

## Praying Our Goodbyes

*Acts 20:17-38 (Common English Bible)*

*From Miletus Paul sent a message to Ephesus calling for the church's elders to meet him. When they arrived, he said to them, "You know how I lived among you the whole time I was with you, beginning with the first day I arrived in the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears in the midst of trials that came upon me because of the Jews' schemes. You know I held back nothing that would be helpful so that I could proclaim to you and teach you both publicly and privately in your homes. You know I have testified to both Jews and Greeks that they must change their hearts and lives as they turn to God and have faith in our Lord Jesus. Now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem. I don't know what will happen to me there. What I do know is that the Holy Spirit testifies to me from city to city that prisons and troubles await me. But nothing, not even my life, is more important than my completing my mission. This is nothing other than the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus: to testify about the good news of God's grace.*

*"I know that none of you will see me again—you among whom I traveled and proclaimed the kingdom. Therefore, today I testify to you that I'm not responsible for anyone's fate. I haven't avoided proclaiming the entire plan of God to you. Watch yourselves and the whole flock, in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as supervisors, to shepherd God's church, which he obtained with the death of his own Son. I know that, after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you and won't spare the flock. Some of your own people will distort the word in order to lure followers after them. Stay alert! Remember that for three years I constantly and tearfully warned each one of you. I never stopped warning you! Now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all whom God has made holy. I haven't craved anyone's silver, gold, or clothing. You yourselves know that I have provided for my own needs and for those of my companions with my own hands. In everything I have shown you that, by working hard, we must help the weak. In this way we remember the Lord Jesus' words: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"*

*After he said these things, he knelt down with all of them to pray. They cried uncontrollably as everyone embraced and kissed Paul. They were especially grieved by his statement that they would never see him again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.*

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"The two hardest things to say in life are "hello" for the first time, and "goodbye" for the last time." Author Moira Rogers wrote those profound words. I find them to be true. How about you?

I heard a memorable first "hello" story about a young girl named Leslie. One Sunday during the Prayers of God's People, she asked for her sick pet turtle to be healed. After worship the pastor ask how she knew the turtle was sick. The seven-year-old rolled her eyes at this ridiculous adult question and said, "Well, because he is moving so slowly."

Before the pastor could reply, another little girl ran by them in the sanctuary. Leslie yelled, "Hey! What do you think you're doing?!" She ran up to the girl, who looked terrified, and said, "This is my church, and we don't run like that! In my church, we don't run by ourselves. When we run, we hold hands!" Then Leslie grabbed the hand of the little girl, who was now smiling, and said, "Come on! We're getting cookies."

Leslie made the challenge of “hello” easy, but sometimes “the two hardest things to say in life are “hello” for the first time, and “goodbye” for the last time.”

I’m better hello than goodbye. Whenever I meet someone new, I make it a point to introduce myself and get to know a little about them. I’m like my dad who could carry on a meaningful conversation with a brick wall. Hello maybe challenging, but I prefer it over goodbye.

When Libby and I visit or share a meal with friends, I have a hard time leaving. Libby knows when it's time to go. She says, “This has been wonderful. I wish we could stay, but it's late, and we need to be going.” That's my cue to get up and move toward the door.

Most of the time I sit there. I know it's late, but a part of me doesn't want to go. So, I linger. Libby gets her things together and starts toward the door. “What's the rush?” ask our hosts. “Why are you in a hurry to leave? Stay a little longer.”

Finally, I get the “look” and soon after we say our goodbyes. On the way home, Libby wonders why I can't just leave. I say that I like to leave the same way molasses leaves a bottle – slow and easy. I'll let you know next time I need a ride home.

Leave-taking, departing, and saying goodbye is never easy. Something deep inside us resists the move from presence to absence. Have you found yourself lingering after a party? Have you watched the clock during a visit with far away friends? Have you stood in the driveway and waved goodbye to your favorite relatives? Have you wished your pastor wouldn't retire?

The move from presence to absence is unsettling. When someone is present, our space is filled. We're not alone. There's conversation and communion. But when someone leaves a hollow place develops. Absence brings silence. Is it any wonder we cling to presence and avoid saying goodbye?

The words we use at leave-taking describe the difficulty of letting go. The English *goodbye*, the Spanish *adios*, the French *adieu* all hint of a spiritual need between presence and absence. They suggest we need God's help during departures. They imply we need to give someone to God when they leave and we can't hold on to them any longer.

