

“When Servants Go Home”

2 Timothy 4:6-8

We have gathered together as a faith community to commemorate the life and sacrificial service of our fellow brothers and sisters that are no longer with us. In no way could we do justice to them in this service today for all the hours of laboring and sacrifice that they made. I say to these families that we know that it was truly a family ministry and many of you can testify today about the highs and lows and peaks and valleys that a clergy family experiences. I'm sure over the years serving the church has caused some important events and activities to be missed. On behalf of the church we say thank you for sharing your family with us. And so it is quite appropriate that we have come to remember and celebrate the life and work of those servant leaders that have transitioned into the hands of God since the last time we gathered as an Annual Conference. I confess today that they will be missed from among our ranks. They will be missed because they made a difference in the lives of the people called Methodist. They will be missed because they made a difference in the lives of their families. Some folks leave this world and we never knew that they were here, but when a true child of God goes home he or she is noticeably absent from the body. Dr. George Washington Carver wrote, “No individual has any right to come into the world and go out of it without leaving behind him distinct and legitimate reasons for having passed through it.” Jesus said in the 9th chapter of John and 4th verse that I must work the works of Him who sent me while its day; the night is coming when no one can work. God wants to use all of us to make a difference in the lives of others. The apostle Paul knew something about making a difference and servant leadership. He writes in the text that my life has been poured out as a drink offering and my departure is at hand. Paul has gotten up in age now and he is close to the finish line of life. But when he looks back over his life he can see the miles that he's traveled in service to the Lord. On the three missionary journeys he traveled roughly 9,000 miles by land and sea. He can see the lives that he has touched over the years. He had scores of mentees including Timothy and Titus. He has been in many perils and storms: ship wrecked, snake-bitten, beaten, imprisoned, and stoned and left for dead, but God brought him through it all. The Holy Spirit gave him the power to run on in Jesus name. Look like I can hear him saying I know something about serving the Lord. I know something about “A Charge to keep I have a God to glorify, a never dying soul to save, and fit it for the sky. To serve this present age, my calling to fulfill; O may it all my powers engage to do my Master's will! I can hear him saying I know something about denying self and picking up a cross and following Jesus. Paul could sing “Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free, no there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me.” And when you find servants that have poured out their lives in service to the Lord, like the Apostle Paul and those whom we remember today, they will be missed. I'm sure that their passing has been difficult and challenging for you. For some of you there may be still some rough days ahead of you, but I want to encourage you to hold on. The story is told of a well-known preacher walking along a country road with one of his parishioners. As they walked they came upon a barn on the side of the road and the preacher looked up and saw a weathervane with the words God Is Love on top of it. He said they shouldn't put those words on top

of a weathervane for it suggests that God's love changes with the wind. The parishioner said no pastor you misunderstand what they are saying. What they are trying to communicate is that it doesn't matter which way the wind blows God is still love. When the winds of bereavement blow your way know that God is still love. When the winds of loneliness blow God is still love. When the winds of change blow God is still love. Know that God is there for you. He will comfort you in your midnight hours and wipe every tear from your eye. He's still love in the midst difficult and challenging times.

When servants go home they leave a legacy of faith. They have persevered through some rough times. They have kept going when a lot of folks would have given up. I heard Bishop Leeland talking about the parsonage at his first appointment that turned out to be a little trailer, but he was not discouraged by those humble beginnings. I'm sure those that we remember today have many stories about what they had to endure and overcome for the cause of Christ. Faith is not about giving up and quitting, but its about having a deep desire to keep pressing on. I heard a story about a woman named Denise who routinely went to the grocery store and one afternoon had an experience that was anything but routine. As Denise got out of her car in the supermarket parking lot, she noticed something unusual! In the car parked next to her, a woman was seated in the driver's seat, her arms were draped over the steering wheel, her head was resting on her arms, her eyes were closed tightly. She was not moving a muscle. She was perfectly still.

Denise thought to herself, "That's odd. Is the woman OK? Is she in trouble? Is she sick? Has she had a heart attack? Has she had a stroke? Has she fainted? Or maybe she's just resting or sleeping or praying?"

Denise wondered if she should say anything but finally decided to go on into the grocery store and do her shopping, then check back later to see if the situation had changed. Forty-five minutes later Denise had finished her shopping and came back to her car. Immediately, she noticed that the woman in the next car was in exactly the same position as she'd been in earlier and was still absolutely motionless-arms draped over the steering wheel, her head resting on her arms, her eyes closed, not moving at all.

