

Saying Goodbye

When my beloved pastor, Rev. Patterson, was saying goodbye, I only remember one thing he said. He said he was going to put a tissue in each bulletin. But then he thought maybe they wouldn't need them so he didn't do that. That's kind of the reason you don't have a tissue in your bulletin either.

If you have ever dropped off someone at the airport, you know the drill. Many times, we don't bother to park when we take our friend or loved one to the airport. It's not that we don't love the person or wish them a safe journey or want to hold their hand for one last minute, it is just that you can only go so far into the airport before the one departing has to check in the luggage, pass through security and go to the seats reserved for those who are scheduled to actually be on the plane.

Then, most people don't want to pray for parking, so most of us say our goodbyes in the car on the approach to the airport and settle for quick hug while we're getting the luggage out of the trunk. "Call me when you get there." we say. And then we get into the car and drive away, sometimes with tears in our eyes and a catch in our throat.

Contrast this with arrivals at the airport, or just about anywhere where people are traveling or awaiting news. Is there anything more heart warming than to see people waiting at the closest thing to the gate for their loved one to step off the plane, walk down the hall and into a hug? Is there anything more cheerful than an enthusiastic greeting that shows someone that they were hopefully anticipated, eagerly awaited and lovingly drawn in for that big hug of welcome?

I've always thought that architects should create special places or designated spots for loved ones and friends to say their goodbyes – like a good bye guest lounge, rather than the usual departure zone which happens curbside at the airport. Standing by the car, in the "no parking zone" with horns blaring and people rushing by, taxis waiting and buses pulling up with your car's emergency lights blinking while you simultaneously grab the luggage from the trunk offers no real space or time to say good bye properly. A quick hug and rushed words always seem entirely out of kilter with the emotional moment at hand.

Today our scripture features Jesus praying for his disciples. , Jesus, unlike some of the other gospels – in John 17 actually does this long goodbye speech and in it, he sounds a lot like a mother sending her eldest off to college, out into the world, or into a new marriage.

For one thing, he reminds the disciples of everything that he taught them and second, he prays for them. . He turns to his parent in heaven and prays the prayer that crosses the lips of many a parent – "Dear God. I have done all I could. I gave them the words and the teachings that you taught me. I prepared them as you prepared me. I did my best. I protected and guarded them as much as I possibly could. Don't abandon them. Don't abandon me. Keep your word. Keep them from the evil one. Keep an eye on them. And please don't let them do anything stupid."

Well, maybe not that last part. But if you read the words of John, you have a sense of Jesus pleading, begging his God and our God, to care for these friends of his because he can no longer do so in the way that he once could.

This departure, this pleading, probably happens more than we think by moms and dads, brothers and sisters, good friends and lovers, as they drive away from the curbside drop off at Wayne State, or at the train station, the steps of the dorm, or the prison gate or the hospital room, or rehab after visiting hours.

You leave a job of 5 years or retire from a career of 21 years, you leave plans for your successor to help guide the team or the staff in the coming days, and after praying for the best possible outcome, you walk out the door, and leave.

You let go. You do so because you must. But it takes time. The mental letting go doesn't always go hand in hand with the physical. Especially if you were deeply invested in someone, some project or some cause bigger than yourself.

Departures of any kind necessitate a certain amount of grieving, time to process and an emotional and spiritual letting go."

As Edward White points out in the book "Saying Goodbye: A Time of Growth for Congregations and Pastors:

"Often it is the transitions of life that are the greatest occasions for growth. In addition to appreciating what we are leaving and what we are moving to, we can learn many secrets of the Spirit by monitoring the experience of the transition itself. We can discover new things about ourselves and about the God who is with us in the transitions."

My hope is that we will discover some amazing things about ourselves and God upon my retirement. Almost immediately we will begin to discover that I will no longer be able to relate to you in the same way as I previously have as the pastor who was daily active and present in the congregation's life and Sunday worship. After June 30, I won't be in a position to provide pastoral care or talk about church business or perform baptisms or preach, teach and serve you.

In that same book "Saying Goodbye: Joan Mahon says that the pastor ceases to be the pastor/friend and becomes the friend only. Relationships must then be redefined as friendships alone, apart from ecclesiastical roles.

It will take some time for both you and I to get used to that shift in our relationship and for that reason, I am committed to being away from you for the next year. I know that is frustrating and that there are still some of you who don't understand this. It is a decision that I'm making out of my love for you and the love I have for this church. It is important for Paul to become your new clergy leader and for that to happen, I can't be here.

I love you enough to let you go and be the people God is calling you to be – Central with memories of my ministry here but without me as your pastor. All I ask in return is that you also love me enough to let me go and be the person God is calling me to be as a retired clergy person.

Love Paul as much as you love me. It will be your best affirmation that my ministry with you was healthy, strong and enduring. It has been my main prayer in this ministry to deepen your commitment to Jesus Christ, his church and his mission and your continued leadership in this congregation will be the best tribute to me and my ministry.

Did you know that Goodbye is really a shortened version of God be with you. In recent weeks, I've seen traces of "God be with you" through the various ways that members' have already shared their good byes. Through cards and e-mails and tear conversations.

And it is those powerful acts of "goodbye" that remind me of God's wondrous presence in our lives over these past 9 years.

