

[BLANK] [PRAYER] Thank you for coming out on this cooler and dryer day. We had about seventy-five people here yesterday for the funeral of Dawn Sperry Moran. It was a blessed service, but it was a day that gave me pause to pray for investing in some air conditioning here for the Summer weather!

What I know is a good investment is coming here to share your love of God with one another, and to serve one another and the world, in Christ. Christian faith is not something that you can phone in, or text, even though phoning and texting people helps us to keep in touch. Christian faith is about being the body of Christ, and being there for people who need to be touched by Christ, so that the story of Jesus can grow in the world. Christian faith is about stepping up to do our part to fill the shoes of the fishermen who first followed Jesus, because we, too, have been touched by this Jesus. We, too, have felt the breath of God's Holy Spirit touch our hearts. We, too, if we listen carefully, can hear the heartbeat of our Creator echoed inside our chests, every moment of our lives.

And so, Christian faith, and, especially, Christian faith in the United Methodist tradition, is about accountability, because God has been accountable to us. God didn't phone in God's love for us when God made creation. God didn't send us Jesus on the phone, or Facebook, or Instagram. Jesus didn't post a selfie on the cross as proof of God's love for us, and then hit the road. God didn't transform hearts for thousands of years in God's Holy Spirit by posting a smiley face, or a meme. No, God has been one hundred percent accountable, and real, in everything that God has offered us in love. Accountability in faith matters, if we are to really honor and worship the God who died and rose from the dead for us, and for all of God's creation.

It is in this spirit of accountable Christian discipleship that we honor and thank Bob and Debbie Moore today for their many years of service to this church. We are losing not only friends of this church, who have loved this church so very much through the years. We are preparing to wish a fond farewell to a couple who have modeled accountable Christian discipleship for all of us, a model of what we will all need to be stepping up to in the months and years ahead.

I remember the very first day that I met Debbie last June, a few days before I started here as your Pastor. I had received the keys to the church, and I decided to put up a new message on the letter sign outside our church. I was sitting on the floor of the office, with letters all around me, and with the door open. All of a sudden, Debbie popped in! I am not sure who was more surprised, her, or me! Presto, new Pastor. Presto, Church Council chair, and longtime knower of where the bodies are buried, as they say.

And so, as Debbie started to chat - you know how Debbie can chat, right - it dawned on me: Here is someone who really loves this church. Here is someone who knows about this church, not as a gossip, not as a know-it-all, but because it has been part of her heartbeat for years and years, as it has been for so many of you. Here is someone who, like the boy Samuel, in today's reading from the Hebrew Bible, said "Here I am," when God called to her.

"Here I am." The boy Samuel had been given to the priest Eli as a nazirite, a boy

dedicated to God by his mother Hannah, in thanks for God finally giving her a child in her old age. Samuel was completely a gift from God, in the eyes of Hannah, and so she made Samuel a gift to God, dedicated to the life of God's tabernacle, the tent where Israel worshiped God, before the building of their great Temple in Jerusalem. Samuel was completely dedicated to God, the way that many of you, like Bob and Debbie, have been so dedicated to this church.

"Here I am." The boy Samuel slept in the tent of worship, watching over the candle lighting the tabernacle, near the chest that held God's Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai. Samuel's heart was pure. Samuel, the son of Hannah and had no power, no privileges, only his accountability to God, who had given him his life. The sons of Eli, the priest, were not accountable. They were not pure. In fact, they had corrupted the practice of faith so badly that God refused to let them rule the tabernacle, a right that should have been theirs, as the sons of Eli. [LISTEN]

"Here I am." The boy Samuel heard a voice calling his name. He thought it was the voice of Eli, and called out to him. Eli told him to go back to bed, twice. But when Samuel came a third time, Eli knew that it was God who was calling Samuel. Eli knew that God was calling to the boy Samuel to be the one accountable to God, in a time when few people heard the voice of God, much less acted on it. It would be Samuel who would step up to lead Israel in faith, and to find them a faithful king. [BLANK]

"Here I am," These three simple words of accountability redeemed the faith of Israel from generations of corruption, and faint hearts and ears, who never cared for God, or heard God, because they never really cared for God's people, the way that God cared for God's people.

This church says "Here I am" to God in many beautiful ways. Your humble service to so many people is very inspiring in so many ways. But as we prepare to bid farewell to Debbie and Bob, I want to make sure that you are aware of some of the important ways that they have said "Here I am" to God's call. One important way that they have responded to God's call is through good stewardship of the church. When I first came here, our church carillon was broken. God's call to grace in this community through music was silent. It was Bob who dug in, tried to fix our ancient carillon, and then scrapped it for a system using a PC. Now, two to four times a day, God's call to grace is heard in South Meriden, because Bob didn't just talk about stewardship - he did it.

"Here I am." We have many church members, as well as other people who we know, who cannot make it to church, or who suddenly stop making it to church. Again, and again, it has been Debbie who has made me aware of the people most in need of our attention for visitation and prayers. When was the last time that you called someone who hasn't been able to make it to our church in awhile? When was the last time that you visited them, or asked to join our visitation team? I wish that I could visit every person who needs visitation, or check in on them. I can't. And, as a United Methodist Pastor, I shouldn't. I should be the Pastor of a church that steps up to check in on its own people, regularly, consistently, and accountably. You are the church, and you need to be caring for

God's people most in need who are the church.

“Here I am.” As you may be aware, we have two new Methodist Faith Groups, now meeting at 5PM and 7PM on Wednesdays. Since I started these groups several months ago, Bob and Debbie have been very accountable members of these groups. They show up, again and again. They let us know when they won't be coming, ahead of time. They contribute not just their presence, but their hearts, their passion for faith, and the wisdom of having been people of faith for so many years. I have been speaking to you now for almost a year about small faith groups as the core of what it means to be a Methodist. Some of you have responded to this challenge, but I thank Debbie and Bob for responding with so much accountability.

So, as Bob and Debbie prepare to enjoy a well deserved retirement, and prepare to travel around this nation, we want to thank them from the bottom of our hearts for their service, their love of God and our church, and their willingness to say “Here I am,” again and again, accountably, as the United Methodist way of Christ. It is now time for us to be stepping up, purifying our hearts, watching for the light of Christ in our own lives, putting aside feelings that don't make room for the healing of Christ, and offer the accountable, healing presence of Christ for others. We are a good church. And, in Christ, we can become an even greater church, for God's sake. And you can be a part of it. All you have to do is to purify your hearts, listen with others for God's call to you, and to say, when you hear God's call: “Here I am.” Amen.