

**“Remain AND Go!”**  
Memorial Service Sermon  
Rev. Lori Steffensen

Greetings to you from the beautiful State College District. A beautiful district. Beautiful not only for its mountains and valleys, open spaces and WiFi district, for its elk, deer, chipmunk, bison, and Nittany Lions. It is also beautiful with a heart for mission. Exemplified by four Mission Central HUBs, mission trips to Sierra Leone, Nicaragua, **Anadagua (sp?)**, and next door. Numerous feeding programs, shoe banks, diaper banks, soap banks, the Matthew 25 Mission, the Lumina Center, the Mommy Shop, the Free for All Shop, ESL classes, Abba Java Café, -----, -----, the Faith Center, and more. Pretty awesome place.

It's a district with a great road system, except during construction season. Don't come and visit us now. But all the major highways seem to cross our district. And we are happy to have you join with the tens of thousands who come to visit. And we are happy to have you visit us for worship and service and fellowship. Anywhere from Renovo to East Waterford, from East Salem to Allport, and all points in between, greetings from my beautiful district.

Thank you, dear Bishop, for extending the opportunity to preach. My hope and my prayer – well, your prayer – is that I am going to give only one sermon. In the five years that I've been a district superintendent, I've got two hundred fifty backed up. Now I do have a confession to make. I think all the pastors all just sat up a little bit when I said that. I have a confession to make; I am a little bit rusty. So, that's why I had Peterson's Paraphrase of Romans 12 read.

The first time I heard that particular version, was when the Rev. Dr. Chuck Johns read it as the Scripture for a Lenten district ministerium service on Ash Wednesday, held at Asbury Church in Scranton. He read that, then he said you have received today's message, and sat down. So you've received sermon number one, two hundred forty-nine more to go.

On a serious note, I want to thank you, families and loved ones, for coming tonight. For joining with us as we remember and give thanks for your loved ones. Before they were a part of us, before they were a part of the Susquehanna Conference, they were a part of your heart and your lives. Service to our beloved church at times took them away from you. And we are ever so grateful for your sacrifice and your sharing.

It is an odd thing that we are gathered here to do. To remember our honored dead and to deliberately remember our sorrow. We gather to give thanks for, and celebrate, their lives and also to mourn. We gather to witness to their faith and to recognize our loss. We grieve now, yet we also hope. For we know our goodbyes are not final. The end of them and for us is not our names etched on some cold, hard headstone. Instead, the Lord had said I have engraved you on the palm of my hand. This end is an eternal beginning.

We are bold enough to gather in sorrow and loss, for we know we are engraved on God's palm. For we know that Christ has defeated sin and death, thanks be to God.

Grief and hope, sorrow and joy, honoring the past, anticipating the future, we live in that place that society sees as a contradiction. Scripture may also seem to contradict itself when we don't read it carefully. When we don't study and love God with our mind, we have these for a purpose, when we don't delve into the meaning with purpose and intent, which is where that juxtaposition of my title of remain and go comes from. And the few sentences that Steph read from John's sharing of the events in the upper room, Jesus tells his disciples to remain and to go. At first, it seems like opposite instructions. So I looked in the Merriam Webster Dictionary. I love on-line: two clicks, you find something. And I found a three-part definition of the word "remain."

Remain is to be left when other parts are gone or have been used; to be something that still needs to be done; to stay in the same place or with the same person or group. That's the word "remain."

I figured that's easy. Then I looked up the word "go." Do you know the word "go" had a twenty-part definition? How many of you knew that? A twenty-part definition: To move; to move out; to take a course; to walk; to be in a certain state; to become lost; to slip away; to move along; to apply oneself. And that's only the first through 7A. Some of them had sub-letters as well. "Go" had over twenty-two pages of definitions.

So I know I couldn't just take the words at first value. So I looked through twelve different biblical texts to see how the scholars over the ages have translated the words, those ancient words, of "remain" and "go." Because the Bible wasn't written in English, originally. You gotta do a little work. So "remain" is interpreted as "abide," "live," and "remain."

"Go" is interpreted as "go."

"Remain" as a three-point definition had three words offered: "Go," with its twenty-point definition, had the just one. So I figured the "go" might seem to be the easier part. So we are going to start by looking at the "remain."

