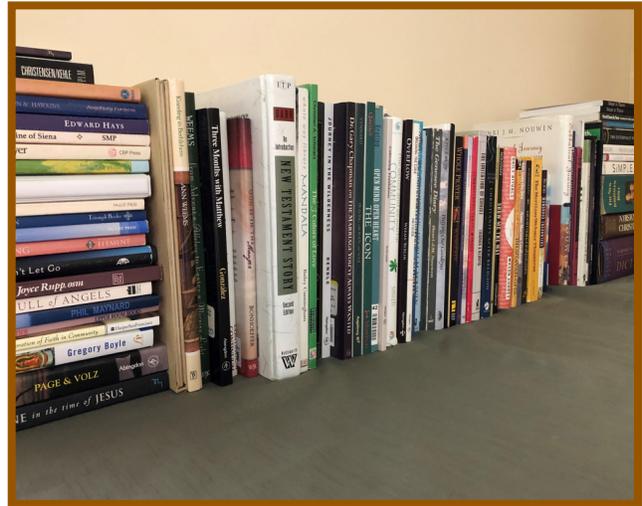


May 2021

Beloved:

I've always loved books. There is just no greater pleasure greater than holding a favorite book in my hands, turning the pages, marking a passage, or folding down a corner for further reflection. Mike loves books too. It is one of the things we have in common. But I don't think he fully realized the size of my library until we moved to Madras. Before this, he had never been around for the unpacking and the filling of the shelves. I recall he was rather shocked when he realized how extensive my library really was. He



could never really complain about my collection, however, since all I would have to quietly whisper back were the words..."wood working tools." , Now that we are getting ready to move into our "retirement home," however, he does have a point. I have too many books. So, I am downsizing. Sigh. And it is hard. It is like having to choose what friends to keep and what friends to leave behind. It would be easier if someone else valued my collection. It is like being on Antiques Roadshow and discovering that no one is interested in your prized possession.

Back when I was still a newly minted pastor, I had a visit from a clergy colleague who was getting ready to retire. He invited me to come by his office to look through his books. I didn't realize at the time, that this would be dangerous to do. When I sat down in his office, he began to pile book after book on his desk for me to take. I kept trying to refuse, and he kept finding just "one more" that he thought would be helpful. I appreciated his generosity, but many of his books were just not anything that would be all that helpful. Most of us realize that any professional book can quickly become outdated. And all his were at least forty years old. It was one of those awkward moments when it was hard to just say no, and I ended up going to my car with an armful of books much bigger than I had intended receiving.

I remember thinking on that day, that when it came time for me to retire, I would not push my books onto some unsuspecting pastor or lay person. A-hem. Well, that day has come. And now I understand much better how that retiring colleague felt.

Downsizing anything is hard. But downsizing my books? Really hard. When I began full-time ministry, the worldwide net was more of a curiosity than an actual tool. There was a professor of sociology that tried to convince her students that it could be a useful resource—but oh my! By the time the "cookies" had loaded onto my computer, I could have gone to the seminary library and chosen a half a dozen monographs and 3 professional journals to peruse. My first appointment was to a small town in Wyoming: the closest theological library was 350 miles away, the nearest bookstore 120 and online books were a gleam in some future visionary's eye. So, I started building my library.

Our "retirement home" does not have room for even a fraction of my collection. So, I have been sorting, and sorting and then sorting again. What should I save? What should I give away? And, even harder, what to do with the books no one

wants? I now understand why my colleague kept trying to fill my arms with books. It is a bit like trying to give away a puppy. . I want them to go to good homes. But, alas, some of my books are outdated, having become victims of ministry trends and fads that are no longer of value. Others might be helpful in the right hands but finding that select group and shipping heavy volumes is not likely to be possible within time and financial constraints. And I love my books. Some, well, they are like photographs of a particular moment in life—like the old black and white pictures of a family gathering. They simply won't mean anything to anyone else. The thought of some of them ending up in a landfill or recycling paper bin makes me want to weep.

But I'm getting there. Letting go of books is just the beginning lesson, really. Along with my library, these last few weeks have been filled with rooting through closets and drawers to make judgments about clothes that haven't fit for over a decade, inherited linens that no one uses anymore (do you know what an antimacassar is?); and dishes I no longer use. But along with letting go of "stuff," I also find myself needing to let go of even more important things. It is time for me to learn to let go of my pastoral identity. And that, beloved, is much harder to let go of than even my most prized volumes of wisdom and learning. Very soon, I will not only be giving up a job I love, but I will be giving up being a pastor alongside people near and far who I call my beloved family. I won't be preaching each week. I won't be leading prayer groups, or studies, or sit with you over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine to swap stories of the ridiculous and the sublime. Being a pastor has never been described as an easy life—at least not by anyone who has given it a try. But it has its moments. I tend to put them in the column labeled: Holy Ground. As a pastor I have been invited into some of the most vulnerable moments in life—the beginnings, the ending, the joys and disappointments. The Holy Ground moments are what keep me going during times that are tough. It is a privilege that never gets old, and I have never taken for granted.

If you are looking for a book on theology, history, pastoral care, preaching, church vitality, or biblical study, I might just be able to help you with that—and I'll try not to load up your arms to overflowing. But no matter how much letting go I will be doing in these next weeks and months, I will never let go of the stories we have shared together. I have been blessed by your trust, your love and your heart for serving God.

*Blessings and Peace, Pastor Nancy*