

Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Joe B. Martin
Pastor at Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church in Sandy Springs, GA
On the Occasion of the Ordination of John Ryan
At Davidson College Presbyterian Church
On February 12, 2017

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; John 19:16b-27

I would like to thank Rev. Lib McGregor Simmons, the session of DCPC, the Presbytery of Charlotte, and my friend John Ryan for inviting me here today. This is a big deal for me. And I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ on behalf of Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church in Sandy Springs, GA and on behalf of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, which is extraordinarily proud to have had a part in guiding John through the ordination process and extremely excited that God and you have called him here.

On the occasion of my ordination, my Grandmother Martin gave me this portable communion set as a gift. It is very nice. She tatted a lace doily for the communion plate and made a little monogrammed sack for the communion cups. Note that she put her initials on it, not mine. She did have the carrying case inscribed for me. It reads, “Joseph B. Martin, IV – Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” so as to assure, she said, that if I ever switched denominations I could no longer use it.

She did not agree with everything the church did, but she regarded the Presbyterian Church as her family and thought that in times of disagreement we should stick together no matter what. I imagine she also thought that given a little time, everyone would come around to seeing it her way. There was never any doubt as to what her opinions were.

One day she was sitting at the lunch counter in a drug store waiting for the pharmacist to fill a prescription for her. A total stranger came up and sat down beside her and he asked her out of the blue, “Ma’am, have you been born again?” She quickly answered, “Sir, I am a Presbyterian. I was born right the first time!” Her point was rooted in Reformed Theology and not driven by denominational competition, but there was that, too.

My senior year in High School I was waiting to hear from the two schools I had wanted to attend all my life: Davidson and Duke. I thought my chances were slim with either. I heard from Davidson first. It was a yes and Grandmother Martin was pretty excited about that since it was the alma mater of her husband and four sons. She happened to be at our house on the day the letter came from Duke. Hey, Gran, I got into Duke! Well, that’s nice. How much does it cost to go to Davidson? \$12,000 a year. (Don’t I still wish.) And how much does it cost to go to Duke? \$17,000 a year. Well, we can’t give all that money to the Methodists. Here I came.

So I guess it is easy to understand that from a very early age I regarded Davidson—church, school, and town—as the center of the universe—at least the Presbyterian part of the universe. Those family members who came here before me. A son who lives across the quadrangle. This sanctuary where I became a candidate for ministry at a meeting of Charlotte Presbytery and where I worshiped for four years of college—which was maybe about 5 times. An uncle in the choir and my own childhood pastor and role model in the pews. My wife from Michigan has grown a little weary with the easy connections I am able to make wherever we go from this little spot; and it seems to her like every relationship I have has had something to do with Davidson.

It is a small, small world if we are paying attention and looking for connections and they do not have to be about Davidson. In 1893, a man named Jakob Svendson finally walked down the gangplank and set foot on Ellis Island. It had not been an easy journey in a boat crammed with poor Scandinavian emigrants all seeking prosperity in the new world. It had not even been easy getting onto the ship. His family in Norway had worked and saved and scraped in a time of severe famine to get enough money to send just one of their sons to the United States. Jakob was the lucky one. He was also my great-grandfather on my mother's side. But his future as a corn farmer in Minnesota was not yet assured. He was nervous as he fought the crowds to get in line to see the immigration officer. He had heard that people had been turned away before and the only thing worse than a return trip across the Atlantic would be facing the dashed hopes of his family.

When he reached the agent who represented the last hurdle for admission, he was trembling. "First name?" asked the American. "Jakob." He then saw the agent write down the letters J-O-H-N, not exactly a correct translation, but he was too nervous to correct him. "Last name?" Now Jakob already had decided to take the name of the town from which he came, common practice among Scandinavian emigrants. So he proudly pronounced his new last name, the name of the town in which he grew up, the place where he left his family behind, his home that he would never see again. The name of the town was "Hell." The immigration officer must have responded sternly as he told him that he would have to try again. After thinking for a moment while being rushed by the official, John selected the name of his Lutheran church, Vaernes. V-AE-R-N-E-S. No doubt the American thought that all Scandinavians pronounced their W's as V's and he wrote down Werness. Werness, a new last name for John. A new name for a new life, a name previously unused by anyone in the new world, perhaps any part of the world. Albeit altered, it was still the name of his church and that connection somehow made his old home seem less far away. Psychologically, God's big world became a little smaller.

