

“Friends Who Care...”

1 John 4: 7-9, 11-12;

Out of Solitude: Three meditations on the Christian Life, Henri Nouwen

On the first day of December in 2019, I took the reins as Interim Senior Pastor at Southminster. I recall the day vividly. I remember sitting down in my new temporary office thinking, “what the hell have I done?” Believe it or not, I never thought I would ever become a lead pastor anywhere. I remember going to seminary on a deal made with God—that I would never become a preacher. That might seem surprising to many of you, but I have always viewed myself as a transformational leader perhaps and even a teacher, but not a prophetic preacher.

God has a way of getting us to do what we don’t want to and putting us into situations where we can only respond by moving forward and doing what is asked of us. Perhaps one of the greatest gifts I have given to Southminster is that I have never sought to be the Senior Pastor but have always made myself available to provide support in whatever way needed. And I will also say, this relationship of ours would not be possible in many if not most churches. I tell folks all the time that Southminster is a unique place in so many ways—one way is that there is a clear sense of professional boundaries—when Scott arrives next week—I have no doubt that I will successfully transition back to Associate Pastor serving in a supportive role—and there will be no power struggle or blurred lines of authority. That has everything to do with who you are as a congregation, and who I am as a leader, and who Scott is as a seasoned Senior Pastor. Not many places like this!

Many of you might remember me sharing the story of how I came to Southminster. Five years before I came here in 2006, I completely left the church and pastoral ministry. Forever, in my mind. I was done! I wanted nothing to do with the close-minded hypocritical self serving bureaucratic Presbyterian church. I realized that God’s call on my life would be best served in the real world of social work and later teaching. And I remember coming to Southminster seeking to fill a void in my life, convinced that I would never tell anyone that I was an ordained pastor. I would just be a fly on the wall—sitting in the back row with Kathy, minding our own business. But as you know, that didn’t last long. God had different plans.

Most importantly, I found here a place of true friendship. A place where I could be myself with all my theological questions and doubts and openness and not be judged. A place where everyone was invited to the table. A place with friends who care deeply about each other and the world around us. I just hope that I have been and will continue to be a friend to you and this community in the way that Henri Nouwen so eloquently describes:

“The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

As an ordained minister, all I really know is that my life has been forever changed by the story of “the man for others” as Albert Schweitzer called him. Jesus, the spellbinding teacher who caught the imagination of simple peasants and rich folks alike and welcomed them all into his circle; the powerful healer who reached out to the most feared outcasts; the wily rabbi who

confounded the wise; the radical reformer who died because he loved his people and believed with his whole life that his mission was to set them free. That is all I know!

Let me share a story that has long been meaningful to me. I have shared it before a time or two. A Rabbi asked a man how he could tell when the night was over and a new day had begun. The man replied, “When you look into the East and can distinguish a sheep from a goat, then you know the night is over and the day has begun.” Then the man then asked the Rabbi the same question: “How can you tell that the night was over and the day had begun?” The Rabbi thought for a while and said, “When you look into the East and see the face of a woman and can say ‘she is my sister,’ and when you can look into the East and see the face of a man and say, ‘he is my brother,’ then you know that the light of a new day has come.”

Friends who care. Friends who care don’t focus on the differences between sheep and goats. Friends who care are willing to cross boundaries and reach out across differences to find our common humanity. Friends who say “she is my sister” and “he is my brother”, and are courageous enough to usher in a new day that challenges social norms of ingroups vs. outgroups and unjust systems of division. Friends who care. Friends who travel the wilderness of pastoral transition and even a pandemic together. but never cease to wave the banner of justice for all to see. Friends who don’t have all the answers but are united by love.

As Scripture tells us: God is love—and since we are god in the flesh—we are love—you are love—I am love—all of us liberated by love and called to liberate others by that same love. Friends who care.

I close with the words of Maya Angelou:

We, unaccustomed to courage
Exiles from delight
Live coiled in shells of loneliness
Until love leaves its high holy temple
And comes into our sight
To liberate us into life.
To liberate us into life.
We are weaned from our timidity....
We dare be brave
And suddenly we see
That love costs all we are
And will ever be.
Yet it is only love
Which sets us free.

Amen.