

Loving and Leaving

by Rev. Sean Parker Dennison, Interim Minister

Delivered at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton on June 16, 2002

Well, it has finally arrived...the time for my last sermon as your interim minister. We all knew, from the very beginning, that this day would come. All those newsletter articles under the title "Temporarily Yours" were reminders for you, the congregation, and me, the minister, that our time together was intentionally limited.

It is, in fact, part of the job of the interim minister to be intentionally temporary. We come to congregations with a job to do. That job is to help guide and direct the congregation in an intentional process of change. My emphasis over the past two years has been on shifting this congregation's culture. I have tried to ask good questions like, "But *why* has it always been done this way?" and "What makes this church matter to people?" and let those questions help guide the Board and other church leaders as they evaluated the health of the church. I've tried to lead from a place of letting go—knowing that this is not **my** congregation and that the answers had to come from you and be implemented by you if the church was to thrive.

It was important that I not get attached to the answers. You had to discover your answers and learn to articulate who and what this congregation wants to be. You had to have some time to rest, and then to dig in and reconnect with what is important to you. In some ways, my job was to stay out of your way. Interim ministers are guides through a short-term but important process of assessment and change. If I've done my job well, the congregation is no longer Bob Green's church or Nancee Campbell's church...but it isn't Sean Dennison's church either. It is **your** church—with your unique history and your vision of the future ahead of you.

Months ago, I named this sermon *Loving and Leaving* as another reminder. In the same way that any minister's first sermon must be a "hello", this one needs to be a "good-bye." Today is my last Sunday with you. Our relationship is changing. This is the last sermon I'll give from this pulpit, and most likely, the last time I will see many of you for awhile. And because I've come to honor and value our relationship, I cannot leave without saying "Good-bye."

To tell the truth, I am not so good at saying good-bye. I'm the kind of person who would rather slip away without making a fuss. You know, the one who tells you they are leaving on Wednesday and then sneaks away on Tuesday night, with a casual wave and a "See ya later." But though it's not easy, I know that I owe you—no, I owe *us* something better than that.

I owe us all a good good-bye. That means an honest good-bye. I am leaving. We are parting ways. I will no longer be your minister. As wonderful as our time together has been, it is ending.

One of the things I have come to love most about ministry is having the privilege of being the one that reminds you of all the important work you do. It has been a joy to witness the incredible amount you have accomplished these past two years, and to reflect upon the profound difference you have made in my life, in each other's lives, and in the world. You have taught me a lot and made me a better minister.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, *"The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life passed through the fire of thought."* What Emerson did not say, and what I think needs to be recognized and spoken, is that the true minister is worth very little without a congregation willing to receive that life. You have trusted me in a deep and profound way, and that trust has made me a better minister.

And that incredible gift leads me directly to the next lesson I've learned while I've been with you. This lesson is so simple it can be summed up in two familiar words. "Thank you." Those two words are perhaps the most valuable tool of ministry I have learned. I wish I had time to thank each of you right now for the incredible gifts you have given me. It wouldn't be hard for me to do right here and right now—just start up here in the front row and name something about each one of you that I am grateful for. The truth is, I am overwhelmed with gratitude.

As a poet and a preacher, I am frustrated that there are no words to explain how thankful I am for my time as a part of this community, for your willingness to embrace me as your minister, for your help in discovering how precious this work is.

Over the past two years I have seen you begin to open and come to understand how important the work of liberal religion is. I have seen you step up and take responsibility for leading this congregation. I have seen you insist on real, committed, loving ministerial leadership. I have seen you begin to be the congregation you hope to be.

I hope you will be able to hear in these two simple words the depth of my gratitude: Thank you. You have let me be a part of you and to challenge you to change, to grow, to reconnect to whatever it is that brought you here and keeps you here. You have let me be your minister and that is the most precious gift you could have given me. Thank you.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote:

"To live in this world you must be able to do three things: To love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

This is the lesson of saying "Good-bye." Together we have learned to love, to hold what is important to our bones, to recognize our interdependence. And now it is time for letting go. This is, perhaps, the hardest lesson that human beings must learn. And it is one of the hardest tasks of ministry.

At General Assembly the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed gave the lecture in Berry Street. This is a lecture (really a sermon) by a minister to other ministers. It is an honor and an opportunity to speak to the real issues of ministry. Mark chose to preach about saying good-bye.

In his sermon, he talked a lot about ministers as human beings with a very human difficulty letting go of the congregations we have served and into which we have poured our hearts. He quoted a line of poetry that has burned itself into me, both as a comfort and a challenge:

"You are not the water. You are only the wave." he said. *"You are not the water. You are only the wave."*

These simple words have been working on my soul, and they are the reason I did not sneak out of here yesterday, leaving you a note that said, "See you later." I am here to say a good good-bye, to acknowledge that the time has come and to let you go.

My time here is over. Like the wave, I have washed over you, perhaps changing things a bit, perhaps leaving a mark or two in the sand. I have had a beautiful time here with you and I am sad to leave, but I know it is time. Just behind me is another wave, with work to do and lessons to learn. And behind her is another.

I am not the water, I am the wave passing through. Each wave is precious, but each one must pass. I say good-bye and let go in order to make room for Joy, your next minister, and the new gifts and blessings her ministry will bring. I am not the water, I am a wave. The water is deep within you, deep within this congregation and your relationships with each other and your voice in the larger world. I am a wave and it is my job to move on, to make room for what is next.

And as for me, there will be another shore—different from this one, and far away—but also beautiful. I will miss you. It's hard to leave, and sad. But just as I knew coming here was the right thing to do, I know moving on is the next thing I must do. We must let go of each other and give in to the surging beauty of the tide. We must say good-bye. And our good-bye must be real, with a real ending.

One of the hardest things to do, but also one of the healthiest, is to really let each other go. As a minister, I have agreed to a set of ethical guidelines that make this letting go very clear. When I leave a congregation, I give my word to never interfere in the ministry of that congregation. It is my job to really let go—to leave in body and spirit—in order to allow a new ministry to take root and grow here. There is also a recommendation—not a rule, but a recommendation that has emerged from the experience of the hundreds of ministers before me who have done this—that I limit contact with the congregation for three years.

Three years of limited contact is hard. It is a real letting go. It forces us all to really say good-bye. We will see each other again, but when we do, it will be different. Someone else will be your minister and I will be someone else's minister. We will still be fond of one another, still have high hopes and wonderful wishes to give one another, but our lives will not touch in the same way they do now. And that will be okay. We will have done some of the hardest and most important work that human beings can do—we will have said a good good-bye. We will have overcome our fear, our discomfort, and our grief and wished one another well. We will know that we recognized when the time came to let go and let go.

When I first began my ministry with you, I was already aware of the need to let go. I asked my mentor, Rev. Marge Keip, who is one of our best interim ministers, how to keep enough distance from the congregation that it didn't hurt too much to leave. She looked at me and said, "Sean, as hard as it seems, you have to go ahead and love them. Love them fiercely and give them your best ministry. And then, leave and leave well. It's okay to love 'em and leave 'em. That is what interim ministry is all about."

She was right. I have had a wonderful time loving and learning with you. I take much with me as I go. Learning, loving, and now leaving, I am blessed. May the waves that come break over you gently and with grace. May they refresh you and stir you on to great things. May you know the comfort of deep waters. Thank you for all you have given me. I will miss you. Good-bye.

Amen, Ashé, and Blessed be.

This page is copyright © 2002, Sean Parker Dennison; Commercial Duplication Prohibited. Non-commercial reproduction with attribution is permitted; prior notice would be appreciated - contact Rev. Parker Dennison with particulars.