Denise then became really concerned. She went around and knocked on the window. No response. Now, at this point, Denise probably should have gone to find a security officer, but wanting so much to help and feeling guilty that she hadn't helped earlier, she opened the door and said to the woman, "Are you all right?" The woman replied weakly, "I've been shot!" "I've been shot in the neck," the woman said.

Now, let me quickly tell you that this is going to turn out all right, but at that moment Denise could not figure it out because there were no signs of foul play, no blood anywhere, no bullet holes in the car windows. Denise then examined the left side of the woman's neck-nothing. She examined the front of her neck-nothing. Denise then went around to the passenger's side, got in the car, looked at the right side of the woman's neck-nothing there either. Then Denise got on her knees, leaned back over the seat and examined the back of the woman's neck, and there she found not a bullet or gunshot wound, but rather she discovered-are you ready for this? -an uncooked Pillsbury biscuit stuck to the back of the woman's neck. Denise looked at the back seat and saw a sack

of groceries. At the top of the sack was a can of Pillsbury biscuits that had exploded and obviously had propelled the uncooked biscuit forward, hitting the back of the woman's neck.

When Denise told the woman that she had not been shot at all but rather had been hit by a flying biscuit, the woman didn't believe her at first. So, Denise peeled the biscuit off the back of the woman's neck, showed it to her, whereupon the woman straightened up, smiled weakly, said, "Thank you" and drove off.

This story reminds me of how quick so many on life's journey are ready to quit and give up. But faith is about believing that God is a miracle worker for things that seem impossible. Faith is about holding on and letting our little lights shine. What is faith? Hebrews 11:1 reports that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. The NRSV puts it this way: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of unseen things. Assurance is knowing without a shadow of a doubt that God does deliver on his promises to us. No need to worry. No need to fret over whether you are going to make it. You know that if God watches the little sparrows, surely he watches over his own children. Faith is the conviction of unseen things. In your mind's eye you see the fulfillment before it even occurs. I had a senior pastor that was in the midst of a building project and long before any bricks were laid on the new building, he said that he could see the light in the choir room that somebody had left on. That's conviction and seeing with your mind's eye. Dr. King said that I've been to the mountaintop and I've looked over yonder's hills and I've seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. When we are laboring in God's vineyard we've got to know that our lives are in good hands with God, and we've got to be able to see the sunshine even in the darkest of time.

Paul said that I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. We have to walk by faith and not by sight. I heard him tell his protégé Timothy one day that Timothy's genuine faith came first from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. These servants whom we remember today have left a lasting legacy of faith. The work that they have done speaks well of them. The Life that they have lived says volumes about what they were about. The service that they rendered tells us that they made Jesus their choice. I say to these families and all of us who knew them to reflect on their faithfulness and let it serve as encouragement and strength for us in the days ahead.

When servants go home they transition to a better life. D.L. Moody said one day you are going to read in the newspaper that D. L. Moody has died, but don't you believe it because on that day I'll be more alive than I've ever been before. Back home we used to say that saints don't ever die they just sleep away. Paul said for me to live is Christ and for me to die is gain. Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die to get there. None of us are going to be here forever. Today we are reminded of our mortality, but we also know that if this house of this earthly tabernacle is dissolved we've got another building not made by the hands of man, but one that is eternal in heaven. I heard Jesus say in John 14 that in my Father's house are many mansions and I'm going to prepare one for you. Paul says, Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness. Crowns in the Bible are associated with a righteous judgment that indicate Christ is seeing all of the sacrifices made, all of the suffering, and all of the devotion and faithfulness done for Him in this life. Every single act of kindness, of

love, and forgiveness is noticed by Him to whom Christian's must give an account. We just say serving the Lord will pay off after while. When I've gone the last mile of the way. When I've read my last scripture pastor; When I've preached my last sermon; When I've sang my last hymn, I don't know which one it will be. I may be singing When We all get to heaven what a day of rejoicing that will be! I may be singing Swing Low Sweet Chariot, coming for to carry me home; I may be singing Soon and Very Soon we are going to see the King. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! We're going to see the King. I may be singing the Hymn of Promise talking about in our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity. Maybe Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I don't know which hymn, but I want to hear my savior say Well Done thy Good and faithful servant. You've fought the good fight. You've finished your race. You've kept the faith. Come on home and get your crown. I want to wear a crown of righteousness one of these days.