



Calling, Sending, Carrying

TEXT
Romans 1:1-12

March 10, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Len Carrell

The first thing I want to say is “thank you.” The next thing I need to say is “I love you and I will miss you.” That is just the truth.

This past Thursday, I met for the last time with my Widowers group, a group of about 20-25 men. On top of it being our last time together, I asked the guys to bring in a treasured memento of their wives. I don’t know what I was thinking. It was like a scene out of an all-male version of *Steel Magnolias* in that room. The emotions were running high.

Trust me when I say, I love you and I will miss you. I will hold you all in my heart, forever. Tanisha, Caitlin and myself, we are excited about what God is doing next in our life. It’s just filled with other stuff too. We are looking forward to being with, and getting to know, all the wonderful people of First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, Tennessee, who are holding all of us in their prayers this morning. As I know we are holding all of them in our prayers as well.

You are my Village family, and nothing can change that. You are the first people who called me into ministry, and

I will never forget you. The fingerprints of this place, and all of you, I will carry with me forever. Village is the kind of place that when you return, the words you’ll always hear spoken are “welcome home.” That’s just who you are.

It’s the language that first stood out to me when I first read about you. One sentence, really, that caught my eye when I was learning about your position for Pastoral Care, said, “More than a collection of beliefs, church is a collection of relationships.” I think that’s right. Church is more than just about getting our doctrine right. It’s about getting our relationships right. Someone taught me that.

We talk a lot about relationships around here, and I know why: because you make them important, and you pay attention to building good ones. And let’s face it, we are blessed with an abundance of good people to be in relationship with. Some we have known a long time, others we are just beginning to know. All are spiritual gifts. Even though this is a big place, we can feel like a small family, too.

In our text today, Paul is longing to share spiritual gifts

with the Christians in Rome, people he has not even met yet. He has heard stories about their faith. He is praying for them; and God willing, he wants to come to them soon. The spiritual gifts Paul is talking about are no doubt the stories of faithful Christians he has met on his journey.

He says, “For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you — or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

I love how Paul catches himself here. How quickly his “I” becomes a “we.” Paul understood his apostleship to be from God alone. It was Christ who called him; it was Christ’s Holy Spirit moving in and through him to the church. Paul also understood his apostleship to be one shared by those Christians in Rome, people he had never met before. Paul understood his apostleship to be one of calling, and sending, and carrying — to carry one another, to love one another, to bear one another’s burdens.

Not to change everything, or anyone; but to listen and to walk with each other, to hear how the stories of our lives

come together. Paul understood his apostleship as something much broader than the church had ever imagined before ... it's a fellowship, a friendship, a relationship, with God and with each other.

When I was fifteen, I was sent to a summer theater workshop at the University of Texas, at Austin. It was for theater students selected from different high school programs from across the state. It was a pretty big deal at the time. The best thing about it was I met a teacher, someone who became a mentor and friend to me. His name is Lou. More than just a good director, Lou was a great acting teacher. The best thing he ever taught his students was that we all had gifts to share. Each one of us had a unique, playful and authentic gift to share.

He also taught us what it meant to be an ensemble, to be a company of actors — both female and male actors, as a company together. He showed us how to respect and encourage each other's gifts, and how to take risks. He helped us to trust the process and to love the craft.

He would have us play games to help us find the spirit of the people we were playing. This game was simple. One-by-one each cast member would go on stage in character and pose on a stool for an imaginary photograph. But first, you had to stop at the imaginary mirror and prepare yourself for your portrait.

I played an older gentleman in the play, so I remember

hunching over and hiking up my waistband above my stomach. People started laughing, and before I could go pose for the picture, I heard Lou saying, "No, no, no, Len. That is not what I'm looking for, sorry. Sit down and watch the others, and when you're ready, try it again"

After two or three other people went, I got the nerve to go again. I stood in front of the imaginary mirror and started to hunch over and bend my head forward. Again, I heard Lou say to me, "What are you doing, Len?" He said, "Do you think you are up there alone, for our entertainment? I know you've read the play. Do you have any idea how many of these people you carry up there with you right now? Sit down and think about it, and try it again, later."

I was afraid to go back up. We got to the end, and I was the last one, and he called my name. "Len, you want to give it a go?" I was feeling less than confident; I was mortified. But then I got up there, and I started looking out at all the other cast members sitting there watching me and smiling. It occurred to me that even among strangers, they were encouraging me. It occurred to me that there wasn't a person in that room that I didn't share a scene with in the play. And then it occurred to me that for my character, there sure would be a lot of people he could share this picture with in his town.

I went up to the imaginary mirror, and instead of hunching over, I did my best to pull

my shoulders back and stand tall and look my best. I took an imaginary comb out of my pocket and combed my hair. And then I went over to have my picture taken. And instead of sitting on the stool like everyone else did, I moved it aside and put my hands in my pockets and stood proud, smiling back at all the people who had smiled into my character's life.

How quickly my "I" became a "we."

Lou taught us amazing things, things we weren't always expecting. Lou taught me that when we are all telling our own story, that is the work of art. But when we travel in the same story, then that is the work of an ensemble, a company, a body. And then it occurred to me: Even when we think we're all alone up here, we're not. Even as preachers, especially as preachers, if we think we enter this place alone, we're wrong. There are so many people we carry with us up here. And we do so because in life and in ministry, we have our hands full.

I have a pillow in my office, and printed on it are the words "The lighter your travel, the farther you'll go." Another good friend and mentor of mine, the Reverend Doug King, who is the senior associate pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City (which is my wife Tanisha's home church), spoke those words in his charge to me at my ordination. And I knew what he was saying.

He was saying that in ministry, we carry a lot, and we're not always going to be able to. But at the time, he was talking about all the "firsts" I was walking into. He was reminding me not to have my hands too full of my expectations or my gifts, or my heart too full of my ego or my insecure fears — that often we carry too much because we get trapped in the notion of thinking we're in control. And so, we pack up our "steamer trunks," as he put it, with all our favorite things, with our confidences and our hesitations, our lessons learned and our failures documented, and we carry the weight of the world on our shoulders.

I think my friend Doug is right. We need to "put it all down" sometimes. Because as he says, and I quote: "There is no way any of us could ever carry enough to be qualified or prepared for what we are called to do." Put it all down, he says. And I think he's right.

But I also want to have a conversation with my friend about new ways of packing. I am finding, in these days, it is a lot lighter to pack the good wishes and prayers I have received from all of you in these days; all the faithful lives I have witnessed in this place have strengthened and encouraged my own faith. And that is not a heavy load at all; it is an uplifting one.

In this season of Lent, it is important to put things down. But it is also important to take things up. I will carry all the spiritual gifts of Village

Church, and all it has been to me and my family, and we will share them with the good people of Columbia, Tennessee.

I have already shared with them a little about you. Because like you, they also gather around tables every Wednesday night and share a meal together. Because like you, they also are committed to feeding people and delivering Thanksgiving meals to so many who cannot afford one. Because like you, they also believe in creating safe and faithful places for children to learn and grow. Like you, they also bring Communion to their sick and their aging. Like you, they love each other and care for each other and share their spiritual gifts.

And those are the gifts that never weigh us down when we move: the gifts of each other and our mutually encouraged faith, both yours and mine. You will always be my Village family. I love you, and I will miss you, and I will always hold you in my heart. Thank you for calling me. Thank you for sending me. And thank you for carrying me — and teaching me, and encouraging me, and praying for me.

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night.

I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.