

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

September 17, 2019

One of the scriptures I sometimes read at a funeral service has to do with “passing the torch.” I use it to encourage the spouse and children of the resurrected one to keep the faith and to complete the race. The words are the opening verses of the book of Joshua:

*After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: “**Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. . . . As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.***



*“**Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them. “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go”** (Joshua 1:1-9).*

Rebecca chose a bulletin cover based on this passage for last Sunday's worship, and that could not have been more appropriate. For some of you who read this, this will be your first awareness that I told our congregation over the weekend that I plan to retire on 31 December 2020, about fifteen months from now.

The attached letter offers more detail and perspective on this decision, and I want to record here the comments that I made about this on Sunday morning. I'd like to point out first of all what is NOT happening, and then what IS happening. . . .

What's NOT Happening. First of all, it's important for you to know that **there is no crisis** . . . of any sort. I've made this decision over a period a months in response to my changing health situation, but there is no crisis. **I'm not dying.** I may not even prove to be “really sick.” But I want to care for my sweetheart and my beloved congregation as best I can, given what I know today.

It's also important to point out that **I'm not discouraged**, and **I'm not “burned out.”** I continue to have an absolutely wonderful time every single day in the glad opportunity I have to serve as your pastor!

At the same time, the events of the last year have been clear reminders that **I'm not going to live forever in the physical body I currently inhabit** . . . though I *will* live forever. I am not afraid of death. Our Lord Jesus has conquered that “last enemy,” and for those who are in Him, death is our Final Healing. **I am not afraid.**

It's also important for you to know that my choosing to retire on this timetable **has not been Jill's idea.** She has paid a higher cost than you will ever know in order to make it

possible for me to be your pastor; but she hasn't begrudged that cost. She has always been—and she continues to be—a glad partner in ministry, and I am blessed beyond words. But I am in debt to her, and it is time to begin to repay that debt as I am able.

So Here's What IS Happening: In the past year I have had surgery and chemotherapy for colon **cancer**. I will have surgery two weeks from today to repair an incisional hernia from that prior surgery. That will be my fourth **hospitalization** since January. And tests so far seem to indicate that I may also have prostate **cancer**. We won't know for sure about that for a while yet.

I love you just as much today as I did before I wrote the letter that follows, and just as much as I did before you read it.

We have an awesome staff, and Andrew, Jenetha and Rebecca are just as awesome today as they were last week. They are an absolute delight!

We have strong leadership in Barbara, our Moderator for 2019, in Calvin, our Moderator for 2020, and in Nancy, our Moderator for 2021. We have healthy and wise leadership at every level of congregational life.

Giving is strong. Our **mission involvements** are expanding. Our **ministries** in our neighborhood are growing broader and deeper.

Our **internal relationships** are strong and healthy. We have committed to a **strategic plan** for the next several years and we will begin to implement it straightaway.

Our congregation is well-positioned for a strong and growthful future, and **God will continue to guide us just as faithfully as ever** (“*as I was with Moses . . .*”).

In making this decision, I am trying to do what I can to provide for your well-being, both now and in the future, just as I am trying to provide for Jill's.

There will be no shortage of candidates for such an amazingly wonderful place to serve!

We still have well over a year together.
Don't mope your way through it!

**God will bring us through, not “somehow,”
but TRIUMPHANTLY!**

We will be friends always.

Because I love you,

Dave

The image shows the Latin phrase "solio in gloria" written in a large, elegant, cursive script. The word "solio" is on the top line, "in" is written in a smaller font size and positioned between "solio" and "gloria", and "gloria" is on the bottom line. The ink is black and the background is white.

14 September 2019

From: Pastor Dave

To: My CBF Sisters & Brothers

Re: Charting Our Course



Dearly Beloved,

It will soon be a year since I was diagnosed with colon cancer. As you know, I have now been declared “cancer free,” and there is every reason to think that the colon cancer is “over and done with.” At the same time, there are no guarantees in such matters, and recurrences down the road would be more serious.

In addition, I will have surgery for a significant incisional hernia on October 1, and that will require some period of recuperation, hopefully brief. Beyond this, MRI scans have shown three lesions in my prostate that may be cancer. On a scale of 1-5, two are “threes,” and one is a “four,” meaning that it is probably malignant.

I will have a biopsy before long to determine the actual situation. Prostate cancer is usually slow-growing, such that I would “die with it and not of it”; but some prostate cancer is aggressive, and aggressive treatment will be needed should that be my situation.