In the upper room, right before Jesus offers himself up for us, he tells his disciples to remain and to go: Go and bear fruit; fruit that will last.

So this is where the preacher is going to get to meddling. I ----- warn you. For remaining is no the leftovers. Remaining is not staying in the same place. Remaining is not being unchanged. But what remaining is, is staying in relationship with God. Remaining is being engraved on God's hand, and having God's grace envelope us. Jesus gave us the example of remaining and going. Jesus remained in relationship with God, and went and left heaven. Jesus remained connected to his heritage, and to the God-instituted Passover meal, and yet he took that to a different place as well. Remaining in covenant. Remaining in relationship with God, and yet forever changed, forever going. A slightly different meaning of the word "remain."

Ted and I, had been married for less than two years when I was asked to be on Cabinet. Cabinet requires a little bit of travel. For three weeks in a row, most of the weeks this month I am not home. And for Ted who had been to seventeen schools in twelve years, stability and being settled are important to him. And I said how are we going to do this? And Ted's answer was, home is

wherever and whenever we are together. Because the remaining is about the relationship. And we can go and remain at the same time. It's not a location, it's not a place.

Daniel Shearer and Emily Woods, who we remember this night, knew about remaining and going. They served in three denominations without ever moving – not itinerating moving, but switching denominations. They were part of the merger of 1946, when the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren joined as the Evangelical United Brethren. And they were both part of the merger of 1968 when the EUB joined with the Methodists to become the United Methodist Church. They were faithful in remaining and going. They remained faithful to their covenant, they remained faithful to their ordination vows, and they remained connected even as the church changed. How do we remain faithful? We remain faithful by obeying Christ's commands, don't we?

I am just going to lift up some of those that were offered previously in John's text from the upper room that night. Jesus commands to us, we are to serve. To humbly meet others needs before your own. I'm meddling for the preachers here – "I'm the pastor." Are we supposed to be that way? And laity, the same thing goes, we are supposed to serve one another. Christ's command is to prune, to cut away, that which is not producing. Sometimes we need to trim to strengthen the whole.

Christ's command is to love. This is not a sentimental feeling that comes and goes, but a tough reality that is revealed in presence and service and care. It's an action. We are called to trust God, even when we don't know for sure where we are going, we know that God's already been there, don't we?

We are called to remember. And remember, here again, is a verb; it's not a thought or a memory, but is to actively put together, to hold together. And we are to go and produce fruit. And we'll deal with more of that in a moment.

So we are called to love, because that is the relationship that unites the disciples to Christ, as branches are united to a vine. Two results stem from that relationship, both obedience and joy. Obedience marks the cause of their fruitfulness, joy is its result. Joy logically follows when the disciples realize that the life of Christ in them is bringing fruit. Something they could never produce on their own strength. Jesus expected that they would fulfill his purpose for them, and that their work would be enduring. For this reason, he urged them to maintain the relationship of love for one another that would facilitate the fulfillment of his hopes. He emphasized the need for prayer for the continuation of their mission. The effectiveness of prayer is linked to fruit bearing, which in turn is linked to obedience, which produces joy.

So how many of your churches have prayer groups that pray to produce fruit in your community? How many of you are gathering regularly, fervently, so people can come to know Christ? Think about it.

Jesus calls us to love as he loved. This is not tolerating one another. It is not being nice to one another. But this is a call to enter into the mystery of his own death. The Good Shepherd lays

down his life for his sheep. He loves, he serves without limit, without measure. And we know we are obeying Christ, because that produces joy.

Michael Card, a wonderful Presbyterian lay person, says this, “Jesus asks us to obey and later to love as he has obeyed the Father. Jesus always provides the perfect pattern for our actions. If he obeyed, so should we. His life was a demonstration that it could be done.” And as verse 11 tells us, these instructions are not an occasion for sullen dedication, but for joy.

