

“We Walk by Faith, Not by Sight”

II Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

Father’s Day, June 17, 2018

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

There it was, in 72-point type, for many years taped to my late mother’s computer monitor:

*“We walk by
faith, not by
sight.”*

II Corinthians 5:7

We walk by faith, not by sight. As I savor these last two messages with you, I am going to reflect as well as I can on this time of transition, toward the goal of making an effective hand-off of the baton in the race we call “pastoral ministry.”

We walk by faith, not by sight. The reason it was printed in 72 point type on my mother’s computer monitor was because she was legally blind due to macular degeneration. Like Pastor Hal – away today with Jane at their granddaughter’s graduation – Mom compensated wonderfully and used every tool in the tool chest to continue full function, including writing on the computer and singing in the choir. But, truly, in the later years of her life, she walked by faith, not by sight.

As we go through this time of a change in pastors, there is a natural tendency to want certainty. We want to be certain that the positive direction of these last six years will continue. The reality is that the future is unknown. We cannot have the certainty we desire.

To be sure, there are some for whom a pastoral change will be welcome. I am not naïve. I have been the best pastor I know how to be, but I have not been an effective pastor for all. I reminded someone this week that a couple of families withdrew my first year here, either because I moved too fast, or not fast enough, for their particular spiritual journey.

It brought to mind the episode in my interview here in the spring of 2012. Those here at that time will recall conflict between leaders and the pastor; and between leaders and leaders. The District Superintendent introduced me to the committee in a very positive way but then wisely said, “Of course, there are no guarantees.” The interview proceeded and the committee seemed satisfied. As we were wrapping up, I said, “I want to disagree with one thing the District Superintendent said.” The room went silent and backs stiffened. I continued, “I actually can give you one guarantee. I guarantee that if you agree with the Bishop that I am to be appointed as your pastor, I guarantee that you will not get a perfect pastor.” People laughed – thank God! – and I, I am sorry to say, have made good on that guarantee. For those failings, I ask your forgiveness. This reminds me of Bishop Bickerton’s ordination sermon last Sunday at Annual Conference in which he said, “Pastors will fail their laity. And laity will fail their pastor.” I said in my June “Beacon” article, this change is an opportunity for those for whom I have not been as effective to have a fresh start.

Still, what I hear more often is that our partnership these last six years has been positive and that the church has moved in a positive direction. As I said in my December 31st retirement announcement, “We’ve had a good run.”

And because it has been mostly good, there is a sense of loss as I leave and an uncertainty about what happens next. These are all natural reactions to change, and we should not fear them or be surprised by them. The formula, as a wise pastor once said to me, is that “Change = Loss.” So there is grief, on my part as well as yours, for the parting that is to come. As one person said “We may never see you again” and that, I’m afraid, is true.

Yet we walk by faith, not by sight. The little flashlight keepsake we’ve given the men today says “Fathers light the way” and, for better or worse, they do. More importantly is that we follow the One who is “the way, the truth and the life” and who said “I am the Light of the World.”

In the transition meeting we had on May 15, Dr. Clayton Miller, our facilitator, said something very quickly that may have missed some. He said, “It is important to say ‘goodbye’ so that you can say ‘hello.’” I must confess that I dislike “goodbyes” as much as anyone and perhaps more than most. I am deeply grateful for the patience of my wife Carol, and my sons, and Stacey Cronk and her committee, for putting up with my protests and persuading me to have a farewell event. I would prefer to ride off into the sunset. But that would not be a healthy goodbye, and to the extent that it would not be a healthy way to handle the grief of separation for you or for me, it would not be in keeping with the kind of preparation I want to do for Pastor Kristina. So come if you can and either way, pray for us at this parting.

But don't look back. We walk by faith, not by sight. Don't look back. This doesn't mean we shouldn't learn from our history. It means we shouldn't linger in our history. The Bible is filled with stories of people who looked back faithlessly, from Lot's wife to the Hebrews slaves to Jesus' own disciples. Lingering in the past is the way of death.

