**And In Conclusion….**

**Jeremiah 1:4-8; John 13:34-35**

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 Are you the type that rips off your bandage with one quick pull to get over the agony quickly or do you slowly ease it off? While you may suffer a bit longer, perhaps the intensity of the sting won’t be so severe.

 A third option, one I would probably choose if it really were an option, is to ignore or deny that I have a bandage on at all. Won’t it eventually just go away? It will either wash off or rot off.

 Saying goodbye to a group of people you have come to love offers the same options. Again, if I could, I would ignore the fact that I am leaving. I would pretend that everything is just as it was. Then, one day, just be gone. It certainly seems like it would be easier. You could ignore the emotions that come with goodbyes. Emotions are just silly things that get in the way.

 However, if experience has taught us anything, it has taught us that it is hard to move on to new possibilities with joyful “hellos,” if you don’t take the opportunity for healthy “goodbyes.”

 Unfortunately, although I think by necessity, I have dragged you through the slow process of removing the bandage. It is hard to live out eight months of saying goodbye, but that is what we’ve done. There is so much forward planning that has to happen in this church. Last October when Karla and I decided make the change to retirement, we found ourselves confronted with the option of lying to people as we look to the future ministry here or admit that we won’t be part of that future. While time is needed to move through transition, eight months seems excessively long. If it had been possible, I think I would have opted for the quick rip option.

 All of that is moot now. Here we are. I can remember so distinctly planning for my first sermon in my first church out of seminary. As scared and uncertain as I was, it was much easier then planning for this, my last sermon. It seems the harder I try to write a “last sermon,” the more profundity and wit escapes me.

 My first sermon out of seminary in my brand new appointment was March 6, 1983. I had finished seminary midyear. I let the bishop and conference know that I was available for an appointment, but since most appointments occur July 1, I thought that perhaps I would be living with my parents for the duration. But low and behold, a small country church opened up (Seymour Lake) and the bishop appointed me to it. I don’t exactly remember the sermon, but I do know that I based it on the last episode of M\*A\*S\*H which had just aired a couple of weeks before in February.

 While my mind had just been stuffed with three years of theology and deep Biblical study, my insecurity was telling me, “I’ve got nothing to tell these people. What do I know? I’ve been in school the last twenty one years of my life. What do I know about real people trying to live out their faith in the real world?”

 The word that sustained me was God’s call on Jeremiah’s life. “But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say that I am only a youth;’ for you will go to all to whom I send you, and you will speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you” (Jer. 7-8).

 So, when I was ordained an Elder that is the Scripture I placed upon the banner that was processed during the ordination service. (Point out the banner and the different symbols on it.)

 That piece of Scripture is as important to me now as when I was young. Not only the assurance that God will be with me, but the fact that our young people today are as inspired by God as we once were. They have something to teach us. They, too, have been called by God to go and speak what God has placed on their hearts. If we want to be a church that wishes to be relevant, and grow in ministry, than we need to hear what they have to say, and not only hear, but place them at the table where decisions are made. Only then will we fully understand how God is leading this church into the future.

 Seymour Lake United Methodist Church is where I began my ministry. Ann Arbor First United Methodist Church is where I end my ministry. And to be honest, I am not sure I feel any wiser today than when I first began. A little less naïve, maybe, but every day in ministry is an adventure trusting that God will use whatever I have to offer. And God does. This is true for all of us.

 You have received us with grace and kindness. That is why saying goodbye is hard. It was hard for Jesus too. That is why he seems to prattle on for several chapters in the Gospel of John about leaving and saying goodbye. And while monologue in the fifth chapter is filled with some of Jesus’ memorable sayings there is one that is perhaps the most important verse in the entire Bible. So, in conclusion, I would like to leave you with Jesus’ conclusion – a new commandment. Jesus said, “Love one another, as I have loved you.” That is the only way people will know you are a follower of Jesus. All the preaching in the world cannot out perform a simple act of love. All the devout confessions are not as meaningful as active unconditional love.