When you walk into church on a Sunday, do you feel the joy? Is it just bubbling out of people? If they are not full of joy. If they are not loving and serving with joy, then we need to look first at their relationship with Christ. We could have had a lot of people who’ve been there for a long time, but they’re still spiritual babies. If we as a person are not full of joy, if we are not loving and serving with joy, we need to look at our relationship with Christ. Have we remained in the palm of God’s hand? Because if we are, then we will go and produce fruit, fruit that will last. The fruit that lasts for eternity is not an edifice or a program, it’s people. It’s a person. It’s me, it’s you, and you, and them, and thousands more who have yet to know Christ’s love.

So let me set the scene. But before I do that I need to define what something is. For many of you, you think this is a phone. And you know your phone goes with you wherever you go. Well thirty years ago, these things didn’t exist. In fact, what you had was a phone with a wire that was connected to a box on the wall. Sometimes those are individual boxes, and that’s called a phone booth. To make a phone call, you had to go to one of those booths and put in your nickel, dime, or quarter, and dial your number. It’s a phone booth. So I just want to make sure that you all know what that is, because some of you don’t; you’ve never seen one. But thirty years ago these didn’t exist, just phone booths.

So at Annual Conference thirty years ago, the ordination service at Elm Park Church was about to begin. My guess is that it’s about ninety degrees out with the threat of rain, because that’s what it always is. And inside in your clerical robes, it would have felt like 110 [degrees]. Now every clergy member was there with great anticipation, for the ordination service included the reading of appointments. Not simply the naming of known appointments, it was the *revealing* of appointments. Everybody’s ears were attentive, listening to hear their name, your church’s name, or the name of your buddy, because everybody wanted to know who their pastor would be in a couple of weeks. Laity were wondering, are we going to get an encore or a new act; a rerun or a surprise? And the pastors were wondering what in the world am I going to do?

Now the laity did have it easier, because the church names were read alphabetically by district. So you knew where your name was going to be read. And the clergy had to be attentive, which is hard to do at the end of Annual Conference in a robe and it’s 110 degrees, I know that. So your mind may just wander. Well, the Rev. William Jones hears his name called, but he wasn’t sure to where. It’s a true story. After the service’s dignified recessional, there was a mad dash for the *one* pay phone at Elm Park Church. That year Bill was lucky, he was only the sixth in line. When his turn came, he had to be brief, for there were now thirty more waiting behind him. German, start packing, we’re moving. And that is how Jean Jones learned of the next appointment for her family, which would start in two weeks.

We honor Jean tonight. Bill, Jean, Gwyneth, and Billy remained in relationship and remained in the covenant. And in sorrow and in anticipation, they went and produced fruit, fruit that lasted. And I am part of that fruit, for Bill Jones wasn't the first pastor I had who wasn't my dad. The first United Methodist pastor, Ira Bent. And I've only ever been United Methodist, folks. And through that family, I learned about John Wesley and our beautiful United Methodist church. So thank you.

The pastors we remember tonight had over seven hundred and ninety years of service. Ranging from eight years to fifty-four. And I am counting real service, not pension years, folks, because many of them served in retirement. In fact, Bernie Bookhammer was still serving and preaching at the age of eighty-six, until he went home.

The service of the spouses and the laity we recognize tonight, was impossible for me to calculate. And I thought about how can I do this, but you can't. Because their service is not simply defined by their spouses. Yet know that service is valued and borne fruit.

I also learned from Jean Jones and sitting around that kitchen table, that it's easier sometimes to ask for forgiveness than for permission. And Gwyneth and I went and cleaned out a messy, messy room at the church, threw out all sorts of stuff, and said, oh, we're sorry, we didn't know we should do that. But you bear fruit, fruit that lasts. And tonight we are honoring well over a thousand years of service to Christ and Christ's church.

I have named just four of the dozens we will remember this night. Each one touched lives. Each one's story is a part of our story. They remained in relationship and went and produced fruit. They mothered and nurtured, organized and served, preached and taught, cooked, packed, and gave. They risked and prayed, cried and tried, and produced fruit, fruit that lasts. What fruit are we called to produce? We're called to produce sons and daughters of God. We're called to produce new believers, grown up believers or growing believers, called disciples. We're called to produce Christians at all age ranges, aren't we?

In my beautiful district, eighty percent of the people there do not know that they are loved, that they are forgiven. That they have a purpose. That they can be resorted. Eighty percent. And my district is not alone across our conference or our country.

