

“The Best Is Yet To Be”
John 2:1-11

This morning’s text and sermon title are the same that I used on January 18, 1998 when I preached before you for the first time, after which you elected me to be your pastor. On that date, the story of the Wedding at Cana of Galilee was the lectionary reading for the day. I was not surprised, therefore, that my colleague who preached for me back in Bradenton while I was away used the same story and said much the same thing – “the best is yet to be.” I thought that was rather providential and it must be a word from the Lord which we needed to hear, not only then, but now – the best is yet to be.

I remember telling you that it would be arrogant of me if I was referring to myself and our ministry together as being better than anything that has happened before I came on the scene. And I would have been devastated if my friend, Wayne, was suggesting that life a Westminster would be better with the next pastor than it was with me.

“The best is yet to be” is not about how the ministry of First Presbyterian Church of Ambler will be perceived in future as compared to what has been. I’m no predictor of the future and there are no guarantees in this life. We can’t say that today is better than yesterday, or promise that tomorrow will be better than today, not with gasoline at \$4.00 / gallon; not if you are unemployed; not if you are struggling with a debilitating disease or emotional distress; not if you are grieving a loss.

It is, however, about a basic orientation in life. The preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes hit us between the eyes when he said, **“Never ask, ‘Oh, why were things so much better in the old days?’ It’s not an intelligent question.”**ⁱ Growing persons, especially growing persons in Christ, don’t look back. Jesus said ... **“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”**ⁱⁱ God’s people can be ready to embrace the future, undefined as it may be, because they trust that God’s grace will be sufficient for them whatever the future brings.

Back in Cana of Galilee, the sommelier didn’t know where the good wine came from. He asked the bridegroom and he didn’t know. We have been told where it comes from. The best wine isn’t found in church or religion (it’s hard to miss the symbolism of the stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification being retooled for something new and better than any religion), nor is it contingent on our life circumstances, good or bad. The best wine has to do with a relationship with Jesus which, if you are a growing in his love, can only taste better with each new day, regardless of who the pastor is. True salvation is growing up into Christ.

I remember telling the elders and deacons during a little retreat we had in January that this time transition would be more of a challenge for Lucy and me than it would be for the congregation. After all, there’s 700 of you and only two of us! You’ve only known me for 10 of your 116 years.

I'm just one blip on your radar screen. I heartily agree with Eugene Peterson, the translator of *The Message*, who writes, "As a pastor myself, I've never gotten over my surprise – and dismay – at being treated with doggish deference by so many people!"ⁱⁱⁱ

Andrew Purves is a professor of Pastoral Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In his recent book, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*, he writes:

Far too many ministers cast their ministry back upon themselves. The danger is ministerial messianism. The fact is, we can't raise the dead, heal the sick, forgive the sinner, comfort the afflicted and so on. It comes as a shock, I think, when we finally discover we are not the Messiah. When we think it is all up to us, our ministries have become a hindrance to the work of Christ because we have put ourselves into the place where only He should stand. When we do that, God kills our ministries – the crucifixion of ministry. But, that's good news, for us and for our parishioners. Ultimately, they need a savior more than a minister. Jesus Christ is Lord, and as such He is the true and only minister.^{iv}

I've never quite understood why God called me to be a minister. I was always a good student in college and seminary, but never attained *summa cum laude*. Nor have I ever had the kind of religious experience that picked me up off my feet and turned my life around. I've been nurtured by the church ever since my baptism at the not-quite-ripe age of 3 months. At that time, the pastor of our church dipped a rose into the water and sprinkle it over my head. I hardly got wet. The liturgically correct would ridicule such a practice as little more than dry-cleaning. But by the grace of God, at least one of those drops of water (like a tiny mustard seed?) never dried and over time I've gotten wetter and wetter. That is, my growth as a person of faith has been slow, hopefully sure.

I consider myself to be a commoner, a blue-collar Christian, if you will. We all are. Consider the reality check we find in the Bible. **Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...**^v That's why I figure if I can be a minister of Jesus Christ, anyone can.

Does that mean anyone can be a pastor? Of course not; no more than I could ever be woodworker or a football player. Being a minister of Jesus Christ is not about being a pastor or any other position in the employ of the church. Being a minister is about being a servant of Jesus Christ, no matter what your status or position in life. The words of Barbara Brown Taylor are so helpful:

Affirming the ministry of every baptized Christian is not an idea that appeals to many lay people these days. It sounds like more work, and most of them have all the work they can do. It sounds like more responsibility, while most of them

are staggering under loads that are already too heavy. I will never forget the woman who listened to my speech on the ministry of the laity as God's best hope for the world and said, "I'm sorry, but I don't want to be that important."

Like many of those who sit beside her at church, she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to do more – to lead the every member canvass, or cook supper for the homeless, or teach vacation church school. Or she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to *be* more – to be more generous, more loving, more religious. No one has ever introduced her to the idea that her ministry might involve being just who she already is and doing just what she already does, with one difference: namely, that she understand herself to be God's person in and for the world.^{vi}

A rabbi named Zusya died and went to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, "Why weren't you Moses or why weren't you Solomon or why weren't you David?" But when God appeared, the rabbi was surprised. God simply asked, "Why weren't you Zusya?" That's our calling – to be our true selves. The way I see it, it's not about the gifts you feel you may or may not have for ministry, it's about the gift you are. I hope you don't think I'm boasting, but during these past few weeks I've been overwhelmed by the number of people who have told me how my life has impacted them, how I've been a gift to them. For the most part they weren't referring to my powerful and illustrious sermons I preached every week! The reference was most often about some little thing – something of which I was not aware. Even a couple of young people expressed gratitude to me for my doing this or that and I had to say to myself, "I did?"

We all impact each other's lives. The question always remains, will it be positive or negative? Last Sunday after the South Ridge service, I met for the first time a young man who for months has been battling colon cancer. Just a few weeks ago he was not expected to make it, but there he was, with his family, worshiping God with us. He didn't have much to say, but the glow on his face spoke volumes about the joy in his heart and his gratitude to God. His battle is not over but at that moment, he found strength to do something he never thought he'd be able to do. That meeting, though very brief, was a gift to me. As the old spiritual sings,

If you cannot preach like Peter,
If you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus
And say, "He died for all."^{vii}

There's more than one way of "telling the love of Jesus" – as many ways as there are those who have been baptized in Christ's name. St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: **"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are**

one in Christ Jesus.”^{viii} It would be heresy of the first order for me to suggest an amendment to the scriptures, but I wish St. Paul included – “there is no longer clergy or laity, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The miracle is, Jesus can take our common lives, marked with the water of baptism – whether we were sprinkled, poured or immersed – and transform them into ministries of grace, tasting like rich, full-bodied wine and having the power to gladden the heart of our hurting world.^{ix}

So always remember your baptism and be thankful! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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- i. Ecclesiastes 7:10
 - ii. Luke 9:62
 - iii. *The Jesus Way*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 13
 - iv. Quoted from article in *Pittsburgh Panorama*, Spring 2008, p. 22
 - v. 1 Corinthians 1:26-27
 - vi. http://www.faithatwork.com/articles/2005/05-2/TaylorB_05-2.html
 - vii. *There Is a Balm in Gilead*
 - viii. Galatians 3:27-28
 - ix. See Psalm 104:15