

“Saying goodbye”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10 and John 14:1-14

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

It’s something we all do at various points in our lives: we say goodbye. In becoming human, Jesus has to say goodbye too. The lectionary today gives us an excerpt from several chapters in the Gospel of John known as Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse,” his final words to his disciples before his death. It might feel odd to read this now, in the midst of Easter. Goodbye? Didn’t he just come back? But Jesus knows that even after he is resurrected, he will only be staying for a little while. He has places to go, things to do, and very soon he will ascend to heaven. The incarnation—Jesus’ presence on earth as God—will end.

John devotes a whopping five chapters to this single night. That’s more than any other event in the entire Gospel. To put that in perspective, the resurrection only gets two chapters! This is the longest we ever hear Jesus talk. Something important is happening here.

Jesus is sitting with his disciples. He’s walked with them for three years. They have slept side by side, confronted authorities together, witnessed wonders beyond imagination, and sat at Jesus’ feet as he unfolded the mysteries before them. He has loved them, and they have loved him. And now he tells them that he’s leaving. “Where I am going, you cannot come,” he says (13:33). Imagine the pain, the shock. Yes, he’s been trying all along to prepare them for this moment, to tell them this must happen; you don’t take on the world and all its hate, greed, and ignorance and not expect it to hit back. But they didn’t want to think about that, any more than we want to think about it for someone we love. Jesus looks into their eyes and sees fear.

Peter asks, “Where are you going?” (13:36). Thomas asks, “How can we know the way?” (14:5). The other Judas asks, “How is that you will reveal yourself to us?” (14:22). In other words: Is there any hope beyond this goodbye? Or will you just be gone?

We speak many goodbyes in life—to loved ones, to friends who move away, to colleagues who retire or change jobs, to relationships that end, and of course, to pastors.

It is right to grieve these goodbyes. “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn,” Jesus says. “You will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy” (16:20). Jesus honors the grief of goodbyes. He cried for his friend Lazarus when he died. He will cry in the garden. I wonder if he doesn’t cry now. But Jesus also gives hope.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus says. “Believe in God; believe also in me” (14:1). The Greek word here for “believe” means to “to trust.” So we could also translate this as Jesus saying, “Don’t worry. Trust me.”

“I go to prepare a place for you,” he says. Nothing Jesus does is without purpose. He arrives with a purpose; he departs with a purpose. He’s leaving because he’s got work to do. With God, Jesus becomes our intercessor—the one who prays for us, roots for us, protects us, and prepares a place for us.

He’s also leaving because *we’ve* got work to do. “Very truly, I tell you,” he says, “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (14:12). He has to leave in order for the disciples to do these great things. Did you ever notice that it’s only after Jesus leaves that Peter finds his courage and becomes the rock of the church he was always meant to be? It’s this weird fact of life: the student needs the teacher, the child needs the parent, but at some point the teacher and the parent have to get out of the way and let them walk on their own—it’s the only way they grow up. Simba doesn’t become king if Mufasa never leaves him.

But of course, as anyone who’s watched *The Lion King* knows, Mufasa’s spirit is still very much with Simba, and when Simba is in crisis, Mufasa speaks to Simba from the heavens to remind him of who he is. In the same way, Jesus says that in his absence God will send the Holy Spirit to guide the disciples. “It is for your own good,” Jesus says, “that I am going away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you” (16:7). Whereas the disciples once encountered God in Jesus, they will now, in Jesus’ absence, meet God within themselves (14:17).

In his book *The Living Reminder*, Henri Nouwen writes, “The great mystery of the divine revelation is that God entered into intimacy with us not only by Christ’s coming, but also by his leaving.”

I remember reflecting on this when our sons Ezra and Leo were stillborn and we had to say goodbye to them before their lives even started. I felt God’s absence then. And it made me mad. But then I read those words from Jesus and Henri Nouwen, and I realized that absence can be just as important as presence. Emptiness creates space. Space to question and wrestle, to sob and rage, to hear wisdom, to create and imagine, to ask for help and receive it. It creates space to relinquish all pretense at understanding and to stand silently, without explanation. It creates space for compassion and for seeing the pain of others.

We are accustomed to thinking of God as “presence”—and indeed that is true. But perhaps God is also absence. Perhaps God is as present to us in the “goodbye” as God is in the “hello.”

It must hurt God something awful. It must hurt so bad not to hold God’s children and make everything better, to close the gap. But the truth is—and God knows this truth—you can’t write on a filled page, you can’t think in a noisy room, and you can’t grow without space to stretch. And maybe you can’t meet God until he leaves.

But no goodbye is forever. Jesus promises that they will see each other again. “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (14:3). He goes on: “So you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice” (16:22). This absence will not last forever.

Frederick Buechner remembers missing his brother so much after he died that he called his brother's empty apartment. He knew no one was there to answer, but he just so badly wanted to hear his voice again. He writes, "So I sat there in the Vermont sunshine—this skeptical old believer, this believing old skeptic, who you would have thought had better sense—and let the phone ring, let it ring, let it ring. Did Jamie answer it? How wonderful to be able to say that by some miracle he did and that I heard his voice again, but of course he didn't, he didn't, he didn't, and all I heard was the silence of his absence. Yet who knows? Who can ever know anything for sure about the mystery of things? 'In my Father's house there are many rooms,' Jesus said, and I would bet my bottom dollar that in one of those many rooms that phone rang and rang true and was heard. I believe that in some sense my brother's voice was in the ringing itself, and that Jesus' voice was in it too."

In every goodbye, there is a promise: "I will see you again." But for now, you need this space for something new to emerge. The Holy Spirit. You yourself, apostles, empowered to do the work of God. What else might emerge in the absence? What new revelations and wonders and beauties may we discover?

This is no less true for a pastor. Though I leave, God does not.

My hope is that, as I say goodbye, you will discover within yourselves—and some of you already have—the power to minister to this community. You will discover the freedom and the space to adapt and claim the vision of this church as your own. People have come to me and asked me who will do this work once I leave. The answer, of course, is simple: You will.

You are a living stone, a holy priest, a spark of the power and light of God. Do not fear goodbyes. They may give you the space you need to meet God for yourself and to become the living stone that you are. So, my friends, always say "goodbye" as if you were saying "hello."

It's how I say goodbye to you. It's how every person you've ever loved says goodbye.

Hello. **Amen.**