

“The Tie That Truly Binds”—Ephesians 2:21-22

In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Well, we’ve finally come to the moment some of us have not been looking forward to—my last sermon as your pastor. I have to confess that I’m not very good at these good-bye sermons—I never quite know what to do or say. I suppose I could do as one of my predecessors in a previous appointment did. In his final sermon, he said, “I realize I may have stepped on some toes while I was here; but if I stepped on your toes, your foot shouldn’t have been there in the first place.” But I can’t really say that, you see, because I’ve never considered myself to be a toe-stepper-onner. I hope you’ve sensed that one of the goals of my preaching has been, not to step on your toes, but to see if together we can find some way to live for and serve Jesus more faithfully in the community and the world.

I suppose I could be like the preacher who said in his last sermon, “Some of you were happy when I came here; some of you were happy when I stayed here; and some of you are happy that I’m leaving. So it can be truly said that I’ve managed to make everybody in the church happy.” Now, how true this may be in our case, I don’t know—but whether it is or not, I’m not going to say it!

Some pastors use their final sermons to point out to their congregations where they—the pastors—were right and the congregation wrong. Other pastors have used their final sermons to trumpet their accomplishments. I thought about those approaches very, very briefly and discarded them just as quickly, mostly because they suggest an adversarial relationship, and, at least in theory, I’ve preferred a team approach to ministry rather than a you-versus-me approach—after all, we’re supposed to be on Jesus’ team *together*, aren’t we? And besides, I wouldn’t want to tempt anyone to respond by saying, “Well, here’s where *you* were wrong” and “Here’s what you *didn’t* accomplish”!

I considered using this last sermon to give you a brief summary or statement of what I believe—my creed, so to speak—but it occurs to me that if you haven’t figured out by now what I believe, my telling you at this point won’t make much difference. And I even considered not even mentioning that this is my last sermon with you—something which I’ve tried in previous appointments. But I’ve discovered there’s nothing to be gained in running around reality and trying to avoid acknowledging the moment.

So, you see, I don’t like these sermons, because I’m never quite sure what to do with them. I’m not very good at this type of closure—I’m not very good at saying good-bye. I don’t like these last sermons, because those that I’ve heard over

the years have generally tended to focus on human beings, either on the greatness of the departing minister or on the failures of the congregation. I hope that if you've learned nothing else about me in these four years together, you've learned that I believe that preaching and worship and the life of the church and indeed our very lives as Christians must center and focus on Jesus and Jesus alone. So I struggle today, as I preach this last sermon that I don't like, to keep us centered and focused, not on me, not even on *us*, but on Jesus, and only on Jesus. As I pray every Sunday, "Hide me behind the cross, that I might preach you and you alone."

One of the high and holy moments every year at Annual Conference is our time of honoring our clergy who are taking the retired relationship. Each minister who is retiring has an opportunity to speak before the conference. Some have very little to say; some have just enough to say; and some have too much to say. But one year one of our retiring ministers spoke of being "in transition"—of moving from the active to the retired relationship and the struggles involved in making that change. For some reason that word "transition" has stuck with me—and maybe "transition" is the word that best describes what we have been experiencing in the past few months. "Transition" best describes what we at 1807 Lake Douglas Road have been going through as we pack the physical things of our lives into boxes, as we bring closure to our activities in the community and the church, and as we get ready to move to another community and a new church. "Transition" best describes what those of us who gather here at 300 West Shotwell Street have been going through as we deal with the fact that, one month from today, a different pastor will be living in your house, and, a few days after that, she will stand in this pulpit as your pastor. "Transition" best describes what so many of us are going through as our relationship changes from being pastor and family and friends to just being friends. We are in transition.

But in the midst of this transition time, and when this time of transition is complete, we will still be joined together—for there will always be the tie that truly binds.

Yet this tie is not the bond of friendship, as deep and as strong as it may be. We trust we will always love you, and we hope you will always love us. We're just not going to see each other quite as often—and you know as well as I do that sometimes friendships fade away. I think of people with whom I went to school, folks who pledged with me that we would be bosom buddies and lifelong pals—but now they are people with whom I've lost touch, people whom I haven't seen in years. We've had ten full-time appointments now, and everywhere we've been we've drawn close to many people around us. But now we're often not as close as we used to be, and sometimes I have to struggle (and quite frequently fail) to connect a name I really ought to know with a face. We all know that sometimes, when the context in which a friendship is formed changes, the friendship fades.

Friendships, unlike diamonds and the love of God, are not forever. So while we hope that our friendships with you will always be strong, friendship is not the tie that truly binds.

Nor is the tie that truly binds the fact that we are United Methodists. Your faith, like mine, has found its expression in Methodism, and you have found this particular congregation of The United Methodist Church to be the place where you live out your faith. But there may come a time when there will not be a United Methodist Church—someone has suggested that, if we continue to lose members at our current rate, we will reach the point where the decline will soon be irreversible and there will be no United Methodist Church by the year 2075. There may come a time when The United Methodist Church, through our General Conference, will do something that will lead me to say, “I can no longer be a United Methodist.” I hope it never happens, because I’m not really sure where I’d go. It’s distinctly possible that you, too, might one day feel compelled to leave our denomination, although I truly hope it doesn’t happen to you, either. As much as we may love The United Methodist Church, there may come a time when we are no longer a part of it. So let’s not depend on United Methodism as the tie that truly binds.

You see, that tie—the tie that truly binds, the tie that *really* keeps us together—is our faith in the saving grace of God that we find in our Lord Jesus, who in self-sacrificing, self-giving love for us and in obedience to the Father sacrificed his Body and his Blood to cleanse us from all unrighteousness; to bring us rebels back to God as reconciled people; to bind us together as sisters and brothers, not in the flesh, but in the Spirit of the Living God; and to birth us as one family under the Fatherhood of the Almighty, the Creator God. It is the Resurrected, living Lord Jesus who is the tie that truly binds you and me, your family and mine, this community of faith and all others, past, present, and future. The tie that truly binds is none other than Jesus, our Savior and our Lord.

We already know this is true, don’t we? For if we look at ourselves, what do we see? We represent a wide range of ages, from the very young to the very old. Both genders are represented here this morning. We come from a variety of backgrounds. Yet we are bound together as one. You see, it doesn’t matter how rich or poor we are, how wise or simple we may be, how educated or uneducated we may be, how well-known or little-known we are: when Jesus confronts us, we are all the same—we are sinners who stand condemned, except that Jesus has paid the price for our sins. When Jesus confronts us, we are all the same—we are prodigals brought back home by the grace of a loving God. Someone has said that death is the great equalizer, and I suppose it’s so—everyone must die, and whatever we may or may not have, whatever we may or may not *be* in this life, we can’t take it with us. But I like to think of *Jesus* as the great equalizer, at least in his Church—for no matter what names our biological families have given us, in

our spiritual family we all bear the same name: we are Christians, and it is Jesus who makes us so. We already know this truth—that Jesus is the tie that truly binds.

So no matter where you and I may go, no matter what congregations you and I are a part of, that which keeps us together, the tie that truly binds, is the Body and Blood of Jesus our Lord, given in God's grace for you and me. May God always keep us bound together in that grace with the tie that truly binds, for now and forever. Thanks be to God!