

Romans 12:1-5, 9-1, 21 ~ Luke 4:16-21

*Keep Following Jesus' Call*

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Christmas ~ Farewell Sermon ~ December 29, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Gospel Reading:*

The scripture I am about to read to you is a touchstone for me. It has shaped my spirituality and my entire ministry. And still, it continues to inspire and teach, confront and comfort me. I pray it will for you, too. I chose this scripture back in 1992 when I had to preach for the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of the Miami Valley (in Ohio) before being examined for ordination. You may recall that this is the scripture on which I preached for my candidate sermon here with you from this very pulpit on September 10, 2017. Just for fun, raise your hand (not if you remember that sermon), but raise your hand if you were here that day, or a part of FPC back in September of 2017. Now raise your hand if you were *not* here with us back then, having been called to become a part of FPC between then and now. Yes, this rich mix of longer term (we have some lifers here with us today 😊) and newer members within in our faith family is a wondrous thing.

Let's all have a listen now, as I prepare to bid you farewell and raise up Jesus' call, Jesus' mandate that he took from the prophet Isaiah. The call which he fulfilled during his days on this earth and then commissioned us to continue. May this scripture again be fulfilled in your hearing.

*Sermon*

The day you voted me in as your pastor, I titled that first sermon, "Is God's Mercy Too Wide?" This time around we didn't read the shocking *end* of the story where they tried to kill Jesus by throwing him over the cliff because they didn't like his sermon. Perhaps because right out of the box Jesus preached about God's mercy that seemed way too wide. Looking back, I credit the wideness of God's mercy to have been at work when your Pastoral Nominating Committee back in 2017, decided to take a look, then a listen, then an interview with this 60-year-old lady preacher from Ohio, California, New Jersey and Kansas (not Wisconsin). I'm sure I was *not* the original profile of the pastor you imagined. (Good thing to remember when your new PNC takes up its work seeking my successor.) But Dan Crump's committee did take a look. And the rest is history. Indeed, being open to the "maybe" is a key to the wise discernment we heard about in Paul's Letter to the Romans 12:1-2: about not being conformed to this world. That is not being conformed to how we've always done things, or what we think "has to happen," rather trusting Holy Spirit to transform our minds and hearts and lead us in unexpected directions.

Not being from here, The PNC knew they were calling a pastor who had a lot to learn about Wisconsin. I remember the last question that Dan Crump asked me at the end of our first Skype (this was before Zoom) interview, "How do you like ice fishing?" We actually had spent a week, Bob and I, with our daughters, Emily & Hannah, riding on two tandem bicycles through the state on an organized ride called "Bike Wisconsin" back in June of 2001. We started out in

Wautoma and ended in Washburn winding along two-lane backroads. And yes, we spent the night in Marshfield on the third night. Little did we know that we were camping, sleeping on the ground in our tent, in the very town where God would call me to be your pastor, sixteen years later.

Over these seven years together, I have learned a great deal about Wisconsin. For one, I had no idea about Deer Gun Season. Until I was warned that first year not to expect many folks in church the Sunday before or after Thanksgiving. Hunting, especially Deer Gun Hunting season, is central here in central Wisconsin. It's more than a sport. It's a sacred practice with certain rituals passed down by the generations. I may have started a *new* deer hunting season: Deer Car Season. If you haven't heard about Deer Car Season--you are looking at the poster child: I bagged not one but two different deer with my car, well actually with two different cars, fourteen days apart in early November.

In addition to the sacred ritual of Deer Gun hunting, I have also learned a lot about Green Bay Packer fan-dom and your much-loved Lambeau Field. It is not just a football field: this stadium is a cathedral to many. Some have even surreptitiously left ashes of loved ones there. This kind of football faith was new to me. Early in my days I learned how important it was to schedule church activities around the games, home *or* away. Even our most devoted churchgoers have their priorities. Trying to lean into and embrace this passion, mentioning the games or a player seemed like a good idea. However, I learned if there had been a loss that week, it was too soon to refer to it in the announcements or my sermon. The first time I tried it, the pain in the room was palpable. On the other hand, if there was a win, like for instance the blow out against the Saints on Monday Night football, the first shutout of the NFL season, it's never too soon to give them a shout out: Go Pack Go!

