



Final Word

Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Vienna Presbyterian Church

Hebrews 13:20-21

February 28, 2021

I'm sorting through old files at the moment. I came across my first sermon preached in this church on May 13, 1979. It was Mother's Day. In Presbyterian parlance, it's called a "candidating sermon." A ministerial candidate preaches a trial sermon. Then, the congregation votes whether or not to call this person. No pressure!

The sermon was titled, "The Church—Gathered and Scattered" from 1 Corinthians 12. The vote was 243 in the affirmative, 6 negative votes, and 1 abstention. I don't begrudge the six negative votes. I read over the sermon this week. It was okay. The congregation took a second vote to set my annual salary at \$16,500.

Never, in my wildest dreams, could I have imagined I would be standing here 42 years later for my final sermon. To an empty sanctuary, no less. Hey, everyone is living a different kind of life from the one we were living a year ago.

People ask me how I'm feeling. I'm feeling all sorts of things! One emotion stands out above the rest: gratitude. Chris and I are so thankful that God led us here.

I've preached 3500 sermons in these 42 years but I've never preached a farewell sermon before. So, I did some research on the internet. I was intrigued by two farewell sermons from the 1770's. Both sermons were preached in churches not far from here.

The first was delivered in 1775 at an Anglican church in Upper Marlboro, MD. Rev. Jonathan Boucher was a British sympathizer who refused to allow his pulpit to be used in support of the American revolution. The congregation pressed for his removal, so Boucher decided to resign. He

preached his farewell sermon in July 1775 with a pair of loaded pistols on the seat cushion behind him. He warned in his sermon, “If any man attempts to drag me out of this pulpit, I shall be entirely justified before God to repel this violence.” I’m happy to report no shots were fired from the pulpit that day.

The other farewell sermon was preached by Rev. Peter Muhlenberg in Woodstock, Virginia, in 1776. His text was from Ecclesiastes 3, “To everything, there is a season. A time for peace and a time for war.” He closed his sermon with the words, “There’s a time to preach and a time to fight. And now is the time to fight.” Story has it that he removed his ministerial robe wearing the uniform of an officer in the Continental Army. He challenged his congregation to join his regiment. One hundred sixty-two men enlisted on the spot. My farewell sermon promises to be far less dramatic.

I read a few moments ago the final benediction from the letter to the Hebrews. (Benediction is from the Latin *benedictio*, meaning “blessing.”) These words constitute a final blessing and closing prayer. These two verses are loaded with themes that have been covered in the letter. I can identify three character traits of God celebrated in this closing benediction. We serve a saving God, a faithful God, and a compassionate God.

First, this benediction opens with the words, “**May the God of peace**” (Hebrews 13:20). Peace in the Greek (*eirene*) means “to join together what has been separated.” Sin estranges us from God. Yet God takes the initiative through Jesus Christ to reconcile us. The result of this saving union is peace with God.

My dad used to talk about making “his peace with God.” I would say, “Dad, you can’t make peace with God. Not when God has already taken the initiative to extend peace to you.” What is required on our side is to receive the gift, what the Bible calls salvation. Have you received God’s gift of salvation through Jesus Christ? We serve a saving God.

Second, we serve a faithful God. “May the God of peace **through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus**” (Hebrews 13:20). Circle this word “covenant.” What God offers people is a covenant, not a contract. God’s covenant is comparable to the ties that bind us together as family rather than a business contract. Scripture testifies over and over again that God keeps covenant with us. Even when we are not faithful, God remains faithful.

This covenant is eternal because Christ secures it by his own blood. God’s act of raising Jesus from the dead puts the exclamation mark on this everlasting covenant. The risen Jesus is our living Lord. God keeps covenant with us.

In John Bunyan’s classic tale, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian and Hopeful come to a deep river they must cross to enter glory. Christian is afraid, so Hopeful wades in first. “Be of good cheer. I have felt the bottom and it is good,” Hopeful assures. God is good. We serve a faithful God.

Third, we serve a compassionate God. “May the God of peace through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, **that great Shepherd of the sheep**” (Hebrews 13:20). This is the first time the author makes reference to Jesus as a great shepherd. The focus earlier in Hebrews has been Jesus as high priest. Now, at the

end, Jesus is identified as our mega shepherd. The image of shepherd recalls Jesus' words from John's gospel, "I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Jesus our Shepherd guards, guides, and protects his sheep. Our English word "pastor" derives from the word shepherd. A pastor is an earthly shepherd assigned to watch over God's flock.