One of my favorite quotes is from the great Negro leagues pitcher, Satchell Paige. Satchell Paige is a monument to what is lost when we say some people aren't welcome. Despite being a star in the Negro leagues, racism kept him from joining Major League Baseball (MLB) until 1948 at age 42, the oldest rookie in the majors. His bio is amazing but not the point. Let me just emphasize his quality by saying he was the first Black player inducted from the Negro Leagues into the MLB's Hall of Fame; and that no less a talent than the great Yankee Clipper, Joe DiMaggio, said Paige was the best pitcher he had ever faced.

All that is important because Paige could have been bitter for the opportunities denied him. Instead, his quote is simply this: *"Don't look back, something might be gaining on you."*

We walk by faith. We also run by faith. Pastoral ministry is a relay race. It's passing the baton, whether from pastor to pastor, laity to laity, or laity and pastor to one another. When a relay runner passes the baton, he or she DOES NOT LOOK BACK at the runner who is passing it. The racer looks back only until they see the approaching runner hit the "mark," and then they run as fast as they can with their hand stretched out, knowing by practice AND FAITH that the baton will be placed in their hand. The exchange, for a relay runner and for the church, is an act of faith: faith in one another and faith in the God who gives us the baton to begin with. Here's the thing: our bulletin says "1836." Our cornerstone says "1892." None of us were here then, and this community and this edifice will be here, Lord willing, long after all of us are under the ground. So

while we give it everything we've got while we're on the field, it's ultimately not about us, but about the Living God who brings life from death, joy from sorrow and hope from despair.

In fact, that's the Biblical definition of faith, right? *"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen."* We are assured of hope and convicted of the unseen future, because while we may not know what the future holds, we know Who holds the future.

And part of faith is the trust that comes with "changing things up." That's the Methodist way. I'm not Pastor Kristina, and she's not me. And that's a good thing.

Yes, I know, it's that dreaded word again: "change." How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? CHANGE?!? WHADDYA MEAN, CHANGE! Or consider the Buddhist monk who was also a hot dog vendor at the ballpark. The fan paid for the hot dogs with a \$20 bill and the monk started to walk away. "Hey," called the fan. "Where's my change?" Replied the monk: "Change must come from within."

But while we may be anxious or even fearful about change, let us remember the Chinese word for change that comprises two characters: "danger" and "opportunity." Change, as much as it may scare us, opens up opportunities that remain to be revealed. As we will sing:

"In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

Now it's hard to argue with a hymn, but there is one more story I'd like to share that illustrates how we **can** actually see the change that waits to be. It's a story about my wife's high school track coach, Gordy Gilmore (who, as it happens, is a cousin to Barbara Stinson, whom some of you know).

To set the stage, a 4 x 100 meter relay is four racers running 100 meters – a little over 100 yards – and passing a baton from one runner to the next. When Carol was in high school, it was common to place the slowest of the four runners in the 2nd position. But as you may know, these races are often decided by 1/100ths of a second, so every advantage one may gain can mean the difference between victory and defeat.

So coach Gilmore decided to “change it up” by placing the FASTEST runner in the 2nd position. What happened? While the first runners were fairly close to one another in the first 25 meters, placing the fastest runner in the 2nd leg made a visible gap in the back stretch of the race that the other teams knew they would have to make up to win: a psychological advantage resulting in complete demoralization of the opposing team!

I have faith that change will make us MORE competitive in a world that isn't always sure about “church.” I have faith that you will continue to run strong! I have faith that the best is yet to be for Mary Taylor Memorial Church! I have faith that visitors will continue to come, as they do now every Sunday! I have faith that you will continue to preach the Gospel of Christ in words and deeds! I have faith that you will continue to give one another “the gift of love.” I have faith that you will continue to love one another and so fulfill the law of Christ. I have faith you will love Pastor Kristina as you have loved me; and I have faith that it will be a better love because the church is in a better place; and I have faith that you will take to heart my exhortation in love: if you want to say how much you have valued my ministry among you, love your new pastor.

Friends and co-laborers with Christ: we walk by faith, not by sight. Thus ever it was. Let us be confident in faith, knowing our confidence is not in humans but in the Lord of Heaven and Earth who never gives out and never gives in and never lets go and never, never, ever gives up on us! Amen!