

Joshua 24:14-18
Acts 20:31-38

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 16, 2010

SERVANTHOOD

But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. *Joshua 24:15c*

And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. *Acts 20:32*

I find today's reading from Acts to be one of the most moving passages in the Bible. The Apostle Paul is speaking to the elders of the church in Ephesus, and he knows it is for the last time. He is on his way to Jerusalem, as his Lord and Savior did, perhaps thirty years before him. For each of them, Jerusalem would be the beginning of the end; Jesus to his arrest, three trials, three declarations from governing authority of his innocence, and finally his execution. Paul to his arrest, three trials, three declarations from governing authority of his innocence, and finally his execution; though for him, in Rome.

Paul, like his Master, did not consider his life his own. Decades before, after his encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road, he gave his life away to God, and now, in this last encounter with his beloved friends, he urges the same to them, saying what we now say to you, Sum, "And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified." Our dear friend and cherished brother in Christ, Sum, we also give you up to God.

This is not a new thing for you, Sum. After a terrible dark night of the soul and bloodshed in your beloved homeland of Burma, at sixteen you left the land of your birth, and loved ones, for England and, ultimately, America, carrying with you that most portable and enduring of treasures, your faith in God. So in a short while we also give you and Anna up to God, full in the confidence that matches your own faith, that wherever God leads you both, together you will be a great blessing in Jesus' name, just as you have been to us.

When you first turned up in our pews two years ago, we had no idea that you were scoping us out, then you asked for a conversation with me about the possibility of an internship, saying, in your own words, what Paul spoke to the elders at Ephesus, "I coveted no one's gold or silver or clothing, You know for

yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself” (*Acts 20:34*). A situation which we were more than eager to remedy the second year. And in all things you continued to be our teacher. Again I choose Paul’s words: “In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of our Lord Jesus, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ” (*20.35*) No matter what you did among us, you always showed us your best self: whether playing your guitar and teaching songs to the children at the Advent Festival, or on a mission trip with our youth, or teaching adults the Gospel of Mark for ten weeks, or leading worship and memorizing the scriptures instead of reading them!, or accompanying me on visitation, or preaching, or sharing your inimitable good humor, or quietly exercising your wonderful capacity to recall names. You have been a beautiful embodiment of servanthood, after the manner of Christ Jesus, and we will “thank God in all remembrance of you.” (*Philippians 1:3*, RSV)

Albert Schweitzer once said, “One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.” Sum, you are evidence of that truth. I remember, among our many Wednesday conversations, you telling me about the morning you left Burma (how you and your people disliked the name Myanmar, the name the dictatorship of generals use). You spoke of the indelible image of the dead bodies, many of young people, in the street by your home on the morning you left your homeland. And how you made a pact with yourself and God, that you would choose in all things thereafter to think and act positively. You made a decision how to be, after the manner of Christ, and have stuck to it with extraordinary faithfulness. And so you became our teacher.

For many years we had on our refrigerator at home a line from Martin Luther. It read, “I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God’s hands, that I still possess.” Here is the very soul of servanthood, to claim nothing for ourselves, rather to embrace everything we are given as a gift from God that we simply hold in trust. As Luther saw in Christ, rather than seeking to possess, to use what we are given to build up others, becomes a gift of inestimable proportions. You have been such a gift to us. And now, as with Paul leaving Ephesus, we must let you go, with many embraces, even tears, thankful for all you have been to us, grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. But before that departure, they would pray together. And I can think of no more fitting prayer than the one offered by Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians.

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart

enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe. (*Ephesians 1:17-19*)

And this from Jesus in Mathew, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”
Amen.