I remember the call I got from my District Superintendent, Melanie Carey called and said those words I had been dreaming of since the day of my ordination. "The Cabinet has discerned that you should be appointed to Detroit: Central United Methodist Church." And my response? "Shut up!"

I remember my introduction. It was MLK weekend. I remember that Sylvia Oatley was on the Staff/Pastor Parish committee. She asked, in front of my boss, if I would do same gender loving weddings." Do you remember that, Sylvia? I said I am not answering that in front of my boss. Shortly after the introduction, Sylvia came up to me and I said, "Of course I will do that." To which she responded, "I could see it in your eyes."

The committee was also a little nervous about the fact that I am a graduate of Asbury College and Asbury Seminary. It is my prayer that after nine years, I have proven how that doesn't make a pastor a conservative for the rest of their lives!

We've been through a lot. We've had pipes burst more than I care to remember. We have been dealing with re-development in at least 4 different versions since we started and now it's really going to happen.

We've housed several mission groups from around the country to do a week in the D. We met with Mayor Duggan and the United Nations about the water crisis. We have worked with the Detroit Business District to help them to understand that we will serve those who are marginalized regardless of how uncomfortable it makes them.

We declared ourselves a sanctuary church because of the refugee crisis in our country. If you have forgotten that was an election year. And because we are the conscious of the city, we did not remain silent during those Trump years, did we? We have housed four families here at Central since that decision. From Angola, Albania, Cameroon and Ivory Coast. We had Ded and his family the longest at 3 ½ years. We did a pilgrimage to Lansing on his behalf, we had lots of fundraisers and lots of food cooked by our beloved Ded. Being a sanctuary church was a huge step of faith, and we didn't know how we'd afford it. We didn't know where the money would come from but it did.

It has been so amazing to me that this congregation in the middle of December, in the middle of Advent, that when it was announced that I would be flying to do a protest at the southern border, you all cheered! Amazing! What other congregation does that?

We also took the step of faith with hiring a full time Director of Children, Youth and Family ministries. First with Rebecca Wilson, who paved the way for Deaconess Anne Hillman who is doing an amazing job.

It was a time that we partnered with our siblings at the Islamic Center of America. We did several activities throughout the years with them, including Interfaith prayer services and educational opportunities.

I was thankful that I could perform same gender loving ceremonies here at the church and at other locations around the state without hiding that from this congregation.

We have laughed during holy humor Sundays and we have cried during the senseless gun violence that has destroyed our children's lives.

And we lived through a pandemic. First with awkward videos of me preaching in an empty sanctuary, to learning how to do zoom worship. Then we moved to the parking lot, with worship through your radio while Anne and I stood outside freezing. Then we had worship outside with our sound system that was louder than those lions and tiger's fans walking around.

You have shared stories with me about your deepest fears, secrets, hopes, dreams, lost dreams, dead relatives long ago and yesterday, new born babies, hospitalizations, insecurities, theological questions, new ways of doing justice work. We have laughed and cried and sat in silence.

When Jesus left he gave his friends and disciples a blessing. He urges them forward. He gives them encouragement. He promises them an Advocate, a comforter who will come and who will be in Spirit with them. And then he prays for them – he prays for their well-being, - as he goes to God.

It means that Jesus will be present in some mysterious way through all of our arrivals and departures, even when he hastily move on to the next thing or the next chapter with tears in our eyes and a catch in our throat. Even when we are struggling to remove all of our baggage from somebody else's trunk, or are parked precariously with our emergency lights blinking and the rain pouring down all around.

Jesus will be there when the one person who knew us well has embarked on a plane or a journey to Timbuktu, and even when we are still clinging, even when our soul knows that it is best for us to let go, let go and let go already, we can still hear – we can still slow down enough to listen to the Spirit saying something to us.

And that something will sound a lot like something that Frederick Buechner, in the Spirit, once wrote:

“When you remember me, it means you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind even though countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me.

Bob Perks tells the following story. He once over heard a father and daughter in their last moments together at the airport.

They had announced the daughter’s departure and standing near the security gate, Father and Daughter hugged and he said, “I love you. I wish you enough.”

She in turn said, “Daddy, our life together has been enough. Your love is all I ever needed. I wish you enough, too, Daddy.”

They kissed and she left. He walked over toward the window where Bob was seated. Standing here, he would see the father wanted and needed to cry. Bob tried not to intrude on his privacy, but the father welcomed him in by asking, “Did you ever say goodbye to someone knowing it would be forever?”

“Yes, I have”, Bob replied. “Forgive me for asking but why is this a forever goodbye?”

“I am old and she lives much too far away. I have challenges ahead and the reality is, the next trip back would be for my funeral.” the father replied.

“When you were saying goodbye I heard you say, ‘I wish you enough? May I ask what that means?’”

The father began to smile. That’s a wish that has been handed down from other generations. My parents used to say it to everyone.” He paused for a moment and looking up as if trying to remember it in detail, he smiled even more. “When we said, “I wish you enough” we were wanting the other person to have a life filled with just enough good things to sustain them,” he continued and then turning toward Bob he shared the following as if he were reciting it from memory.”

I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude bright.

I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun more.

I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive.

I wish you enough pain so that the smallest joys in life appear much bigger.

I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting.

I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess.

I wish you enough “Hello’s” to get you through the goodbyes.”

May it be so. Amen