



Over the years, the church has gradually caved into the idea that the building can be used beyond worship and Bible study; that it can be a center for the community to gather. So, if you ever look at calendars displayed online or in congregation newsletters, you'll see a fair share of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Al-Anon, sewing and baking groups, even yoga or cardio-drumming. And when such events occur inside fellowship halls or random rooms around sanctuaries across this country and beyond, the forefront of the Gospel proclamation does not lie with the pastor or a deacon or someone higher up in religious bureaucracy. Instead, it lies with the custodian, who must display a kindness beyond understanding, a patience beyond comprehension, and a willingness to be just as hospitable to the greatest financial contributor to the church operation as with the one who will come for some random graduation party inside the walls and never return again. The custodian, in a way, is called to be an embodiment of Christ's compassion and love no matter what baggage they're carrying in with them. And for nearly 20 years, we have had that with Tom Eaton.

There's something to be said about taking the time to extend our appreciation to him as we bid farewell into his retirement on this day when the Good Samaritan story is brought front and center. Hopefully Tom was never expected to bandage any physical wounds necessarily, but we in the church are more than fully aware that there are hidden wounds because of what the church operation has been for far too many children of God. The physical sanctuaries have not always been sanctuaries for everyone. We must admit that we have done our fair share of instilling guilt and shame, leading to God only knows how many to insist never to return. For them, church buildings do not instill hope, but fear. We know they are out there. And we know that the God we worship, the God for whom we have not always proclaimed with brutal honesty just how far the Divine love really goes into the deepest ditches of our humanity, we know the God we worship has this kindness beyond understanding, a patience beyond comprehension, and a willingness to be just as hospitable to the most dedicated church-goer as to the one who believes Jesus Christ has simply walked on the other side from them never to return.

So, even though I hope Tom has never been asked to bandage actual physical wounds while working here, I think he still has bandaged the hidden ones with his kindness beyond understanding, his patience beyond comprehension, and a willingness to be just as hospitable to the steadfast Divinity members as to the one he's never met before and will never see again. It is a ministry to make this building available for the AAs and the NAs and the Al-Anons and even the graduation and random family parties to gather. Because in those times that just seem to fill slots on church calendars, are meetings of hope and joy and an insistence that nothing that is endured in this life is meant to do so alone. Time and time again, Tom opened this place up not just with physical doors and lights turned on, but Tom opened up the heart of this Divinity family. Tom opened up the heart of God so that these people amidst the chaos of the day-to-day living, including on the days when they wonder if they are in too deep of a ditch that no one is willing to pull them out; Tom opened this place up so that in whatever way possible, they can still experience the Gospel. Even if it isn't in a worship or a Bible study, God will still find a way to reach over to the opposite corner of the building, into the parking lot and well, well beyond.

Yes, the church has gradually caved into the idea of buildings being used by the community for these groups to come together in offering support and joy and celebration. Yes, deep down we wouldn't mind a few of them to trickle down to this corner of the building. Maybe some day they might, but I think God is just as alive in that corner as God is here. And I think Tom in his own humble and kindhearted and just-doin'-his-job way, made sure that was known, too. To just provide a time and space for other children of God who aren't so sure about this corner, to still experience a precious glimpse into the One who still thoroughly adores them, into the One who didn't walk on the other side away from them, but who got down in the ditch with them, and no matter how long it takes, will stay as long as eternity to get us out. As if nothing can happen in this life to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. So for Tom's own precious way of proclaiming that Gospel, and in all the ways you do as well, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!