 It truly represents the culmination in the evolution of faith. It’s something my father-in-law, Keith Pohl, once outlined in a sermon “The Good, The Better, The Best.”

 The Ten Commandments are good. But the majority of the commandments outline life and faith by telling us what not to do. And that is indeed good. But something better came along. Instead of just trying to eliminate evil, how about actually being proactive about doing good? In Deuteronomy 6 we have the Shema, which commands that we love God with all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength. Another commandment in Leviticus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18), was combined in the New Testament as the “greatest commandment.” It also came to be known as the Golden rule – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

 Because of the positive nature of the command, it is better than the good of the Ten Commandments. But there is still a problem. “To love your neighbor as yourself” or “to do unto others as you would want them do unto you,” the “**you**” becomes the standard.

 Jesus changes it up a bit in his farewell address, taking out the subjective nature of the Golden Rule. “A new commandment I give you. Love one another as I have loved you. The best comes when we accept others for who they are. When we welcome the foreigner and the stranger among us. When we see all humanity as children of God worthy of love and care. “Love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus said. When we love with the same kind of welcoming, unconditional, sacrificial love with which Jesus loves, then people will know that we are followers of Jesus Christ. Then the world will begin to experience the realm of God on earth as it is in heaven. That’s the best.

 And that is all I have to say about that. So it is time to say goodbye and it’s a hard thing to do.

 It's like that old story about a preacher who was leaving a congregation. On his last Sunday, at the end of the service, he stood at the door while the people filed out and said their last goodbyes.

 One woman came to the preacher weeping, full of emotion. The preacher attempted to comfort her. "There, there, sister. Even though I'm leaving, I'm sure the bishop will send you a wonderful preacher."

 Through her tears she replied, "That's what they've been telling us for twenty years and it hasn’t happened yet!"

 Well, the good news is it has happened now. The joy of having already lived with the one who is becoming your senior pastor is that you know what you are getting. And you know with Nancy you are getting a great preacher. And much more.

 Who would have guessed? For the first time in the history of United Methodism, which may not be exactly accurate, but everyone I’ve talked with cannot remember a time when the associate pastor became the senior pastor of the same church in succession. There are good reasons for that not to happen. But when the right person also happens to be the associate, then I am happy that the system found a way around traditional thinking.

 But here is the caveat. That does not mean things will stay exactly the way they are now. I hope they don’t, and I don’t think you want to hamstring Nancy in that way. Don’t limit yourself with that expectation. There are things that need to change here, and I look forward to the way that Pastor Nancy Lynn and Pastor Nick Berlanga will lead this church as your pastors to move this church to the future. In fact the only inkling of regret I feel, moving into retirement, is not being around to see this dynamic duo at work and not be a part of the transformation that can take place. On the other hand, if I didn’t retire, there would not be this new dynamic duo to lead you into the future. And there is the catch 22.

 (Give Nancy the mug, the book and the stole).

 Please don’t get me wrong. Karla and I are excited about retirement. I think Karla summed it up best when she came to an epiphany last week. She said, we’re not going to miss the job, but we are sorely going to miss the people.

 You have been our extended family these past thirteen years. You’ve become some of our closest friends. You have been a base of support and celebration during some momentous occasions in our lives. This is the place that both of our daughters met their husbands. Heather and Bryan right here in our youth group. Kara and Derek because they both found themselves in Ann Arbor working at Bigby’s together. You housed their weddings, which has now produced our first grandchild Adeline Rey Paterson Woodman (another check in the “Why retire now,” column). You have been gracious, giving, and forgiving. We will forever be grateful for your presence in our lives. So in conclusion…Thank you!

 I pray that the wisdom of God fill each of your minds that you will never be at a loss to give evidence of your faith. That God finds a place in each of your hearts that you will forever know that you are loved. And that God’s Spirit mingles with your spirit giving you the passion and the courage to be who God needs you to be to help heal this fractured world.

 And I pray that will be true for your life and for mine. Doug out!