepherd's Garden has come because Matt Forsythe, Elizabeth Rinehart, and other Walsh personnel have never forgotten that you gave up a couple of million dollars-worth of property to follow the vision God gave you to love others. It has also been this church's loving hospitality that gave rise to projects like Shepherd's Village, Lynnwood International Fellowship, and Iglesia Bautista el Buen Pastor. Keep it up! Know that love and radical hospitality are not only what God has called you to, they are gifts that God has given you.

Of course, I can't talk about your living into God's command to love your neighbor and not mention the current endeavor of Anti-Racism Training. I am so proud of you for choosing to participate in this ongoing program as a church and as individuals. The pernicious nature of racism runs deep in our culture and the work it takes to expose and begin to reduce its effects in us can be brutally difficult. Those of us here who belong to the dominant culture often cannot see the impact racism has on us. We move through it and breathe it as fish swim and breathe in water. We must learn to recognize it in the dominant culture, in our neighbors, and in ourselves. As our friend, the executive minister of Evergreen, Doug Avilesbernal says, "I'm not racist but we are."

But as hard as the work is, it is also that critical. Part of the reason that the United States of America has teetered on the verge of imploding for the past six or so years is that we have not dealt with our racist foundation, our racist history, or our racist present. But if we are to continue to take seriously the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," we must learn how and why we have failed so badly to fulfill that commandment when it comes to people whose skin is a different color than ours. As you continue to pursue anti-racist training, it will also give you insights into the other "-isms" that plague our culture: sexism, ageism, classism, ablism, homophobia, and so on. As you continue to "love everybody," the current movement toward anti-racism is not only appropriate for Christians to join, it is critical. And, as we, the Euro members of Good Shepherd Baptist Church, work to support our brothers, Pastor Jorgé and Pastor Stephen in their work with immigrants, and as we find ways to partner with our new friends in Hana Church, we must work hard not to let the old demon of racism raise its ugly

Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen

head. Your radical hospitality has and will continue to be manifest in Good Shepherd's work with and for immigrants to our shores.

So, you have been remarkably, radically hospitable when you welcome folks onto our campus and into our fellowship. Let me challenge you now to extend that hospitality out into your day to day lives. In the time that I have been here, we have talked some about evangelism and we even had several sessions in "Soup, Salad, and Soul" to learn about new methods of evangelism. But honestly, we've not done much about evangelism. The majority of new members in the last 16 years have come because they heard about us from someone else, or from our website, or from your pastor's visibility in the community. Let me encourage you all to rethink evangelism. It doesn't have to be the awkward, tract-based, cold-call method that was popular in the '50s and '60s. In fact, not only has that very twentieth century mode of spreading the Good News become grossly unpopular, it wasn't around for most of the history of our faith. Evangelism should be about relationships, about living the Jesus Way so intently that people ask you what it's all about. I know how important this church is to you, how much joy you find from your relationships here and from learning more about how God works through us in the world. But do your neighbors know how important GSBC is to you? Do your grandkids know? Your hairdresser? Your auto mechanic? The guy who mows your lawn? I've talked a lot in recent years about the grand opportunity GSBC has for growth as Lynnwood grows. But we can't just throw open the doors and wait for people to come. We've got to invite them. As you think about calling a new pastor, consider who it might be who could guide you in this endeavor. Who is it that understands what steps a bunch of introverted Scandahoovians can take to spread the Good News about what happens at 6915 196th Street SW?

Also, as you think about a new pastor and prepare for the future, I challenge you to get real about money. I had a long talk with the Pastoral Relations Committee about this on Friday in my "exit interview" and I'm not going to share all of that with you now in interest of time but here are a few thoughts. First, there needs to be a reality check about what Good Shepherd's assets are. We are land rich and cash poor. In moving forward with many building improvements and missions projects and in the attempt to move your pastor to full-time status, we have depleted our reserves, which now consist of a few thousand dollars left over from last year's COVID-relief grant from Seattle Baptist Union. The reality is that with the current level of giving, GSBC cannot afford a full-time pastor. In order to have a safe cash reserve, equal to about one quarter of a year's expenses, the pastor's compensation must return to that of a half-time, bivocational status. That means that some of the things I've had time to do will need to be taken over by volunteers or not done. And it re-emphasizes something I said at the end of a Zoom meeting a couple of weeks ago: it is unlikely that the next pastor of Good Shepherd Baptist Church will be able to live in Lynnwood. That means, among other things, that he or she will not be the one to dash over when the alarm gets triggered and will not have the kind of relationships with city government that I have fostered.

But beyond those very concrete concerns, I need to challenge you all to get real about money in another way. When I was growing up in Baptist churches, pledge campaigns and special funding campaigns were a time of competition and celebration. Most folks knew who gave what and when. It was, of course, the same in the theatre, where levels of giving were published in the program along with the names of those who gave at that level. But when I came to GSBC, I was

Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen

surprised to find a “cone of silence” around giving. Not only were members’ giving levels generally unknown to each other, I was told that under no circumstance was I to know what members gave because I might treat people differently if I knew. First of all, that’s insulting. If a pastor treats people differently based on what they give, that man or woman simply shouldn’t be a pastor. Secondly, it handcuffs the pastor from ever truly knowing what’s going on in people’s lives. Financial hardships are hidden. There is no way for the pastor to effectively minister to folks who keep their troubles under wraps. According to one of my close friends in another denomination, his bishop told the clergy in his diocese that to not know what people’s financial affairs were was “pastoral malpractice.” And then there’s the lack of opportunity for celebrating with folks when their finances improve. For many years, because I worked in non-profit and Connie was forced by my moves to constantly change jobs, our income stayed low, and we were simply unable to afford to tithe as we wished. When the day came not too many years ago, that we finally were able to give 10% or more of our income to the causes we most cared about, I wanted to celebrate. But we don’t talk about money at Good Shepherd.

Friends, there is a deeper level of spiritual concern here. When you say that money is none of the pastor’s business, none of the deacons’ business, none of the church’s business, you are essentially saying that your money is none of God’s business. And if your money is exempt from God’s oversight, well... I don’t mean to harangue you all or scold you or anything resembling that. But I do feel I need to warn you that the relationship between this church and money is broken and needs attention.

As Paul with the Philippians, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ... And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” My sisters and my brothers, the Apostle Paul deeply loved his friends in Philippi, but I can’t imagine that he loved them any more than I love you. While Connie and I are excited for this new adventure in our lives, we are grieving that it means leaving you all behind. As I’ve said to many of you, there are things I cannot do as your former pastor. I can’t get between you and Denise or you and the next stated pastor. But I will always consider you all dear friends and I hope to hear from you regularly as individuals. But for now, my last words as your pastor are those of blessing: May God bless you and keep you; may God’s face shine upon you and may God be gracious unto you; may God’s countenance be lifted up upon you, and give you peace. May God give you grace never to sell yourselves short; grace to risk something big for something good; grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love. So, may God take your minds and think through them; may God take your lips and speak through them; may God take your hearts and set them on fire. Amen.