

FINAL ADDRESS
June 11, 2017
Trinity Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Thank you, choir. And thank you Mary Ellen, Brandon, Doug, Ethel, Bill, Kari, Ernest, Eli, Ed and Wanda. My heart is full. I don't know how much more I can take!

In case you hadn't heard, no one becomes who they are alone. It takes innumerable others to call forth and shape the person we are and will become. Some we know; most we don't. I'd like to acknowledge a few that I know.

I have been shaped by the work of many theologians. But none have influenced my approach to ministry (or got me in more trouble!) than Dr. Douglas Ottati. It was from Doug that I stole two mantras: *Life is hard, but grace abounds*. And this: *our true vocation is to be in true communion with the One and true community with All*. Those handful of words have touched the hearts of thousands. Thank you, Doug.

My father was a brakeman on the P&LE railroad. My mother was a shoe clerk in the Strouss-Hirshberg department store. They worked extra jobs and hours so I could go to college.

My father taught me that no matter your job, do it well and then some. He also taught me that everybody makes mistakes. It's what you do next that matters.

My mother taught me that a good name is to be chosen above riches and that education is a good thing as long as you don't let it go to your head.

Needless to say: without them I would not be here or be the person I became.

I first stood here in May of 1975 as a temporary supply preacher. A few from that congregation are still around. Those of you who preceded me here please stand. For the willingness of these—and those they represent from the congregation of 1975—to take a chance on me, please join me in a salute.

I have been blessed by the support of several Presbyterian ministers. Em Lowe, Jim Macdonell, Patricia Donohoe, and Don Allen. Without their guidance I would have gone off the rails way more often. Please join me in showing gratitude for their assistance.

I must also thank Vivian Headings and her late husband Verle whom I met by chance in Washington DC in November 1974 when I was like a rolling stone with no direction home. I learned of their vision to establish a study retreat center in the mountains near Harpers Ferry. The next day I decided to return to my parents' home in Youngstown for Thanksgiving by a meandering way to check out that intriguing site.

I crossed the Potomac and Shenandoah into West Virginia for the first time. And on a whim, with no place to call home at that time, I rented a room in a farmhouse on old route 340, took a job pruning apple trees at Walnut Hill Orchards for \$1.25 an hour not knowing it would ever lead to this. Thank you, Vivian and Verle.

I also want to express my gratitude to Garrison Keillor. Don't look around. He's not here. I forgot to invite him.

In 1986, I was a commissioner to the Presbyterian General Assembly in Minneapolis and attended a Saturday night performance of "A Prairie Home Company" in the Fitzgerald Theater. I was enthralled. It was entertaining but more than that it was engaging and somehow holy and healing.

That experience inspired me to start the "Rumsey Radio Hour" but more importantly it helped me see that our Sunday morning experience in this place should never be any less professional and engaging than "A Prairie Home Companion." And so, thanks to Mr. Keillor for showing me a way to touch hearts and souls through music, poetry and stories creatively woven together.

And now finally the last one who should have been the first one since she is first in my heart. For more than 40 years Paula has been not only my beloved and loving wife, she has been my truest and most stalwart friend.

Paula, if not for you I'd still be wandering in the darkness. If not for you, I never would have become who I am. If not for you, I would not be here today.

Please join me in a salute to the loveliest woman in the world.

Over these 42 years I have stood and spoken in this place more than 5,000 times. Had I known there'd be a last time as hard as this, I never would have started. But here goes.

This church was established by an immigrant community of Scots Irish in 1743 before there was a town known as Shepherdstown and before there was a country known as the United States of America. Those Scots Irish settled among the English. You'd think the Church of England would have established itself first considering Thomas Shepherd was English, but no it was the Presbyterians.

It's not known why the Presbyterian Church got established before the Church of England. But I can guess. Any time the Scots or the Irish or any hybrid of them found themselves surrounded by the English, they got organized real fast and started praying.

Our Presbyterian predecessors were a feisty and fearsome lot. They came to America with a grudge against King George and a chip on their shoulder the size of his crown. They despised tyranny in all its forms. It was in their blood, in their faith and in their slogan: *resistance to tyrants is obedience to God*.

No wonder Presbyterians were in the vanguard of armed rebellion. Many a Presbyterian minister carried a musket into the pulpit just in case the bell of freedom rang out.

Our Presbyterian predecessors were fighters against injustice, oppression and inequality. That spirit is still in this place. We've dropped the muskets but we've kept the fighting spirit. Love and non-violent resistance are now our preferred weapons.

