

The Good “Good-Bye”¹

John 14:1-3

First Presbyterian Church

June 5, 2022

14‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3And 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.

Sermon

It’s the sort of thing a parent never forgets: a two-year old child heading off to preschool for the first time. Sporting new OshKosh B’Gosh overalls... lugging a backpack filled with a water bottle, lunch box, and a spare set of clothes. The feel of that little hand clinching your pants leg as you approach the classroom door... the voice of a cheerful teacher saying, “Good morning!” Then there is the questioning glance, “Do I have to?” The assurance, “It’ll be alright. You’ll have fun. I love you.” And then, “Good-bye.”

Several miles down the road a song comes on the radio – it’s by the Byrds – singing those well-known words from Ecclesiastes – you know them: For everything, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn, and a time to every purpose under heaven.”

But is that true? IS there a time for everything? No question, parents must learn to say good-bye... kids, too, must learn to say goodbye. Too long under our parents’ wings... too long dependent on our parents’ support... and no human being can develop into a mature adult. It’s a question of timing. Good-byes must be said... and when they are said at the right time, they are good good-byes. There are good good-byes when we send our kid off to her first sleepover... and good good-byes when he leaves home for college. Fathers and mothers say good good-byes when sons and daughters marry and start families of their own. It is as is should be. A good good-bye. And then, there are ministers... ministers often say good-bye. Not long after I arrived here in Hickory, I noticed there was no place for the pastor’s name on our sign out front. It was a good lesson... a good reminder that (as I said a couple of weeks ago), all ministry is “transitional ministry.” Ministers come and go, but First Pres. Hickory goes on in ministry and mission as it has for nigh on 150 years. The coming and going of pastors and associate pastors is one part of a church’s ongoing life in which we hope and pray for many glad hellos and just as many good good-byes.

¹ I am indebted to Rev. K.C. Thomey, the late pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN., for the title and idea behind this sermon. In the same way, Rev. Ptomey credits Rev. Patrick Willson.

There are lots of good-byes scattered throughout the Bible – Abraham and Sarah saying good-bye to their family in Haran... Moses blessing the Israelites before he dies... the Apostle Paul, sitting in a Roman prison, writing heartfelt words to the churches he started. But perhaps no good-bye words are as poignant as those said by Jesus to his disciples just before his trial and crucifixion. They actually began on the night before Jesus' arrest. It was an evening of foreboding and sadness as the disciples began to realize that he would be leaving them. So, the Lord speaks to their troubled hearts with these words we typically read at funerals: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." We hear these words and take them to mean that Jesus has gone to heaven to get a place ready for us... so that when we die, we will be there with him. And that IS what he promises/means... that we will spend our future with Jesus in our Father's house.

But here's the thing – Jesus THEN says that IN the Father's house there are many "dwelling places" (or as some prefer "mansions.") And when he does that, he uses a very special word... a word that means "abide," which in John's Gospel is not about a FUTURE LOCATION/PLACE called heaven, but a PRESENT RELATIONSHIP of love and trust... a present "communion" we might say. "Abide in me," he says, "as I abide in you."²

Friends, Jesus is making two promises here. First, the promise of a place... of an eternal abiding place with him in God's house. And second, the promise of present ongoing relationship.³ "You will be with me in the future," he says. "And I am with you now so that my work may go on and on through you."

Over the past 10 years, you and I have read this passage countless times to find comfort at the time of the death of a loved one. Well, today I want to suggest that it offers the same comfort at times of transition... at times when we must say "good-bye." Because it promises that when we say good-bye to someone in whom we have experienced something of God's presence, God doesn't leave us... God sticks around. And when those with whom we have shared in God's ministry and mission say good-bye... the ministry, the mission, the good work continues. Therefore, our hearts need not be troubled or afraid.

That gives me comfort, friends, as we say good-bye. And it gives me hope, both for me and for you. Because it means that our good-byes are not simply courtesies... not just something we say. They are prayers. Did you know that our word "Good-bye" is an abbreviation of "God be with you?" And this is what Jesus promises when he says good-bye to his friends God will be with you, and you, and you, and with me.

² John 15:4

³ Fred. B. Craddock, John, Knox Preaching Guides, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 107-108.

So, good-bye, God be with you, little child, toddling off to preschool,
and with your parents.

Good-bye, God be with you,
high school graduate heading off to college,
and with those you leave behind.

Good-bye, God be with you, son, daughter, on your wedding day,
and with your families who bless you.

Good-bye, God be with you, lifelong friend,
as you move to be near your family
and with those who will miss you.

And good-bye, God be with you, pastor, as you retire,
and with your beloved congregation you will never forget.

Good-byes are hard, especially when there is such love. But they are GOOD when they are spoken in the sure and certain knowledge that in all our comings and goings, Jesus abides with us always... and that his work will continue through me and through you. Our Spanish sisters and brothers say it so lyrically, Vaya con Dios! Go with God. And so, we do!