

May 20, 2007

John 17:20-26

Sermon: “You Say ‘Hello’ and God Says ‘Good-bye’” Bob Jack
Text: “*The glory that you have given me I have given them.*”

Have you ever been in a situation where it was real hard to say good-bye? Last week, visiting my mom in Massachusetts on Mother’s Day for the first time in 32 years, after nearly losing her last year to open heart surgery – *real* hard to say good-bye. Even though I was anxious to get back to Carol and the family, it was difficult leaving my mother. Parting can be sorrowful.

I remember a time when I took a church youth group to visit some elderly and shut-ins. The older folks were delighted to have the company of the youth, and I think the youth really enjoyed themselves, too. But I noticed something in the course of that visit. The teenagers didn’t know how to leave. After we had visited for a while, I knew that the teens probably had better things to do with their evening. I knew that they really wanted to go, but didn’t know how to go – how to politely excuse themselves from their company. So I had to do it for them.

So there was an awkward lingering at the door, and a gaping silence over what to say next, and I realized that saying good-bye isn't as natural as you'd think. Those kids had to be taught how to say good-bye. You and I need to be taught how to say good-bye. It doesn't come naturally. There's a way to do it.

When someone is with us, our space is filled, we are not alone. There is conversation and communion. When someone leaves us, there is absence and there is crisis. Absence creates a void, and we ache for something to fill it. Absence means silence, awesome, lonely, gaping silence. No wonder we're afraid of being alone. Afraid of saying good-bye.

But you'd better get used to saying good-bye. Life is a long series of farewells strung together, isn't it? If you've ever read Gail Sheehy's best-selling book *Passages*, which tracks what she calls the predictable crises in adult life, you know that our lives move from one plateau of comfort and discomfort to the next. And at each level, there is the need for letting go, and for saying good-bye to old, familiar patterns & habits. Life is a string of farewells.

Carli Simon tells us in her song that “nobody ever stays in one place anymore.” Every “hello” leads to an inevitable “good-bye.” And that’s what we’re afraid of.

As a pastor I’m all the time dealing with people in one or another stage of grief and loss. And one thing I’ve noticed is that the cruelest thing about death seems to be the loss of memory among the survivors. “He’ll live on in our memories,” we sometimes say of the dead. Don’t believe it. Oh, we may remember this story, or that particular experience, the smell of her perfume or his aftershave, maybe even a brief snippet of her voice. But every day, memory becomes more distant, more faint. And that’s insidious.

Yes, it’s painful, frightening even, to be left alone. The words we use when we are leaving have been hollowed of their religious significance, but they remind us of a time long ago when leaving was especially painful and dangerous – so dangerous that we needed God to help us do it. *Goodbye* in English, *adios* in Spanish, and *adieu* in French, all imply that when we part, in that

moment between here and not here, we need to give someone over to God because we can't hold on to that person any longer ourselves. Goodbye. God be with you.

In this morning's bible reading, Jesus bids farewell to his disciples. Actually, the chapter I read from is part of a longer farewell that runs through four long chapters, John 13-17. As you may remember, The Gospel of John begins with the sweeping declaration, "*the Word became flesh and lived among us*" (1:14). It ends with Jesus saying goodbye. Jesus is the one who calls us, teaches us, turns water into wine, raises the dead. Now, he's leaving us.

So these four long chapters near the end in John take place on a long, sorrowful evening in spring, in a garden. It's the same garden where Jesus will be arrested and taken away to meet his death. That's the ultimate goodbye.

And the questions Jesus gets from his disciples are the simple, childlike questions typical of children. Like when Mama and Daddy gather hat and coat and prepare to leave for the

evening. The children look up from their play and ask the usual questions: “Where are you going? Can we come, too? Who’s gonna stay with us while you’re gone?” Those kinds of questions.

So, Jesus is about to leave. “What’s gonna happen to us?” the disciples ask. “*I will not leave you orphaned,*” Jesus promises. Still, can we be sure? That’s the question you and I still ask, in these days of uncertainty, twenty centuries later. “What’s gonna happen to us?”

We feel the tension still between presence and absence, between having and not having Jesus in our lives. This is the time after Easter. My job as a preacher on Easter morning was to help you feel the presence of the resurrected Christ – to somehow make him real and available and present, standing among you. For some of you, it worked. You really did leave church on Easter morning striding confidently into the bright sunlight, just as Jesus arose from the tomb and met the new morning. You left here convinced that you were not alone on your journey through life. Jesus walks with you.

