

In Every End, There Is Also a New Beginning: Thank You! Philippians 1:3–11

Time Really Flies

Next Sunday, we will have a joint worship service, so today is, in a real sense, my last Sunday to share the Word with you here at Asbury. It may sound like a cliché, but time really does fly. At the beginning of April, when my new appointment was announced, I said to you, “We still have two months left, so let us not make today the last day.” But somehow, it is already June. And now, today has come.

As I prepared this message, I spent time looking back over the past seven years. And honestly, I can only say this: my seven years at Asbury UMC have been a gift from God to me and to my family. When I thought about what to preach for my last sermon at Asbury, I could not think of any Scripture other than Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

Unlike some of Paul’s other letters, Philippians is full of gratitude, joy, affection, and thanksgiving. Paul planted the seed of the gospel in Philippi during his second missionary journey. That seed grew into the first Christian church in Europe. When Paul first came to Philippi, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he did not have any personal connection to that city. He did not know anyone there. He was a stranger.

But then he met Lydia. Lydia became a faithful ministry partner and supporter of Paul’s mission. She welcomed Paul, a complete stranger, and her hospitality became the seedbed for the church in Philippi. Later, the Philippian church became one of Paul’s most faithful supporters, both spiritually and financially.

That is why Paul writes, “Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart.” After serving here at Asbury, I understand Paul’s heart a little better.

When I received the phone call that I would be appointed to Asbury UMC, Juhee and I felt that God was leading us into a new chapter of our lives. So we accepted the calling. Of course, beginning a new journey is exciting. But it can also make you anxious. And I had heard that Asbury had gone through a difficult time with one of its former pastors, who was also Korean. So, to be honest, I was a little nervous when I first met the SPRC members. I wondered, “Maybe some people were frustrated when they heard from the Conference that their new pastor would be Korean again.”

But from our very first meeting, that anxiety began to melt away. I still remember Andrea Dunn asking me an unexpected question: “What book have you read recently?” I was a little startled, and I had to quickly search my memory for what I had been reading! But all of you welcomed us with such warm hearts.

I still remember receiving a gift certificate for Governor Francis Inn from Diane Newman-goins. That small gift was more than a gift certificate. It was a sign of welcome. Also, it was one of my first lessons about Rhode Island: you love your local restaurants, and you are proud of them! Over time, I also learned why people celebrate Gaspee Days by burning a boat. Slowly, Asbury and this community became my community.

When I first came to Rhode Island, I was a stranger in a foreign land, far away from my own family. But through you, God blessed Juhee and me with a new family in Christ. Like Lydia, you welcomed us. You embraced Juhee and me as part of your family. You supported our ministry. Every Sunday, I received warm hugs from you. I heard encouraging words from you.

After only one month of ministry here, I was no longer worried about my English. Why? Because I knew your love for your pastor, and your desire to hear God's Word, covered my linguistic weakness.

I have often heard people say that churches resist change. But Asbury never simply said "no" when I tried something new. Hawaiian Shirt Sunday. New worship series. Joint worship services with Zion Korean UMC. New ways of doing ministry. Your generous hospitality and faithful support became the seedbed for my ministry here at Asbury.

So, like Paul, I can say: Every time you cross my mind, I thank God. I thank God for the blessing of being your pastor. I thank God for the blessing of being your friend. I thank God for the blessing of being part of your family. You have made my time at Asbury one of the most beautiful seasons of my life. So today, from the bottom of my heart, I want to say: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

A Time to End for a New Beginning

When we first began our journey together, we quickly developed a close relationship. In one of my sermons, I talked about how we were in a "honeymoon period." And I said I hoped that honeymoon period would last as long as I stayed at this church. So let me ask you: are we still in a honeymoon period? I believe we are. Thank you for loving us all the way to this day of departure.

As we all know, the United Methodist Church has an itinerant system. The bishop appoints pastors to churches. Some of us may not always like this system. Sometimes it feels hard. Sometimes it feels too soon. Sometimes we wish things could stay the same a little longer. But today, I want you to remember something: because of this Methodist tradition, we were able to meet one another.

And who knows? Maybe one day I may come back if a bishop appoints me to Asbury again. Lee Arnold once said to me, half-jokingly, "You should come back to our church as a bishop." And I said, "I will do my best. But it will probably take more than a decade, so please stay at our church until I come back." So I wish all of you good health!

Our journey together here at Asbury is coming to an end. And I know this is not easy. I know many of us do not like saying goodbye. But Scripture reminds us: "To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." In every end, there is also a new beginning. One of my favorite hymns is "Hymn of Promise," number 707 in the United Methodist Hymnal. It has such beautiful words.

This hymn reminds us that there are hidden promises we cannot always see. "In the bulb, there is a flower. In the seed, there is an apple tree. In the cold and snow of winter, there is a spring waiting to be. Unrevealed until its season. Something God alone can see." That is such a powerful image of faith. Faith does not mean we can see everything clearly. Faith means we trust that God is still working, even when we cannot yet see the flower, the fruit, the spring, or the new beginning. Today, we may not see the hidden promise clearly. We may only see the ending of our journey together here. We may feel sadness, disappointment, gratitude, uncertainty, and hope all at the same time.

But remember: in every end, there is also a new beginning. So instead of being discouraged, let us trust God. Let us trust the God who reveals everything in its season. Let us expect wonderful things to come. Be ready for a new journey with Pastor Park and Pastor Kang. Be ready for the many gifts God will give to this church in the coming season. God has been faithful to us. God is faithful to us. And God will surely bless the new journey ahead of us.

So today, I would like to end this sermon with the liturgy of farewell. In the United Methodist Church, when a pastor is appointed to a new church, there is a special liturgy in which the pastor and the congregation give thanks, offer forgiveness, and release one another for a new journey. I invite you to participate in this liturgy with sincere hearts. Because this is not only an ending. This is also a new beginning.

The Order of Farewell to a Pastor

Pastor: I thank you, the members and friends of *Asbury* United Methodist Church, for the love and support you have shown me while I have ministered among you.

I am grateful for the ways my leadership has been accepted.
I ask forgiveness for the mistakes I have made.
As I leave, I carry with me all that I have learned here.

**People: We receive your thankfulness, offer forgiveness,
and accept that you now leave to a new church.
We express our gratitude for your time among us.
We ask your forgiveness for our mistakes.
Your influence on our faith and faithfulness
will not leave with your departure.**

Pastor: I accept your gratitude and forgiveness, and I forgive you, trusting that our time together and our parting are pleasing to God.
I release you from turning to me and depending on me.
I encourage your continuing ministry here and will pray for you and for your new *pastor, myeungeun Park, and Youmin Kang.*

Let us pray together.

**Eternal God, whose steadfast love for us is from everlasting to everlasting,
we give you thanks for cherished memories
and commend one another into your care as we move in new directions.
Keep us one in your love forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**