On a more serious note: I have also learned about the depth of your faith, not only in deer hunting or in the Packers, but in hearing Christ's call to turn compassion into action. To be Christ's hands and feet. Stalwart. Resilient. Moving ever forward. Even when the COVID Pandemic required us to shut down our building. Yes, our building was closed for worship or any gathering of people for over a year. But that did not mean the "church was closed." Together you and I learned new ways of being church, using technologies that were new to some of us (including me), and developed creative work arounds since it was unsafe to meet in person.

This was really hard for all of us. Especially for me as the kind of pastor who hated to cancel worship on one snowy Sunday morning. Preaching to a camera rather than to you, recording the services on Saturday morning, was a challenge. But together with your "can do" inspired spirits, we not only survived, but we also found new ways to be church and thrived in the process. Carmen led Zoom Sunday School, we hosted Vaccine clinics, we created the "Canasta Basic Gratuita" ministry to offer food to our undocumented neighbors not served by the assistance offered to the rest of us. We figured out how to do a Zoom drama for the Christmas Play and the Living Last supper, for Maundy Thursday. We even were granted permission from the presbytery to do a "virtual baptism" on Easter Sunday of 2020 (Dottie

Krohn) in which the Krohn family, at home with their baby Dottie, actually performed the sacrament while a Ruling Elder and I did our part from the empty sanctuary, by YouTube.

Thankfully, just before the Pandemic in 2019 we stepped up and committed to being a Matthew 25 church. This bold vision has guided and continues to guide how we live and move and have our being here at FPC. It has been a touchstone helping to revitalize us! Did you know that during these past seven years we have received 104 new members into our church body? And we also have several more who have become dear friends, worshipping and serving here, as well. We had 269 members when I came here and now, we have grown by God's grace and mercy to 307 members. That means more than one third of our current membership has arrived during my shift here at FPC.

Over this period of time, we have also experienced the loss of many beloved church family members who completed their life on earth during my watch. 44 of our folks have passed on to their greater glory on my watch. And we continue to miss them to this day. We can see their legacy in and among us: not only in the new generations of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren and the leadership, energy, and perspectives they contribute. But also, through gifts given in their memory: such as helping to fund our refurbished Steinway grand piano. And our "Glory to God" hymnbooks, purchased my first year here, funded by gifts from heaven.

One of our elders at our December session meeting remarked, "We put the "fun" in functionality." So true! Every Sunday, through thick and thin, our Deacons offer hospitality to all who happen to cross our threshold. With grace and peace, a bulletin, and communion packet. This doesn't just happen. It takes planning, pivoting done every Sunday with joy in their calling. During my three-month sabbatical in the summer of 2023, you learned that you could function well with or without a pastor here. In fact new projects began that summer: The Solar Panel Project was initiated, our 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration, Open church on 5<sup>th</sup> Sundays.... all happened during my sabbatical. Worship attendance that summer was also up.

That's when I started realizing maybe it was time for me to retire. Just kidding. Actually, it was my Bible. Perhaps you have noticed. It was brand new when I was at seminary back in 1990. 34 years later it has done some hard miles. Genesis has fallen out of it. And the Book of Revelation is not far behind. And how can I preach from a Bible with only 64 books? Then I noticed recently that all of my black preaching shoes were falling apart! They all have holes or scuffs or evidence of the church halls, cemeteries, hospitals, presbytery meetings, protests, and parades. Right here, I have had the honor and joy of performing 33 baptisms. That's 33 parades through these pews. Glory, Hallelujah.

As Anne Lamott, one of my spiritual mentors, author and former congregant in the church where I interned in Marin City has written: "We are bread to be served to the poor and the hungry, and sometimes it is we who need the bread. To give it or receive, we move out of our shells and personas, scooching toward the real. The real is hard, time-consuming and badly lit. I much prefer fantasy. And by the same token, change is hard... We like breakthroughs, while

the changes toward evolution and greater humanity are incremental. We don't want to grow. It hurts. And yet we do, bravely and scared, bit by bit... The Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote, "Anyone who moves forward even a little, is like Jesus walking on water." <sup>i</sup> I included this quote in my candidate sermon to you in 2017 and ended it with this challenge: "Are you ready to move forward... even a little? Let's ask Jesus what we can do here, scooching toward the *real* Good News. Let's walk on water, together." And, beloved community, looking over these seven years that God has given us together, I can say: you did! And are.

