

Bridges

Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

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Sometimes you think something is going to be there forever. And then it's not. A change like that can bring surprise, it can bring confusion, it can bring grief. And while some such changes are tragic, others are not.

The collapse of a bridge is a tragedy. It's a shock, people die, and some lives are wounded forever. A year after the 35W bridge collapse, one woman wrote that she will forever be scared every time she drives over a bridge. A year after the collapse, hundreds of people gathered to mark the anniversary.

But other changes—even other awarenesses that nothing is permanent—are not tragic, and no one gathers a year later to mark the day. These are healthy signs that life moves forward and that there are new possibilities for us to step into.

For those who are visiting today, the occasion for this sermon is my recent announcement that I'll be concluding my ministry at First Church in mid-October. I'll be dealing with different aspects of that decision in my sermons today and next week. The questions for today are *Where are we? Who are we?* and *Where are we going?*

For years I've had a picture in my office of two young children in the back seat of a car. Their family is embarking on an adventure. They are moving to Minnesota, and it is August 1992. The smiling children are Isabel and Tucker, Robin's and my kids, and they're in the back seat of our car on the move out here from Connecticut. Isabel was about to enter fifth grade, Tucker would be starting first. Both have now graduated from college. We've been here so long that some people tell me they thought I'd be at First Church forever. But that wouldn't have been a good thing for any of us, and the time has come for me to move on to a new adventure. My leaving opens up new possibilities for First Church as well, and it's no insult to me for you to acknowledge that.

But it may feel like the story of Jacob and the angel: you have to wrestle with it a bit to get the blessing out of it.

A wise woman helped me see this in a larger context when she said, "Children and teenagers are always stepping into the unknown. They can't help it. It's what they have to do. And then most of us spend decades trying to keep change at bay. But at the end of our lives, we all have to take the big step into the unknown, with confidence and with faith. So maybe it's good for us to have to move into the unknown from time to time, almost as practice."

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It should be said that there's been a wide variety of responses to the news that I'll be leaving. Some in the congregation have been quite surprised. One described it as heartbreak. Another said, "I think I'm becoming a Republican. I don't like change." Yet another, a mother with younger children, said, "If my husband quit his job to go to a theatre school, I'd kick him in the head." (Robin appreciated the sentiment.) But most have voiced some variation on "I'm excited for you, sad for us." And the first things I heard from several people—particularly among the elders of the congregation—were "I

can't say I'm surprised" and "We've gotten through this kind of change before. It's sad and we'll miss you, but we'll be fine."

So however it is you're feeling, you're not alone.

Maybe it's helpful to think of this in terms of grief, because this kind of change most immediately elicits a sense of loss. We all react by entering the cycle at one point or another of the classic stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Some have started with denial, saying, "This can't be true," or "I can't believe it." Some have been angry. Some have wanted to bargain. One joked that she wanted to find a good lawyer to keep me here. Others have asked if I'm angry with the congregation, or if there was something they could have done to prevent this. Some have been not depressed but deeply sad. And some have been able to start with gracious words of acceptance. Wherever you are in that cycle, be patient. Give yourself time.

I'll address the reasons for my leaving more fully next week, but I do want to reassure you that I'm not mad at you. It's not your fault. And it's going to be *very* hard for me to say goodbye. This community has meant, and continues to mean, so much to Robin and me—and to our kids, though they have already moved on to other places, as young adults do. Still, First Church is a huge part of what they have known as home throughout their formative years. We will all miss you dearly. But I can't deal with that right now. There is a time for every purpose under heaven, and I'm glad that the time for saying goodbye is still a couple of months away.

I have my own grief to deal with, even as I look forward to the new adventure that awaits me in London and in whatever comes from my time in school there.

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Tucker had a very interesting reaction to the news that I'd made my decision to leave. "So you won't be a minister anymore," he said. Projecting my own worries onto him, I'd expected him to be concerned over finances. But for him it was a question of identity. He's always thought of his father as a minister, and now that will change.

For some in the congregation, this is also a question of identity. A neighbor remarked to me yesterday, "You're the person First Church is most closely identified with." I don't think that's a good thing, but I know it's perhaps inevitable, and I'll accept it as an observation. Others have put it another way: "Who are we without Tom (our Minister of Music who recently left after 15 years)? Who are we without Eric? Who are we without Tom *and* Eric?" As someone said at the Church Council meeting the other night, "Grief is a search for a new identity." And that's a lot of what's going on here.

Who is First Church without Tom? without Eric? Well, who are we now?

First of all, we are a community. A community of hope, of faith, of confidence in the love of God. A community that works for justice and recognizes the need for forgiveness. A community of openness and welcome. A community of old and young and in between. A community of the open table where Christ is the host and no one is turned away. We have been that in my time here, we *are* that, and I know you will continue to be that after I have gone. These are fundamental elements of

who we are, of what First Church is as a Christian community, and that won't change with the departure of Tom and me. Yes, I have played some part in our being who we are, *but so have you*, and First Church will not cease to be who it is after I have gone. And you can assure that because you get to choose who your next Principal Minister will be.

But first of all, more immediately, remember that Jennie will continue as Associate Minister for the rest of her term. (She is well aware of these changes. She just happens to be on vacation right now.) And then you will call the next Associate Minister, and the next one. The Lilly grant that has allowed us to call Jennie, and Christina and Dea and Hilary, Alan, and Sara is not tied to my being here. And remember that Sandy will continue as a wise and loving Minister of Education for the children. And Sarah and Brad will continue as a caring Parish Administrator and the world's most dedicated Custodian. And we fully expect to have the next Minister of Music in place before I go.

Karen Smith Sellers, our Conference Minister and a former member of this congregation who knows First Church well, will work with you in finding a transitional minister to serve as a bridge to the next Principal Minister, who might well be in place a year from now. (It is both amazing and reassuring how much bridge-building can happen in a year.)

And you as a congregation will get to choose the next Principal Minister. You may well choose someone with very different gifts than I have—or more important, who can call forth gifts from you that I've been unable to. Some of you have not been around for this process, but what characteristically happens in the United Church of Christ—and though it's not my job to manage the transition, I'm sure this will happen here—is that the congregation determines the kind of person it's looking for and forms a search committee from within the congregation. The search committee accepts applications and does interviews, working hard to select a candidate. The candidate comes and meets the congregation, then leads worship on a Sunday. Then you as a congregation get the final say. No one forces a new person on you. It's a process that's both prayerful and very democratic. It's classically Congregational.

The long and rich life of this congregation will go on, and you will continue to be a wonderful community that supports one another. I am deeply grateful to have been part of that for these many years. And I have always known that you would do just fine without me. There is so much talent, so much caring, so much blessing in this gathered community. It's never been difficult for me to go on a few weeks' vacation or even a sabbatical leave of several months, because I've never had to worry that things would fall apart without me. And if you'll look back on those times, I think you'll agree that you never worried about it either.

The story of the loaves and fishes is one of the foundational stories in the gospels, and it can be a touchstone for us in this time of transition. Especially in times of change, we are hungry for reassurance, thirsty for community. In a time of distress or sadness, it can seem like there simply isn't enough to go around and what we have at hand won't do. So each brings what he or she has, and by the grace of God, not only is it enough, but there is more left over, enough to sustain us and others for another day. It may seem like a miracle, but it happens all the time.

I thank God for you. I thank God these years together and for the several weeks yet to come.