

It can seem as if we have been abandoned, when the person who has stepped up in a moment of crisis to heal us and restore us to some semblance of sanity is called to move on.

How could you leave us! we might cry out. We still need you. What will we do without you?

We can almost hear Simon and Andrew and James and John crying out these very words from the pages of Mark's Gospel as they *hunt* for Jesus while he prays in the wilderness. Where have you gone, Jesus? they are shouting into the hinterlands.

COME BACK!! Come back ...

We can sympathize with their urgency, to be sure, as those who are sick and struggling - which indeed includes *the whole city* - pile up at the door. You were just getting started, Jesus, we can hear Simon say. There is far more to do. Just look around!

To which Jesus replies, *Indeed!* There is far more to do. It is time to move on ...

This is where our beloved Debbie Romano, Deacon Moderator extraordinaire, has found herself, as she transfers from part-time studies at Wesley Theological Seminary to full-time studies at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in pursuit of more thorough training for ministry of Word and Sacrament in the larger church. She will begin her supervised ministry practicum at another congregation this Fall and complete Clinical Pastoral Education in a chaplaincy setting in the following year. And then she will move on ... wherever the Spirit calls her to serve as Pastor.

It is a joyous transition, on the one hand, full of celebration and conviction that God is doing a *good* thing by equipping and empowering this faithful servant to finally follow a calling that has been with her since adolescence. On the other hand, it hurts to let her go, not just because we will miss everything she *does* - which is enormous! - but because we will miss *her*.

Fortunately, for us, in contrast to Jesus, Debbie's call to serve elsewhere is not *immediate*. She will still be with us, even as her focus will shift. She will not leave a vacuum in her wake but rather gradually pass the torch of her various roles and responsibilities to those who step up in response to *their* call to serve.

Jen Jones, for example, has just yesterday been elected by her peers to serve as Deacon Moderator, bringing her own unique gifts and calling to this role. A potential new Worship Committee chairperson is lingering in the background discerning if this might be the right fit for this moment in that person's journey. A new PrayerNet Coordinator will be named in the coming months. And slowly but surely, the call to serve will carry on, not replacing Debbie's call to serve, but rather sustaining it for generations to come.

Which is really what Jesus is trying to do, as he heals Simon's mother-in-law, and the crowds who gather at her door, and those in the neighboring market towns of Capernaum, and all of us who gather these millennia later throughout the world.

His point is not and never was about how much we need *him* in order to be healed. His point has always been about the unfolding reign of God that is *at hand* and the healing of the Spirit that allows us to live into that reign, even as we wait for it in its fullness.

This is why Simon's mother-in-law immediately begins to serve her household as soon as she is healed by Jesus. Not because of ancient misguided patriarchal notions of *a woman's place*. But because she has been equipped and empowered as a eucharistic minister in the movement's very first house church.

The whole point of the call to serve, it turns out, is to claim, as Jesus intended, the reign of God *is in our very hands!* The teaching, the preaching, the deaconing, the governing. All we need is a spark to light the fire to give us the courage to keep going.

Debbie Romano's call to serve has been that spark. It is not hyperbole to say that SPC would not have made it through COVID without her. I would not have made it through COVID without her.

And now her call to serve is leading her onward. To which we can all say, Alleluia! And well done, good and faithful servant. May you transition - gradually, not immediately! - into the joy God is preparing for you and those you will serve as Pastor.

And may the rest of us, as well, be caught up in a continual call to serve.