

## Farewell Reflections Part 3 – The Future

### Matthew 25:31-46

Today is not an ending. It is a beginning. While it is true that our pastor-parish relationship is ending, it is equally true that our friendship continues. And I truly believe that you as the family of faith known as the Carbondale Community United Methodist Church are about to begin a grand journey.

Several weeks ago I decided to take three proclamations to bid you farewell. In my first, four weeks ago, I talked about our past as a church. In the second, two weeks ago, I addressed the present. Today, in my final proclamation, I want to look into the future. Let me be clear though. I do not consider myself a prophet. What I want to share with you today is not a prediction, but a hope, a dream, a prayer of what I know you to be capable of becoming and accomplishing.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said this: “I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving: To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it – but we must sail, and not drift, nor be at anchor.” I have used the image of you now swimming instead of treading water. This image of Holmes’ says the same thing. As a church, don’t ever allow yourselves to drift aimlessly. Don’t drop anchor and just bob there to and fro.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Chapter 25 first yields two parables from Jesus – that of the bridesmaids and next of the talents. The chapter then closes with the passage I just read. It is Jesus’ final discourse in Matthew and it is not a parable. Here, to put it in Holmes’ words, Jesus is talking about how we reach the port of heaven. This passage is apocalyptic. It talks about the end times. The imagery is that of Jesus coming with his angels and gathering all the nations before him and then separating the faithful from the unfaithful for all eternity. But the sheer beauty and power of this drama lies in Jesus telling us that it is simple, every day deeds of love, compassion, and service that will grant us entrance into his kingdom. Jesus then adds the eternal exclamation point – when we do acts of kindness to others, we are doing them to our Lord.

Such also is applicable to congregations. Churches fall into two categories. They are either maintenance churches or they are mission churches. Maintenance churches are focused inwardly. All of their time, money, and energy are focused on their own congregations. The help they provide is to themselves, usually to try and just keep the doors open. Maintenance churches don’t grow much. In fact, being introspective, they tend to gradually decline.

By contrast, mission churches are focused outwardly, beyond themselves. To be sure, they take care of their own, including their facility, but they are energized by taking the church and what it stands for into the world. People in mission churches are deeply involved in serving those in need within the community and beyond. It is my belief that we stand on the cusp of moving from being a maintenance church to embracing being a mission church. In fact, I am renaming these three farewell reflective messages as follows: The Past in Maintenance, The Present in Transition, and The Future in Mission.

We have already begun the process. Our new Missions Committee met for the first time last week. I naively thought we would meet for an hour or so. Our chairperson, Sydney Hays, had intended for this first meeting to be informational and educational. We did not meet for just one hour, but rather for almost three hours. Ideas were shared and there was genuine interest and excitement for the possibilities that lie ahead. As members talked it became somewhat overwhelming. There are great needs and opportunities for our church to serve those in need, and thus, to serve Christ himself.

You need to know that the Mission Committee is not going to be, nor can it be, the sole provider of mission outreach for our church in the future. The Committee will be an idea forum, an organizational forum, and an inspirational forum. For a church to be a true missional church, the great majority of members and constituents in the church must be involved in mission outreach to some degree.

In the previous two messages in this farewell series I talked about the dedicated leadership of so many of you laity in our church who have held on through thick and thin. I also shared about The Reverend Wally Finley and The Reverend Doctor Richard Lyon, and their contributions to keeping the church alive. I may embarrass her and she might get upset with me for doing it, but I want to talk for a moment about The Reverend Doctor Melanie Dobson Hughes. On this coming Thursday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, you will leave nearly five years of interim pastors behind you as Pastor Melanie becomes your permanent pastor.

I cannot begin to tell you how good I feel about our church at this moment because of just two things – you and Pastor Melanie. You’ve heard her preach. Last week she offered the most insightful interpretation I have ever heard of the Transfiguration of the Lord, including my own. As she preached, she herself was glowing. Did you see that in her last week? It was beautiful. And those of you who were not here for our Ash Wednesday service missed something special with Pastor Melanie. She is a gifted pastor and preacher. But she is more than that. She’s intelligent, thoughtful, thoroughly grounded in John Wesley and his theology, compassionate, organized, focused, and deeply spiritual. What gifts!

Pastor Melanie also has a deep heart for missions. She has served as a missionary overseas and has led work mission trips in the U.S. and abroad. Under her spiritual guidance with you, our church is going to break out into the community and world to serve and touch lives in ways that only a missional church can accomplish for Christ.

Stepping out of the sanctuary and moving beyond it to serve people in need can be a little scary. We don’t know who we will meet, or how they will receive us. It can be intimidating as it takes us out of our comfort zones. What do we do and how do we do it? How do we serve Christ himself? I am going to answer those questions with one of my favorite stories. If you’ve heard it before, I do not apologize, because it is worth hearing again.

One day a man was walking alone on a dry, barren road. He was a man who revered Jesus. But he was terrified of lepers. On that day he came upon a lone figure on the road and as he approached saw that the man was a leper. The man stepped off the road and walked a wide arc around the leper, who watched him as he went. Coming back onto the road, the man was suddenly convicted of his avoiding and ignoring the leper. He stopped, turned, walked back, and embraced the leper, calling him brother. He wished him well, said good-bye, turned and walked away no more than a few steps. Turning around once again to look, the leper was nowhere to be seen. There weren’t any trees, or shrubs, or anything else to stand behind out of sight. At that moment the man knew he had met the risen Christ in that leper. The time was early in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the man’s name was Francis – Francis of Assisi. To his dying day, Francis knew that he had embraced Christ himself that day on the barren road.

Francis had been intent on maintaining his fear of lepers, yet found the inner strength to overcome those fears and move into mission with the leper-Christ. He lived out Jesus’ message in Matthew 25. He tended to the least and then found that he had met Christ. Such is what our church needs to do.

This story is a beautiful metaphor for the church. When we go out to serve, our actions speak louder than our words. We might offer food, or drink, or clothes. Whatever we offer, we are giving ourselves to Christ himself. “When you do it to the least of these my children, you do it to me.” I fervently believe that is your future as the Carbondale Community United Methodist Church. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 26 February 2012