Let me say a word about earthly shepherds. This is my last day as your shepherd. It has been my deepest joy and greatest pleasure to serve as your pastor. Some of you are upset about my leaving. Others of you don't care all that much. To those who care, let me remind you that earthly shepherds come and go. Jesus—our chief Shepherd—never leaves or forsakes us.

We have three capable, committed earthly shepherds who remain on staff here. Glenda, Charles, and Connie bring 90 years of pastoral experience to the table. They will serve us well. Glenda will act as our interim head of staff until a new senior leader is in place. I've served with Glenda 14 years. She is well-suited to lead us. Get behind her and our entire staff. We are blessed with a capable staff, the best with whom I have worked in my years here. A new senior leader will be introduced this spring. I've talked with this leader. Rest assured this new leader shares our core convictions. That said, let's not make it all about the leader. Make it about Jesus, our mega shepherd.

Verse 20 commends our saving, faithful, compassionate God. Finally, in the next verse, believers like us come into play. Verse 21 supplies the main verb. "May the God of peace...**equip you** with everything good for doing his will."

Equip is a word meaning to mend. It's the same word people used for the mending of fishing nets.

Our world is broken. People need mending. God calls us to mend what is broken by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not left to do this mending on our own. This saving, faithful, compassionate God makes this work possible. God “equips you **for everything good for doing his will.**” This same idea is reinforced by the next supporting clause, “May he work in us what is pleasing to him.” Our author closes out the benediction with a soaring doxology, “through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Some of you comment on the “so- what” question I ask in every sermon. Chris would often ask me in the early days of preaching, “What are you preaching about this Sunday?” That’s all it took for me to launch into an extended discourse on the passage. Then, she would kindly, but firmly ask a follow-up question, “So what difference does it make?” I hated it when she asked me this question. I often didn’t have a good answer. Her question was spot-on. We have Chris to thank for pushing me to address the so-what question.

Over the last nine Sundays, I have been talking about what matters most to me.

Don’t name something after me. Bundle these nine sermons together and share them widely with people. It’s my best attempt to communicate what matters most.

First word: **creation.** God made us in his image. Every human life has dignity and worth because every person is created in the image of God.

Second word: **fall**. Something goes horribly wrong in paradise. God's image becomes "frightfully deformed," to use John Calvin's words. It's what the Bible calls sin. Sin separates us from God's image. Sin isn't something we can fix ourselves. Nobody can put Humpty Dumpty together again. No one, that is, except God.

Third word: **redemption**. Jesus restores us to God's image. God offers to the world something unique in Jesus Christ, found in no one else.

Fourth word: **grace**. Grace is God's gift to us. I told in this sermon the fascinating journey of an unopened Christmas gift. What good is a gift if it remains unopened? Tell God you want to receive this grace gift through Jesus Christ.

Fifth word: **change**. You saw a clip of this sermon from our earlier Celebration of Ministry video. God changes people. Change is possible for those who believe. Here's the problem: We want change. We resist change.

Sixth word: **priorities**. Some of you will recall I used an object lesson for this sermon. I took a bowl to represent your life. I poured water, sand, and pebbles into it, representing all the little stuff. There was no room for the big rocks. So, I reversed the exercise and put in the big rocks first: faith, family, and friends. Big rocks first!

Seventh word: **good**. Life is hard; God is good. God is good when life is hard. God is good even when life is not good to us.

Eighth word: **persevere**. “Run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Romans 12:1). The race you are running equates to your life. Run with perseverance, looking to Jesus. Eyes on Jesus. Life requires resiliency. We need staying power.

Ninth word: **God**. It’s all about God—a saving, faithful, compassionate God.

To Vienna Presbyterian, my final word: Don’t lose focus or become sidetracked. Don’t let common culture set the agenda. Keep the main thing the main thing.

To my friends at Vienna Presbyterian: Don’t waste your life. Don’t look to material things to satisfy you. Follow Jesus. Follow him all the way.

“Let’s go from this place to love the Lord and love the people; serve the Lord and serve the people. May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, go and abide with you now and forevermore.”