As Frederick Buechner noted in his book, *Whistling In The Dark: The noise of the traffic almost drowns out the sound of the word, but the shape of it lingers on the old man's lips. He tries to look vigorous and resourceful as he holds out his hand to the other old man. “Goodbye.” This time they say it so nearly in unison that it makes them both smile. It was a long while ago that the words God be with you disappeared into the word, goodbye, but every now and again some trace of them still glimmers through.*

Goodbye. God be with you. Go with God. That's what glimmers in our reading from Acts. This story describes Paul's last Sunday and sermon with the church in Ephesus. For three years, Paul worked with that Christian community. Now he's moving on.

Paul addresses his farewell directly. He tells the people there's little chance of his return. This is his final goodbye. He allows everyone the luxury of tears, and although it's not mentioned, I imagine there was a potluck and lots of laughter at Paul's expense.

Do you remember how he would say "Beth-le-HAM" when he told the story of Jesus birth? How about all those y'all's over the years? What about that Sunday afternoon he left for home and had to come back when he realized he was supposed to officiate a wedding? Scheduling was not his strong suite, was it?

Paul's love for this congregation shines through this story. He anticipates the loss of relationships that mean so much to him. *"You know how I lived among you the whole time I was with you... You know I held back nothing that would be helpful so that I could proclaim to you and teach you both publicly and privately in your homes...I know that none of you will see me again—you among whom I traveled and proclaimed the kingdom."*

The Apostle expresses his apprehensive about the future and what lays ahead. *"Now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem. I don't know what will happen to me there. What I do know is that the Holy Spirit testifies to me from city to city that prisons and troubles await me."*

Paul reviews his ministry among them, and warns of potential pitfalls in his absence. *I know that, after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you and won't spare the flock. Some of your own people will distort the word in order to lure followers after them. Stay alert!*

Paul trusts that God will lead the congregation into the future. *Now I entrust you to God and the message of God's grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all whom God has made holy.*

Paul prays his goodbye with the Ephesians. *After he said these things, he knelt down with all of them to pray. They cried uncontrollably as everyone embraced and kissed Paul. They were especially grieved by his statement that they would never see him again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.*

I can't imagine a better story for us on my final Sunday here. It captures the grief and heartache we feel. It portrays the love we share as congregation and pastor. It also offers us a healthy example of leave taking by praying our goodbyes.

Before Paul departs, he commissions the congregation to continue the work he started: First, testifying to the good news of God's grace and then supporting the weak: *...nothing, not even my life, is more important than my completing my mission. This is nothing other than the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus: to testify about the good news of God's grace... In everything I have shown you that, by working hard, we must help the weak. In this way we remember the Lord Jesus' words: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

I want to commission you to continue the work we've done over the past 19 years. Keep testifying to the good news of God's grace in who you are and what you do. Keep doing the work of faith and the labor of love that I shared two weeks ago, and never, ever let go of your steadfastness of hope.

Hold on to your name and identity and live out of it. As I said last week, be the community church and be the Presbyterian church of this valley. Your witness and work are necessary today as it was 140 years ago when this church was founded.

Support the weak and the poor and the oppressed. Love your neighbor and the stranger and your enemy. Continue putting your faith into action by doing the hard work of caring for the least, the lost and the lonely. Incarnate Jesus words “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Like Paul I am moving on and you will not see me for a while. It won't be never, but until you call a new pastor and she or he invites me back. We will both need time to grieve, as did Paul and the Ephesians, and you will need time to bond with you new pastor.

Many have asked what am I going to do when I retire. My wife Libby says I have to take over all the cooking, cleaning and pet care. I hope there's time for other things. Truth is, I don't yet know what I'm going to do in retirement. If I follow in your footsteps, I'm going to be very busy. Libby and I want to travel while we're able after she retires in a couple of years. Plus, there are several honey-do projects waiting for me at the house.

The only thing I'm sure of at this point is that I'm taking a sabbatical from church for the next five months. I never had a sabbatical in 37 years of ministry even though you tried to provide me one.

I'm looking forward to a journey inward and letting go of my role and work as a pastor that has defined me for so long. I've got lots of reflective books to read and prayerful meditative practices to try. I want to spend time fly fishing, so you may see me or my car in the Jemez. If you do, it's ok for us to hug and talk. But don't ask me to pray. Just kidding.

Paul commends the Ephesians into the care of the Almighty at the end of his last sermon. I want us to do the same with each other. I invite you to pray our goodbye by offering the words Paul wrote later in his letter to the Ephesians. The elders and I used these words at our last Session meeting this week. The words will be on your screen. Let us pray together:

*I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through God's Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Vaya con Dios, mis amigos. God with God, my friends.

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