In 1972, my parents were attending a party in New Jersey. They met a man there named Richard Werness who introduced his wife, Joan Werness. My mother was flabbergasted. "You are kidding me! My maiden name is Joan Werness. Are you from Minnesota?" "No, we aren't." "You must be related to someone from Minnesota, then." "No, we aren't." "Are you descended from people in Hell..., Norway, who went to a little church called Vaerness?" "No, never been to Hell." "Then how on earth did you get the name Werness?" "Well, my German grandfather entered the country at Ellis Island and he was very nervous that he might get sent back. The man in front of him was having some trouble getting through, so when it was my grandfather's turn, he just said, 'John Werness' because it had worked for the last guy." It is a small, small world when we look for our connections.

It is smaller for those with ties to Davidson, but those ties make the breadth of our community bigger, too. It is about what we share. In our lesson from Deuteronomy, we hear the Children of Israel given a choice for when they enter the land that God has promised them.

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in God's ways, and observing God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."

The Promised Land was no cheap grace. There was a way to be in it if life was to prosper. Following God's law might be hard work, but a life of obedience would be a blessing itself as a community developed around a shared land, a shared law, and a shared faith.

Our relationships are rooted in what we share. Oddly enough, among the things John Ryan and I share there has previously been no Davidson connection. He was in Richmond at PSCE while I was at Union Seminary, but we were little more than cordial acquaintances. He then became the Youth Director at First Presbyterian in Dalton, GA—a job I had just before seminary. John moved to Atlanta several years before I did and we ran into each other over the years at all the events where Presbyterians typically gather and where John has been far more connected than I. But our friendship was really more about having friends in common all over the place and John has a bundle of them. And so when he *finally* accepted his call to ordained ministry, I jumped at the chance to be his Presbytery liaison, mainly because I knew Dr. Ryan would be one of the easier ones. What I ended up with was a real friend and a brother. Now everything seems complete since we are fixing the shared Davidson connection.

None of these things are coincidence. It is by design and we call it the connectional nature of the Presbyterian Church. God's creation is big, but we believe that God wants it to seem a little smaller, drawn in tighter by the relationships that we establish and foster. This is why on this joyous day in the particular life of Davidson College Presbyterian Church, there are others here from other churches in the Presbytery of Charlotte. It is a rule of our order that ruling and teaching elders from other congregations constitute the commission that installs pastors in our churches for we recognize that we need each other and that we are all in ministry together and that our celebrations are more joyful when we share them together and our times of struggle, when they come, are eased by the presence and prayers of our sisters and brothers in Christ. We are a family.

However, this is not just a Presbyterian thing. It is a Jesus thing.

According to our lesson from John's gospel, Jesus was forced to carry the cross upon which he would be crucified up Golgotha and there they nailed him to it between two others. Mockingly or not, Pilate had an inscription written on the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Jesus heard the chief priests take exception to the wording, one last hurtful barb on their part. He saw the soldiers take his clothes and cast lots for them as if they were some victor's war booty. And then he looked down and saw his mother standing near the cross with the beloved disciple we presume to be John. Even in his own terrible physical pain, Jesus must have seen the unbearable pain in his mother's eyes as she watched her son being slowly executed for crimes he did not commit. She probably would not even have cared if he had been guilty. This was her son and she was losing him. Even though likely widowed by this time and, therefore, especially vulnerable in that society, it probably did not even cross Mary's mind to worry about who would take care of her now. But it mattered to Jesus.

And the disciple's pain must have been terrible, as well. He was losing his leader and his friend, the one who had held all of them together for three years after they had left their homes, their families, their occupations, and everything else to follow him. He was surely too grieved to worry about himself and what he would do now or who would take care of him, but it mattered to Jesus.

Seeing their pain and knowing their need, Jesus said, "'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." As Jesus was dying on the cross to provide for us the gift of the forgiveness of our sin and the gift of our eternal salvation, at the foot of the cross, Jesus took two unrelated and hurting people, gave them the gift of each other, and made them family. And thus, the Christian Church began.

God knows that we need each other. To share in each other's joy. To share in each other's sorrow. To lift one another up. To inspire, to correct, to love. To be connected. To be family. That is no cheap grace, either. Being a family is work. Maybe you have noticed in yours. But when we work to be family by loving and listening, sharing and serving and staying together, and keeping our common connections strong—the places that matter to us, the ways of being we value, and the faith we share in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior—being in the family of God is a blessing itself and one of the ways that God gives us life—if we choose it.

So in her own special way, Grandmother Martin was spot on. We were born right the first time—and not just the Presbyterians—because we were born into the arms of a loving and gracious God who, through the Son of God, Jesus Christ, has given us the gift, not only of forgiveness and new life, but the precious gift of each other, and made us family. Connected to one another. Connected together to God, sharing the same name Christian. To the glory of God. Amen.