

The Journey, The Company, The Blessing

Preached by

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

United Church of Fayetteville

October 29, 2023

For Reflection:

“Ideally, a good pastor wants to empower a congregation to the point where they don't need him. [sic] You want everyone to leave feeling better.” Pete Holmes

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 100

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

²Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

³Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Epistle Reading: Philippians 4: 4-9

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Meditation: *The Journey, The Company, The Blessing* Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

Some months ago, Betsy sent us a cartoon. An ink brushed panda is traveling with a small dragon on its back. Big Panda asked, “What is more important—the journey or the destination?” Tiny Dragon answered, “The company.”

Our destination, together and apart, remains unchanged: to live into the fullness of our created humanity through God in Christ. Our journey together toward that destination has lasted a little more than 16 years.

Thirty-six hours after I was officially on board, UCF showed extraordinary trust in its new pastor who had never preached a stewardship sermon. Going into debt for the first time in its history, they borrowed \$150,000. They pulled her through with a capital campaign that raised \$350,000, providing for the stabilization of a major retaining wall, the addition of an access project and lift, the replacement

of two 50+ year-old boilers with new furnaces, and new roofs on the Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall, thus preparing the historic building for many more years as a base for ministry.

That same year, we used our unique status as a united church to leverage our ability to provide for the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community in our ministry—several years ahead of our allied traditions.

UCF used its treasure, not just for its own care, but in service of the community and the world. Believing music ministry involves supporting music other than on Sunday morning, it raised \$5000 in one night for the Save Our Symphony Campaign through our ongoing coffee house ministry. Since then, the Steeple Coffee House has become an important venue for supporting live music in CNY. In addition to the powerful music we enjoy in worship, UCF has hosted more than 30 benefit concerts in cooperation with SUBE.

Along with those funds, funds raised by the coffee house and the generous budget and special offerings of members, UCF has given away thousands upon thousands of dollars, for local, national, and international needs. We raised \$4000 in one month for burial expenses of the murdered child of a refugee family we sponsored. We are major supporters of the F-M Food Pantry; have expanded our cooperative education ministry in Haiti; and seen the inception of Church in the World Sunday.

We have gathered around this Table for bread and cup more than 200 times. I can remember the first time I knew everyone's name when I served communion. Now I can remember the last.

We took that Table and healing meals into many homes; a "Soup and Bread Elf" made special deliveries. We gathered around other tables for: 15 kinds of meatballs; eggs of every devilment; one, two, three and four cheese macaroni and cheese, macaroni and cheese with ham, bacon, ground meat and tuna (shudder), roasted vegetables, gluten-free and vegan macaroni and cheese. There were salads. They were good, but they were salads. Fruit made an occasional appearance. The only people I ever saw eating it were men who let their wives bring them their desserts. The desserts, like Abraham's descendants, were as numerous as the stars in the sky.

We have gathered at other places and times. In this room, we celebrated weddings, baptisms, blessings, ordinations and commissionings. We have commended our loved ones to God. We have left the Sanctuary to a jazz rendition of "*Ain't Gonna Need this Old House No More*" and the haunting notes of *Taps*. We have followed fire engines and horse drawn carriages to graves; slipped in wet spring grass; looked like a Druid dance troupe, dodging drone-sized mosquitoes in late summer, and stood knee deep in ice and snow, accompanying and comforting one another as we returned to the earth the ones God created from the earth.

We have gathered around hospital beds, for education and retreats, for game nights and talent shows. Of the latter, two features stand out in my memory: the extraordinary talent, my definition of talent being widely expanded. And the elaborate wrapping required for gift baskets for the silent auction. If I ever touch a piece of colored cellophane again, it will be too soon.

Then came the pandemic.

Which brings us to the company.

Had the pandemic not occurred, I would have handed on to my successors that which I received: a congregation committed to: creating a welcoming, inclusive community; caring for one another and our neighbors in every place; meaningful worship and gifted music to lift spirits; and a laity sacrificially involved in the congregation's life. A congregation that listened well and sang well in worship.

To that, we added a congregation that can listen between the words for the Word that comes in silence and expanded its confidence in its role in leading worship. A congregation that comes to a

new preacher/pastor with a hundred-hour deficit in time spent listening to sermons. If you come to church every week, it will take you between three and four years to work off the deficit at approximately nine minutes per week. Otherwise, it will be about six years. A congregation that still has not learned *not* to hit reply all, but can read texts and emails written in tongues, because that is the language in which I type. We laughed and cried together, argued and reconciled, often all in the space of an hour. We got it right; we got it wrong; and we got over it. That's what I would have handed on if the pandemic had not happened. But the pandemic did happen.

UCF brought its best self to the pandemic. Our tech skills expanded. Certainly, we had a few wizards who ramped up their skills and our offerings with amazing speed. Yet, everyone learned to Zoom; septuagenarians took selfie videos as liturgists in gardens and in front of Christmas trees and learned to upload them. We didn't have a music director and choirs couldn't gather, but choir members learned to sing to music only they could hear (literally), which was then combined and uploaded for our streamed worship.

Our COVID Task Force created a response grid to varying risk levels shared with the presbytery and used as a model for at least four churches elsewhere. We learned ways to take our mission efforts outside the building, including starting a community-wide, drive-by White Christmas Offering for the Food Pantry.

