

“On the Road”  
Romans 6:12-23  
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota  
July 2, 2017  
Rev. Glen Bell

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

“I promise, before God and these witnesses, to be loving and faithful, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.”

“What is the chief end of humanity? The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.”

“Do you trust in the gracious mercy of God, and do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? Do you confess Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior and do you trust in him? Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his word and showing his love?”

There are many ways you and I pledge our allegiance. We declare our loyalty, give ourselves to another in trust, and promise to be faithful and obedient. It happens every day. It happens in the classroom before the flag, as we stand with our husband or wife at our wedding, when we take the stand and testify, as we hold our infant child here at the font.

As with so many texts in the Bible, today’s scripture lesson could lead to a variety of sermons. “The end is eternal life,” we read. Those words could be a launching pad for a sermon about heaven, and our anticipation of life everlasting. “The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,” we read. Those words could lead us to consider the amazing grace of God in all its breadth and depth and color.

But today I’m more concerned about the in-between. What do we do, how do we speak and act and think, what do we choose after we have been found and blessed and freed by God’s grace? What happens right now, in the mundane and the everyday, on the way, on the road, in the meantime, as we prepare ourselves for life everlasting?

Guy Sayles is a professor of religion in western North Carolina and a church consultant. A few days ago he wrote this: “Ministry happens in the meantime . . . The meantime is a season of sometimes bewildering change and troubling transitions. It’s an interval between a past we know well and a future which isn’t yet clear, an interval between a familiar way of doing things and an emerging way of doing them. . . . This meantime calls for discernment, perseverance, and courage.”

The Apostle Paul captures this emphasis in the language he uses throughout today’s New Testament lesson from Romans. Do not present yourselves to evil, he writes. Do not present yourselves, body and soul, to impatience or lust or gluttony. Do not give yourself over to the quiet, calm death of sloth or the bitter yellow-green angst of jealousy.

Instead, present yourselves to God. Present yourselves as those washed clean through the waters of life, those formerly hungry and thirsty, now filled by the bread and cup of salvation. Present yourselves for joy and gladness and generosity of spirit. Present yourselves that your life, your heart, your brightness, may become one more candle of justice and forgiveness and care to light the world.

Even at its most poetic, this image strikes at some of our most cherished values. Think about it. “Free time.” Think about that phrase for just a minute. These days we yearn for it. We crave

it. We worship it. Can we reach those golden moments of summer vacation, away from the boss or off campus, cut off from the emails, far away from the crazy schedule? Can we be done with the laundry and dishes and diapers and chauffeuring the kids all over town? Can we find a little peace?

But time is never free, not completely. We are always on the way, on the road, declaring something – something important - through our moment-to-moment choices.

Last Wednesday night, I experienced this again as I witnessed the ordination of a friend as an Episcopal priest. The service was fascinating – incense and bells and lots of ritual. One of the most poignant moments for me was when Jonathan’s family – his wife and young son and daughter – placed his new vestments on him. Jonathan received a beautiful red stole, and they put it around his neck.

It’s not unlike this green one I’m wearing today. Often I expect you and I look at them and think, “That’s attractive. It’s a pretty color, isn’t it?” and then go right on. But the stole that I wear, the stole that Jonathan received, binds us to our responsibilities as pastors. It signifies the yoke of Christ. “Take my yoke upon you,” Jesus says. Take my yoke and present yourselves for service, day after day and hour after hour.

You see, memory and hope fill our experience, even when we are out on vacation in the midst of God’s creation alone, even when time seems free. Memory and hope fill our hearts. They carry us back to when others offered their assistance, shared their wisdom, forgave our hurtful mistake, sacrificed themselves for us. And they lead us on to the future, to visions and dreams of opportunities in which we may offer and share and forgive and sacrifice.

We remember those who loved the church so deeply they were willing to become martyrs, those who loved liberty and justice so deeply they were willing to die defending our flag, the flag of our United States of America. We aspire to embody that kind of dedication, that depth of commitment.

I think this is what Paul is inviting us to today– at every turn, every moment, to present ourselves to God, to open ourselves for service, to open ourselves to our neighbors, to the demands and needs of others, to the suffering, to the joy, to open ourselves to it all.

This means that we are not free to fight fire with fire, to lose ourselves in anger or speak however we choose. Free speech isn’t truly free. We are not free to denigrate women, abuse our privilege, cut and criticize others on a whim. We cannot allow the meantime to become a mean time. For we are charged to present ourselves to Christ.

I had coffee a few days ago with a good friend. Her youngest is just graduating, and she asked me what it is like for me and Anne to be empty nesters. I’m afraid I didn’t offer anything helpful or profound.

But it did get me thinking. I recalled flying up to Indianapolis last February so that I could support Rachel after her tonsillectomy. It’s not always a quick and easy surgery for an adult. During our days together, the first night and every night, I made sure she was settled in her bed, and then set my alarm for every two or three hours, when it was time to give her another dose of medication. I would be there at the side of her bed, with the right pill at the right time.

Oh, I remember fantasizing and yearning to turn off the alarm, to sleep for just a few more minutes. I remembering coveting free time. But I found myself in the rhythm. I found myself by presenting myself to try to help her.

Now, let me confess. In plenty of ways, I was a lousy father. At times, sometimes all the wrong times, I was cranky or loud or impatient.

But it touched my heart when Rachel posted this on social media for Father's Day. "I love my dad. . . . he's smart and strong and always on time." He's always on time.

In time, in everyday time, in the mundane and the ordinary, we present ourselves. We present ourselves with faith and obedience. We present ourselves with kindness and mercy. We present ourselves for peace and justice.

Sometimes it may seem so . . . . well, trivial. But I believe it makes all the difference.

In a few more weeks, one of the families of our church will present themselves here at the font, bringing their children for baptism. And we will present ourselves too. We will remember that we are washed, cleaned, scrubbed and healed and delivered by God's grace. So we will present ourselves too, promising to love those children, to teach them in Sunday school, to serve as youth group advisers, to travel to Cedarkirk and Montreat.

And today, once again, we gather at this table. We present ourselves as those who remember the living sacrifice of Jesus, as those who hunger every day for his blessing and care. We present ourselves that we may be fed here by God's amazing grace.

So, sisters and brothers, present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life. Present yourselves, day after day, as servants of righteousness. For the end is eternal life. The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.