

Coming To Work On Sunday
November 15, 2009
Rev. Robert V. Thompson

Sometimes I apologize for telling you a story more than once. Today I offer no apology. Today I knowingly repeat myself—isn't that what people do as they age?

So Yogi Berra was one day approached by teammate Tom Seaver who said—"Hey Yogi, what time is it?" Yogi answered, "You mean, now?"

Over the years I have used this story to make the point that wherever you go, there you are. Don't bother to look at the clock, because it's always the same time.

It's always, now.

Along with other Lake Street Church staff members it is my job to come to work on Sunday. Every week I am amazed at how quickly Sunday rolls around. For many years it has been my practice to write my sermons one week ahead. On the Saturday before I preach the sermon, I rewrite it—and then I get up early on Sunday morning to do a final edit.

Early one Sunday morning about 6 weeks ago, I got up at the crack of dawn, meditated for about 45 minutes, poured a cup of coffee as I prepared to do my final edit on the sermon of the day. Suddenly one of the sentences from that sermon jumped up off the page and hit me in the face. "We cannot think ourselves into a new way of living—we must live ourselves into a new way of thinking."

Over and over again I read that sentence: we must live ourselves into a new way of thinking. In that moment of now I realized it was time to pay attention to my own words.

Two weeks ago today, November 1st, 2009, I began my 30th year as minister of this church. 30 years. Where has the time gone? 30 years, well that's nearly half my life. 30 years, by some counts that's a generation. While reading the words I would say to you later that morning, I realized it was time for me not to think, but to live myself into a new way of thinking. It was at that moment I decided it was time for me to retire from all my years at Lake Street Church.

Filled with this insight, I marched into the kitchen and announced to Judy that I had finally made a decision. I told her that it was time for me to move on and I believed it was time for Lake Street Church find its way into the future without my leadership. I said to her, on November 1st, 2010 I will celebrate my 30th anniversary at Lake Street Church and it will be time for me to move on. For the next year I will do whatever I can to help the church through its transition.

Knowing me well, Judy stood there and said, "Really? Bob, don't announce it right now. Just keep this to yourself for a while, okay? Think about it. Live with it, sit with it a while".

I don't always do what Judy tells me to do. But I knew she was right about this.

What I have discovered over the last 6 weeks is that my decision on that September Sunday morning continues to resonate as the right thing for me to do. We cannot think ourselves into a new way of living, we must first live ourselves into a new way of thinking.

On November 1st, 2010 I will relinquish my pastoral responsibilities at Lake Street Church. After 30 years it will be time for me to move on—which means, it's also time for you to move on.

I will be around for nearly a year, and I need for you to be here too. It's all too easy to confuse the identity of a spiritual community with those who lead it. But this spiritual community is not about me, it's not about Ann-Louise, it's not about the other people who are paid to work on Sunday. I've tried to make this point over the years. It's not about any one of us it is about all of us.

My job description will morph into a singular focus between now and next November. From here on out my job will be to help you, the Lake Street Church of Evanston, build a bridge to the future. I do confess there is something liberating about making this decision—there is something liberating about letting go.

That said, over the past few years I have been hearing whispering questions and speculative talk about whether I was planning to move on any time soon. Now I know. Now you know. And in this moment, pregnant with possibility, I confess that I feel a little bit like Yogi Berra. You mean, now? Here we are now – now – now. The future is now.

As it's been said, everybody's got to go some time. We all know that life is always changing. But usually we convince ourselves that life's changes are somewhere out there—somewhere around some imagined corner.

Take for example, the inevitability of death. We all know that sooner or later we are going to die. And we don't like to think about it, but we all know that sooner or later the people we love are going to die. Even while we know that life is constant change, we are really good at walling ourselves off from the implications of this insight. We know that everything changes, but we persuade ourselves that change is about some future event rather than the present moment.

My mother was diagnosed with lymphoma 15 years before she died. When she was diagnosed I didn't know how much time she had, but I knew her time was probably more limited than mine. I knew the lymphoma would finally do her in. But I didn't really believe it would actually kill her—take her away from us. That's why, when she died, I found myself saying to myself—you mean it's now?

Life is full of changes that choose us. To wake up to now, is to know that no matter what changes choose us, we are always free to choose who we are and what we will do with our lives.

So today, I am choosing to remain with you one more year.

After making this decision to move on, one day while walking through this building, I started filling with pain—with grief. This place and this wonderful, colorful, crazy, exasperating and inspiring community has been so much a part of my life for so many years. It's no surprise that

as I walked about this building on that particular day, I filled up with a sense of loss, and the tears welled up.

I was making a decision to leave the people I love and to leave this place that has allowed me the sacred space, to live out the vision and vocation of my life—which is to be and become a “beloved community” of God. The grief I felt on that day was profound – the loss was especially intense. And I know it’s all going to come up for me again, again, and again.

That’s how grief behaves.

I cannot thank you enough for the inexplicable gifts you have given me over these many years. But in this life there is such a thing as necessary losses.

Grief is a curse and a blessing. It is a curse because it causes so much pain. But it a blessing because by breaking open the heart it puts us in touch with what life is all about. Every life, every relationship, every moment, is precious beyond measure.

It’s time for me to move on, but, there is also a very deep part of me that doesn’t want to leave you—ever.