But then there's always the Sunday after Easter. Low Sunday, we call it. The crowd dwindles, the music is not so buoyant, and when you sing those *post*-Easter hymns, your voice returns to a croak rather than a shout.

Things would be different if Jesus was resurrected, brought back into our lives, period. But that's not what the Bible says. "In a little while, you will see me no more," Jesus says. The One who says "hello" on Easter is soon saying "goodbye." Emmanuel, God with us; the risen Christ, God away from us.

Among other things, the resurrection means that we don't have this 2,000 year old, perpetual 33-year-old still walking around with us. If that's what it meant, we'd have a problem; a real problem. But that's not what happened. That's not the way it is with Jesus. That's not the purpose of the resurrection. He's always coming and going, arriving and leaving, because he can! Because he's God. No matter how close we feel his presence on Easter, there's always the absence after Easter.

“He isn’t here,” the angel said to the woman at the tomb. “He’s gone on before you.”

Easter morning, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb to dress the dead body of Jesus with spices. But his body isn’t there. So she asks the gardener, “Where have you taken him? Why isn’t he here?” But this is no ordinary gardener – it’s the risen Christ. And he makes Mary realize that nobody keeps Jesus tied down. Nobody keeps him fixed in one place.

Mary tried. She tried clinging to Jesus, holding him close so he wouldn’t get away again. “Don’t hold on to me,” he tells her. To hold Jesus is to limit him. You can’t hold Jesus. He’s risen! He’s moving out, beyond all our earthly expectations and limitations and categories. He’s out to get hold of new life for you and for me, so we can’t try to hold him back.

Again and again, in John’s Gospel, the story is the same. The disciples try to get hold of Jesus, to fix him, to define him. But he keeps vanishing, leaving them as quickly and as mysteriously as he came.

“I’m going to prepare a place for you,” he tells them. But he can’t prepare a place if he doesn’t go. So you and I can’t hold Jesus back. And we can’t hold him down.

The Christ after Easter is a living God, an awesome God, not some containable, definable pet of a God we can whistle to and who comes at our beck and call. He comes and he goes as he pleases. He’s present, then he’s absent. Hello. Goodbye. The risen Christ isn’t Tinker Belle. We can’t close our eyes and pretend him back to life. Jesus determines his comings and his goings, not us. And my friend, if you meet Jesus in worship this morning – and I sincerely hope that you do – he comes to you as a gift, not something you have earned, or deserved, or gained through your own efforts.

You know, just because Jesus promises us that he’ll never leave us alone, doesn’t mean that we’ll never feel like we’re alone, doesn’t say that those times of absence, those dry valley of loneliness times, won’t be hard. They will. And I can promise you that there will be plenty of those times, too. But Jesus doesn’t try

to assuage our fears with cheap words of consolation. (“I’ll live on in your memories”).

What Jesus does for us is that he prays for us. You can tell a lot about people by observing the way they leave, the way they say goodbye. I think of Moses’ speech to Israel as they stood on the threshold of the promised land and Moses stood on the threshold of death. I think of General Douglas MacArthur’s farewell speech to Congress – “Old soldiers never die. They just fade away.”).

Jesus spoke farewell words to his disciples. But at the end of those words he offers a prayer. He prays for you and for me. That’s what this morning’s Scripture is: It’s Jesus’ prayer – for us.

You can tell a lot about people by the way they take their leave.

I don’t know why you’ve come here today. Maybe you don’t know the reason either. I don’t know what burdens you brought with you through those heavy oak doors. But I know enough about this congregation to know that you can hardly find a place to sit

out there for all the baggage and burdens and fears and unresolved grief and conflict and pain that people drag in here every Sunday.

And you know, if you've been here before, that no matter how good the music, the hymns, the sermon, the presence, you'll probably still drag a lot of baggage out with you when you go – but Jesus will go with you, too.

Jesus prays for you wherever you go. As the Bible tells us, we've got a great high priest, seated high in the heavens, who is good at interceding with God because he sits next to God. Jesus knows a lot about our human hurts and pains because he came and stood next to us.

And when Jesus goes, he doesn't say farewell and then forget about us. He prays for us, never stops talking to God about us. He's gone away so he can be close to God.

Today, when you say goodbye, I don't know where you're going, what tough pathways you'll be walking, what burdens you'll be carrying. But I do know this: Jesus will be praying for you.