We stayed connected by sharing pictures of the piles of books on our night stand, our hobbies, our holiday decorations, our children and grandchildren, and our gardens. One of my favorite collages is the pictures of this Table set in our individual homes the first time we shared the Lord's Supper remotely. We organized drive-bys for our homebound and blessed a family on its way to life in another state with a safely distanced service on their front lawn.

We did not complain about: long lines for COVID vax, we were just glad they were available; getting sick from the vax, because it meant our immune systems were working. We did complain about fogged glasses, chapped faces and that shopping at TOPS or Wegman's was like shopping at Ike Godsey's General Store on Walton's Mountain, but the prices were way, way, way higher.

Most importantly, here at home, we did not complain to or about each other. We learned to let the small stuff go. We even managed to let it go without mentioning it. We were not picky or petty. We prayed with and for one another, for the sick, grieving, and anxious. We lamented together the holidays and special occasions when we were not able to be with family and friends, and worried about the effects of home schooling and people without safety nets.

We communicated. We answered our emails. We did what we said we would and fulfilled our responsibilities to one another. We were creative, adapted to rapid-fire change and learned to pivot on a dime. We were less focused on how we did it before, and concentrated on finding ways that worked in the present. We paid more attention to today than yesterday. We lived authentically with what was and looked to what might yet be. We were gracious and forgiving, striving together in difficult days. **If you bring that company to the days ahead, you have it nailed.**

Remembering that you are that company and maintaining that company brings us to the blessing.

A few years after I was ordained, I received, from a professor in my D. Min. program, the best advice I ever received for how to maintain emotional and spiritual health with regard to getting feedback. I do not think its wisdom is for clergy alone.

She said:

"If it's anonymous, don't read it or listen to it. Toss it; erase it; delete it." That turned out to be easy.

“If it’s negative, read it or listen to it once. Learn what you can; toss it; erase it; delete it. Do not obsess over it.” Not obsessing was the hardest.

“If it is affirming, take it seriously. Do not discount it. Hold onto it. Let it help you hold your center in your created goodness.” That was the easiest to forget, especially if one was obsessing over the negative.

After that class, I returned to my office and picked up a drawstring bag that had lain untouched on the shelf for more than a year.

For my installation service at my first church, I asked the Head of Staff to do the charge to me. After a few brief sentences, he pulled a small card from his pocket and uttered one sentence: “Always put your home phone number on your business card, which you already did without any guidance from me.” Then he took a drawstring bag from under the pulpit, placed the card in it and the bag on the communion Table. He turned to the congregation and said, “There is a small card in each bulletin. You called her; you give her a charge.”

I didn’t open the bag for a few days. It was heavy with nearly 300 cards and the expectations of 300 people. When I did open it, I was stunned. There was not a single instruction (not even one about a telephone number); rather it was filled with blessings, invitations and words of welcome. The day of my class, I re-read all of them and began a ritual I have continued to this day. I emptied the bag into the waste can and put every subsequent affirmation, card or blessing into it. I read them at the end of the year and start again.

You are familiar with those blessing bags. We have created them for children we baptize. One parent told me that her child, who was experiencing the challenges of developmental delays was insistent that part of their bedtime ritual be reading a blessing. It reminded him, that regardless of how difficult his day had been, he was valued and created good by God.

As have so many, this message comes with homework and it is the most important homework I have ever assigned. It has two parts.

One: Before you go to bed tonight, create a blessing folder. It can be digital or physical (a manila envelope, a shoe box, a drawer or a folder. You might even persuade retired members of the Committee in Stitches to make some drawstring bags.) Both digital and physical would be best. **Do it before you go to bed tonight.** Every time you are thanked in the weekly email or get a note of affirmation, a holiday greeting card, get well or sympathy card or a thank you note, put it in your blessing folder.

Two: You have a year to complete the second part, but you will need the whole year to do it. You cannot do it at the last minute. By All Saints’ Day 2024, it is each person’s responsibility to provide a blessing, prayer, holiday greeting or other note for every other person. You have new directories. You can keep track.

Before you go to bed. By all Saints’ Day 2024.

That is how a community is maintained for effective ministry in all the days ahead. Our blessings and affirmations help us live from our faithful center. They remind us that we have been named “Good” by our Creator. They help us remember who we are.

St. Paul said it more eloquently. ⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone... ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think

about these things ... and the God of peace will be with you.

In such ways, we remember who we are.

**You are created in God's image.
You are God's beloved and with you God is well pleased.
You are called and empowered by the Spirit to be Christ's body in the world,
praising, thanking and serving.
Remember who you are.**

That is my charge and blessing to you.
May it be yours to me.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God: We turn to you in prayer offering up the concerns of the world and lifting the cries of our neighbors:

In these brilliant autumn days, we pray for those for whom the light has turned dim:
where health of body, mind or spirit is at risk or declining
where caregivers tend and mourners grieve
where hunger, homelessness and lack of opportunity blocks the light of hope
for a nation reeling from yet another mass shooting
where terrorism reigns and war devastates
for all these concerns, we join together with you and with one another
to touch with compassionate hands
to sustain with prayer
and to breathe peace in every setting

We pray with these words, the silent meditations of our hearts, and we are bold to pray the prayer your son taught us...

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**