Still, it is time to go—well almost. November of 2010 will be here before we know it.

So, what’s next?

As Joan Borysenko reminded us last Sunday, there is something within the spirit of life that is resilient. No matter what we choose no matter what happens to us, there is something within us—call it God—call it Christ—call it the Great spirit—what we call it doesn’t matter so long as we call on it! What matters is developing our capacity to respond to the spirit within that is forever rising up among us.

My favorite definition of faith is, “first you leap, then, you grow wings” (Bill Coffin). I do not know what I will do when I retire from Lake Street Church. I do know that I’ll be doing more than sitting around, twiddling my thumbs. I am taking a leap of faith and I hope I will grow wings. If I splatter, at least I will have leapt.

It turns out that 2010 is also a leap year for Lake Street Church.

Before the service this morning I met with elected church leaders to share my decision. We have a road map for how to proceed and we will follow it. The path ahead is outlined in our new Bylaws.

Later in the service today we will receive new members. I want to encourage not only our new members but every member of this community to reach out to each other—deepen your sense of connection—inspire, comfort and encourage each other—together become a luminous, compassionate and magnetic presence in this world.

My job over the next year is to help you build a bridge to a new beginning, the dawn of a new day. The Seeds of Change initiative is already taking root. Earlier, you heard about additional service opportunities at Lake Street Church. You will also be hearing about a plan to create what

we are calling neighborhood groups. And over the next months we will be offering rich and diverse alternative worship experiences, like the one last Sunday night, the Service of Silence.

The Seeds of Change initiative was developed by members of this congregation—it's a vision and a strategy that has emerged from the deliberations of this community and endorsed by the LSC Board.

It's time for Lake Street Church to live itself into a new way of thinking—beginning Now.

Many years ago William Least Heat-Moon wrote a book called, *Blue Highways—A Journey into America*. The book is about Heat-Moon's journey on the back roads. He says that all the interstate highways appear in the color red on our road maps. When he looked at a map, the blue highways he said represent the back roads—the roads most Americans don't take when they're traveling around the country.

The red highways will take you to well known destinations like Chicago, Indianapolis, St Louis, Denver and San Francisco.

The blue highways take you to unfamiliar places like Remote, Oregon; Simplicity, Virginia; Why, Arizona; or Whynot, Mississippi; or my favorite—Nameless, Tennessee.

When the author asked people who lived in Nameless, Tennessee how they decided to call their town "Nameless", they said, "well many years ago we decided that we needed a name for our town—so we had many meetings—many meetings—but we couldn't agree on the right name so we decided to call it "Nameless". And that's what it is."

When it comes to the Christian roadmap, Lake Street Church is not a red but a blue highway destination. In some ways we are nameless—which is why a number of years ago one Lake Street Church member had the audacity to confess to me that she was a Baptist but not a Christian. She couldn't bring herself to drink the Christian Kool-Aid, yet, she found her place at a Baptist table that celebrates Soul Liberty.

Lake Street Church is a blue highway church.

Every Sunday we come together for a worship service. Every Sunday we come together to celebrate the mystery and miracle of life. Every Sunday we gather to sing hymns, listen to readings, listen to sermons, share in the prayer of the congregation and hopefully to return to our ordinary lives with a little more energy, purpose and hope than when we entered this sanctuary.

Every Sunday we gather to practice what Christians call: the liturgy. I was recently reminded that the word "liturgy" is derived from the Greek word which means "the work of the people". The real work of the "liturgy" is not the work of the ministers, pastors or church staff.

The purpose of the Sunday liturgy is to remind all of us that life is a miracle and mystery. The highest purpose of worship is to remind us all that life, the life we live every day—the now in which we are living, is holy and sacred. Whether we know it or not, we are always meeting God here and now and in each other. As Meister Eckhart put it, “every creature is a living Word of God” here and now.

This is why Jesus says, the most important thing in life is not to get your theology together. Jesus never says, you must believe twelve important doctrinal statements before breakfast. He doesn't say, once you believe the right things then you will be right with God. Over and over he says, I bring to you a new way of life, a new way of understanding your relationships to each other and to “the one in whom we live and move and have our being”.

This is the lesson from Matthew's Gospel we listen to earlier. In so many words, Jesus said, If you want to worship God, but there is friction or tension—enmity or acrimony in just one of your relationships—don't even think about coming to the altar. Don't think about coming to the altar until you have made peace with that person. Every relationship in your life is the true altar where you meet the Holy Within. Life is the altar, he said—and God is always met nowhere but in the heart.

Life is not about a doctrine, a dogma, or a creed. Life is relationships.

Several years ago author Stephen Levine wrote a book called, *A Year To Live*. He wrote it as an experiment. He asked himself this question: If I knew I had a year left to live—what would I do – what would I process—how would look differently at my life? What would I fear? Who would I forgive? If I knew I had only a year to live, how would my life change?

This is how I'm thinking about our next year together.

Let's not waste it. It is a gift.

My dear, beloved friends, I shall say it now and I shall say it over and over during the coming year—it is more important to be related than to be right. The journey is the destination.

And so it is, together, we take the next step—trusting God—trusting ourselves—trusting life. Here we are, **NOW**. First we leap, then, we grow wings.

Blessed be