Three years ago, we scooched toward the real when we decided to change our approach to the important work of confirmation class. You may have heard the joke about the church that had bats in their belfry that they could not rid themselves of. They tried everything they could think of to deter them. Not until their Session realized all they had to do was to confirm them, and they would be gone. Problem solved. Funny and sad, but kind of true. Then along came a radically new approach to confirmation particularly geared to a Matthew 25 church, like us. We jumped out of our traditional confirmation boat and onto something new, untried. Calling youth to consider how they could change the world as Jesus calls us to. Just this week, my heart smiled when I spotted one of the posters in the Marshfield public library, still there 3 years later, from the project of our first class. These posters say, "You are not alone" and provide information for local hotlines and support groups, mental health resources in places where folks who feel alone or are in trouble might see them. That class was concerned about the mental health of their friends. This year's confirmation class has yet to discern its project. To them and their mentors I say: *Keep following Jesus' call.*

Or like the day that our Christian Education Coordinator, Carmen Lawler, took some steps out on the water in search of a family that had come to worship at FPC for the very first time that August morning. She noticed they had some children the right age for our Vacation Bible School that was starting the next week. She didn't have an exact address but that did not deter her from trying to find and invite them. She only knew the name of the street they lived on and thought it only a few blocks long. She decided just to go to that neighborhood and hoped she would get lucky. So, she knocked on the door of one home on this block, thinking a neighbor could help her pinpoint where they lived. A man answered and she explained her purpose. After dispelling her hope of finding them because this street was actually miles long on the other side of town; he asked her, "What church did you say you were from?" After she said, "First Presbyterian Church," he gave her a sideways look and replied, "Oh yeah, I've heard about that church...You know, you can't just accept *anyone* into your church. That's *not* how it works." I say to you, Beloved Community: *Keep following Jesus' call.*

- We are also known as the "Green Church." *Before* we put in our Solar Panels. *Before* we returned a small portion of our land back to its natural Prairie state. Steady and evolving in our commitment to God's beautiful earth. *Keep following Jesus' call*, to save the one planet he came to save.
- It took about five years, but now we have also become the church that hosts the Mexican Mobile Consulate bringing right into our neighborhood critical services that our

undocumented neighbors would have to travel to Milwaukee to obtain, otherwise. *Keep following Jesus' call.*

- We didn't know we were the Parish Medical Equipment Loan Closet Church, until lending a wheelchair here and a walker there has grown steadily into a vital ministry on which our entire Marshfield community depends. Hundreds of pieces of equipment, loaned for free to anyone who has the need. And they usually need it that day! Again and again, Nadene Lautenschlager would be amazed at how just the piece that someone needed that afternoon, had been returned that morning. *Keep following Jesus' call.*

You have exceeded all expectations, taken my challenge from that first day and truly walked on water in service to the Lord, look ahead I have to ask. As you look forward, I have this challenge I must leave you with: Is there a gift in you that you have been neglecting, ignoring, or dismissing? Ask yourself the question that God asked Moses in Exodus 4:2 when Moses was full of doubts and what ifs about this hard thing that God had called him to do. God asked Moses, "What is that in your hand?" To which Moses replied, "A staff." then God showed Moses the extraordinary power this staff could wield in service to God's call. What ordinary thing do you have in your hand? Perhaps you are being called to offer it in a new way to the Lord today. God's redeeming work to be done, with the tools are already in your hands.

"What is that in your hand?" This question is one God asks each of us. But also to you, y'all, as the FPC community. There are untapped gifts within you, beloved community, gifts that will emerge in your transition time, with the leadership of your Interim Pastor, and then your installed pastor. I am excited to see what God will do through you in the coming years. Healing work, transformative work, for people who are hurting, for our earth that is in critical condition. Let the passage from Romans 12 be your guide in the months ahead. And above all, trust in the slow work of God. As Teilhard de Chardin has written:

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.*

*We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.*

*We should like to skip the intermediate stages.*

*We are impatient on the way to something unknown, something new.*

*Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be.*

*Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you,*

*And accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.<sup>ii</sup>*

And see how God is leading you, hear how Jesus is calling you, step by step, into the future with hope. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Anne Lamott, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, (Riverhead Books: New York, NY, 2017), pp. 135-136.

<sup>ii</sup>From "Patient Trust" by Teilhard de Chardin, <https://www.chausa.org/prayers/cha-prayer-library/prayer/patient-trust-by-pierre-teilhard-de-chardin>