Those who obey with joy the command to love as Jesus loved, who obey completely sacrificially, humbly, with the heart of a servant, those are who we need, folks. Like those we honor tonight. Those who remain in relationship and go where Christ has called them to go.

Sometimes, church, we have forgotten Christ's command. And we are content to concentrate on minor issues. I know one church – I can tell you the name afterward – the church almost split, because at a funeral dinner somebody served the red Jello instead of the green. I have a church that is dear to my heart. There is a big fight because the green carpet was put in and replaced by a blue. Any of these sound familiar? Folks, it's not about buildings, about titles or committees. It's not about power or entitlement or endowment. It's not even about who's sin is worse than the other's. We like to do that one. And the worst one is always the one we're not doing. And then we judge the other. Go read Matthew 5 on that one.

Scripture speaks most about how we use our money, and it's not on ourselves, about honoring God with the Sabbath, about being in community. And once we get those things right and straightened out, we can move on to the minor things, can't we? We have to keep the main thing the main thing, and do what Christ calls us to do. It's about remaining in relationship with God and God's children, and going to produce more. It's about feeding the hungry, caring for the widowed, finding the lost, protecting the least, welcoming the stranger. It's about serving, trusting, pruning, obeying, remembering. It's about healing, caring, sharing, holding, giving. It's about calling, listening, offering, yielding, witnessing. Folks, if we are doing that, our churches will bust out the seams, because the love and power of Christ when we are being the church is beyond measure. We need to be loving as Christ loved, and introducing the lost to our Savior. We need to be going out into our communities, and not stuck in our churches. We have not been joyfully following Christ's command.

And I have numbers to back this up. And folks, this is why we do statistical reports. Somebody asked me that just this week. So I am using them. For the decade from 2005 to 2014, there were 889 churches in continual existence in our conference and our predecessor conferences. So 889. Of those eight hundred eighty-nine, 304 had ten or less professions of faith or restorations of faith in a decade. That is less than one fruit produced by a whole community per year. And I know, because I had to print them all out and count them. In fact, there were 117 who had zero professions of faith or zero restorations of faith in the five years from 2009 to 2015. Thirteen percent of our churches in five years produced no restoration and no profession. Shame on us.

And there were churches, and I am going to use that term loosely, who had no professions or restorations of faith in ten years. And I must admit, I did not have the heart to count those. All I could do was pray, Father, forgive us. We have gotten focused on the wrong things, folks. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't get out of bed in the morning and do what I do if I didn't know that I was engraved on God's palm. If I didn't know I was loved, that I was forgiven, that this life is not the end, that I have purpose and a value. That makes me get up and go, how about you? And when we don't share that through our lives, through our loves, we are being disobedient to God.

We need to be going into our communities, my friends. We are to share and to witness to the wondrous life affirming, life changing, joy-filled hope that we have found in relationship with Christ. That we have found as beloved, forgiven, healed children of God. We are to remain firmly rooted in relationship with God, and then go and share the hope and love of Christ.

Honored guests, you are loved. And I want to thank you for sharing your loved ones with us. For sharing Bernie, Bill, Ron, Don, Luke, Vidal, Ed, Henry, Cal and Calvin, Marco, Michael, Leon, Aaron, Dan, Dick, Richard, Harold, George, Ray, Roy, Jess, Doug, Jim, MaryLou, Dot, Kathy, Charlene, Alice, Patricia and Pat, Phyllis, Erma, Laura, Jean, Ruth, Juliet, Gladys, Marguerite, Mabreen, Betty, Joan, Thelma, Louise, Lois, Bernice, and Eileen with us. Thank you for sharing. For sharing your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, your spouse, your in-law, your grandparent, your friend, your beloved. We are who we are because of what they have done for us. Thank you for remaining in relationship with them while allowing them to go and serve;

while allowing them to produce fruit that lasted. Thank you for sharing even your grieving with us.

I want to close with John 16:22 further on in that same passage. “You have sorrow now, but Jesus says I will see you again. Then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy.” May Christ’s love comfort you, and may you go in peace, knowing your loved ones and you are engraved on God’s hand. Amen.