This Meeting House was built in 1836, 25 years before the Civil War. In September of 1862 in the wake of the Battle of Antietam, this space was

converted into a hospital for the wounded and dying sons of our nation. Many were laid upon the floors beneath this carpet and tenderly nursed.

Some recovered. Others died. I don't know but I can guess: many died with a prayer for the peace and healing of our nation upon their lips.

Our predecessors practiced hospitality. That spirit is still here. Together we have cultivated that spirit of welcome for any and all who are wounded or dying in one way or another.

In 1985 a small group gathered here each Sunday evening in Lent to learn about and pray for the plight of Central America refugees fleeing violence in their countries. Refugees were pouring across our southern border.

Our prayers led us to ask: *what can we do?* And that led to a phone call to the minister of a Presbyterian Church in Laredo, Texas. He told us of a Guatemalan woman and her four-year-old son held in detention for deportation.

He had met them during his weekly visits. Could your church post bail for them, he asked, and resettle them in your community. Yes, we could and we did.

Maria and Eddy arrived. This parish of about 50 souls rallied round them and facilitated their naturalization as citizens. Today Maria is an attendant at Canterbury. Eddy graduated from Shepherd and works for Comcast.

Our predecessors practiced hospitality. That spirit is still here.

Forty years ago the Presbyterian Church banned gays and lesbians from ordination to the offices of deacon, elder and minister. But 16 years ago this congregation exercised its right to elect from its membership a certain woman to the office of deacon, a woman who was not only an out and out lesbian but proud and grateful for a 25 year long partnership with the love of her life.

The council of Elders met with her and considered her fit to serve this church as a deacon. However, the constitutional ban loomed. How could we ordain a most worthy candidate without violating the constitution of the church?

I asked each Elder to indicate which way they were leaning and why so we could learn from each other. Some leaned for; some leaned against. It would be a close vote. We recessed for 20 minutes so each could have time to think and pray through their decision.

After we reconvened, I ask each to state their vote for or against. One by one each did. For. For. For. For. And so it went. It was unanimous.

Our most conservative elder offered this: I know the Presbyterian Church's constitution has that line about banning gays and lesbians. But there's a whole lot more in that constitution and the Bible that clearly says: *all are welcome*.

I don't often weep. But I did that night. We proudly ordained Sally to the office of deacon the following Sunday.

Several years later that ban was removed and the Presbyterian church quickly went on to redefine marriage from "between a man and a woman" to "between two persons" and soon thereafter I officiated a same sex wedding in this Meeting

House and then another and another and another. It was the dawning of a new day.

In the name and in the spirit of Jesus, we choose welcome.

And maybe that's why when LGBT persons were roundly condemned and tormented by certain Christian churches, we invited the LGBT community near and far to gather in this room and stand on these hallowed floors to be affirmed and celebrated as beloved children of God.

In the name and in the spirit of Jesus, we choose welcome.

And maybe that's why when certain Christians were spewing out hatred against Muslims and threatening to publicly burn the Koran we invited our Muslim neighbors to join us here in a night of solidarity, celebration and prayer. The imam and a hundred of his congregants stood in this room and on this floor and we held hands.

In the name and in the spirit of Jesus, we choose welcome.

One night, in my second year here when the church council assembled for its monthly meeting, the clerk of the Session, Clarence Wright, who was also mayor of the town, said he had received a letter from a long-time member. He unfolded the letter and read it. It said: *"The Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church used to be a really nice church. But now anybody can go there."*

Oh, oh. Here it comes, I thought. I'm done.

Clarence held the letter for a while, folded it, put it in his coat pocket and said: "We'll take that as a compliment. Now let's move on with the agenda."

And that's when I fell madly in love with Bones Wright, his town and this church.

I have not forgotten for a minute that when I was lost and broken this church and this town welcomed me and made something of me I could not have made of myself alone. Others saw more in me than I saw in myself. I have not forgotten that and I have tried to repay that favor ever since.

I am so very, very proud to have been part of this awesome church for 42 years. And I know you will make me proud in my retirement. It takes a congregation to raise a pastor and I think you've done a pretty good job and will do the same for the one who succeeds me.

I can't imagine this church without me. And I can't imagine me without this church. But beginning tomorrow we will wake up and start imagining a new day.

Thank you for letting me serve and love you all these years. And thank you for loving and caring for Paula and me and our children in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and want throughout all our years together. You have been faithful to the way of love and I know you will keep on keeping on.

The Good Shepherd will lead you into green pastures and anoint your wounds with the oil of grace. The Good Shepherd will walk with you through every dark

valley. Be not afraid. Be brave. For goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life.

Let your little light keep shining. And keep building a place where love can dwell and all can safely live.

Thank you.