While there is no telling at this point how all this will develop, I’ve already been unable to give my fullest energies to the church for nearly five months this year, and it would be a lot to ask of the congregation to put up with the other treatments that may be ahead.

My friends, I continue to delight each and every day at the joyful opportunity I have to serve as your pastor. I agree with Homer Carter’s evaluation that “I wish every church I’ve served had been like CBF!” At the same time, I don’t want to become a drag on the strong forward momentum we have at the moment.

Therefore, I am writing to tell you that, assuming reasonable health—which is no longer a given—my plan is to serve as your pastor through the end of 2020 and to retire on 12.31.20 after completing nine years with you.

There are two compelling reasons for this timing: (1) my health and energy level are declining, and CBF needs a leader who can move “full speed ahead”; and (2), Jill has lived apart from me for nearly eight years (it will be nine years by that time) so that I could serve CBF, and I owe it to her to give back as much as I can in the years that remain to me.

While I am still able to do so, it is crucial for us to sell our condo here in Columbia, consolidate our households at Lake Holiday, and perhaps even to move to a third location as our retirement home. This is going to be a lot of work, and I just cannot leave this for Jill to do alone. Should my health become more fragile, this need for consolidation will become more urgent.

As I’ve talked this through with key leaders, one question I’ve heard more than once has been, “But I thought you were going to stay for ten years.” For those of you who might have the same question, I’d like to offer a few thoughts.

You’ll not be surprised to learn that I take promises and commitments very seriously and don’t make them easily or quickly. At the same time, other than the commitment of marriage, I’m not sure an unequivocal ten-year commitment is really possible. A lot happens in ten years.

Here’s what I think happened. I do think it is quite possible, even likely, that I made statements to the search team such as “I think I have about ten good years left,” or “I’d hope to be here about ten years.” Such hypothetical statements are very different from making a firm commitment,

but I can see how members of the search team might have perceived such statements as a commitment, viewing it as they did through the lens of trying to firm up the future.

There were several reasons for an estimated length of service of “about ten years.” My Dad retired from the government at 69, and it has always been my goal to work at least that long. (I’ll make that if I work for three more months!)

Although next spring will mark 40 years since my ordination, I’ve done a lot of other things besides pastoring during these 40 years (Navy Chaplain, professor, therapist, church staff member). Completing ten years at CBF would make 25 years as a senior pastor, which is a nice number to shoot for. Stopping at the end of nine years will only be 24, but the changes in my health situation have caused me to think differently about all this.

So, while I really do think that before too long I should be relatively healthy and functional, these several reminders of mortality have increased my sense of urgency to take care of Jill as much as I can while I can. I need to get her/us into a sustainable real estate situation so that if my health collapses, she is properly cared for. And with the prospect of a shorter life-span than might have been, I want to be with her as much as I can from this point on.

Having made this decision, the choice then became whether to announce this coming transition sooner or later—now, or late next fall. With respect to that decision, I’ve been impressed with the transition that Bet Aviv has just accomplished with Rabbi Bernstein’s retirement.

Seth had told the congregation from the beginning that he would retire on 30 June 2019, so they had eight years’ notice of that transition. Consequently, beginning in the middle of 2018, Bet Aviv began their search process, such that there were only a few days between the end of his tenure and the beginning of Rabbi Linda Joseph’s tenure as their spiritual leader.

Both Seth and the congregation knew throughout the last year that they were moving through the calendar together for the last time, and there was plenty of time for mutual blessing and leave-taking. There was also a very smooth transition of leadership that conserved the momentum of congregational life without the need for interim leadership. My hope is that something similar might take place among us.

So here’s the plan our core leaders and I would like to propose:

1. I will make shorter comments similar to this letter to the congregation tomorrow.
2. We will schedule a “fireside chat” very soon in which you and I can talk more fully about all this.
3. At some point in the very near future, our MINISTRY Team will initiate our normal process for establishing a Search Team for the position of Senior Pastor.
4. Once a Search Team has been elected, development of a Pastoral Profile with the congregation will begin, and once such preliminaries have been completed, the search process will begin even as we move through next year together.
5. If necessary, the MINISTRY Team will initiate the process to establish a Search Team for the position of Intentional Interim Pastor at some point toward the middle of next year.

Dear Ones, I continue to delight in every day God gives me as your pastor and friend. I have never had so much fun! And I want to complete my service with you in such a way that CBF’s strength and momentum are conserved and enhanced.

My prayer is that the next fifteen months will be wonderful for us all, and that God’s provision of your next under-shepherd might be accomplished with minimal stress and maximal joy!

With Much Love,

Dave