

The Grace in Goodbye

August 20, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28; John 21:1-14

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Do you know where the word goodbye comes from? I recently learned that the etymology of the word reveals that it is a contraction of the phrase God be with ye, a blessing of sorts. The phrase god be with you was used at the moment of parting because at the time folks didn't know how long it would be until they would see each other again. As the years went on, this transformation of the phrase God be with ye into the contracted form goodbye happened around 1580¹ when the words became associated with other greetings like good night or good day. In the last paragraphs of his letter to the people of Thessoloniki, Paul uses a blessing as well, as he says goodbye to a community needing reassurance and encouragement all those years ago. Instead of goodbye, he says a similar blessing of his own: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

Whenever we come to say goodbye, however we say it, it's difficult work. There's a reason why many of us avoid saying goodbye, slipping out the back door of a party, leaving early to get on the road before the household is awake, or choosing not to attend a funeral at a loved one's end. I too am not immune to the challenge of a goodbye despite my love of a good handwritten note and the practice of facing the truth of our lives even when that truth is hard to look at. This week I was definitely struggling to write this last sermon with you all, thinking that it had to say everything

¹ <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/1505/what-is-the-origin-of-the-word-goodbye>

there was to say about these past 5 years together until I came across these words written by one of you in a note given to me this week. I re-read the words scrawled in familiar handwriting, “There are not really any words to say what needs to be written.” And, in that moment I realized how true that is here today. Whatever is written or said will fall short, so I trust that the Spirit will stand in that gap for us, infusing us with the grace to know in our bodies and our hearts what cannot be said in a Sunday morning sermon, or even in 5 years’ time.

In his letter, Paul ends his words of encouragement with God’s grace, and Jesus too appears to the disciples with that same grace in the Gospel of John during his third and final appearance to the disciples in the gospels (or more accurately his 4th appearance if we count his first appearance to Mary Magdalene, which of course we should). Both of these texts are speaking to or depicting moments of saying goodbye to one reality and saying hello to a new one. In the gospel, Jesus appears to the disciples on the shores of a beach, coming to them in the midst of their fishing, having returned to their familiar work during this time of in-between what was, and what was yet to come.

When they arrive on the beach, Jesus is already there preparing their breakfast of fish and bread over a warm fire. He invites them into the feast, saying to them, “Come and have breakfast.” And at that moment the disciples knew exactly who he was, our text saying, “Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord.” There have been too many moments to count here at First Church when we have experienced that invitation from God to nourish our bodies and our souls, to throw out the nets one more time even when the prospects of success seemed unlikely or intimidating, to reorient ourselves to our callings to serve, and to ultimately be reminded where we belong and to whom we belong. This community of resilience and beauty has followed the call to God’s kind of love and justice, to endurance and deep

hope, to taking that next right step even when the path was unclear. We have survived so much together and have helped our wider community to feel more human, even as we nourish ourselves too.

This story of Jesus and the disciples on the shore is often seen as both a communion and re-commissioning moment. The fish and the bread standing in for the bread and cup, and the command of Jesus to throw the nets once more from the shore ties it to the same scene in Luke when Peter was called by Jesus to be his disciple at the beginning of their journey together. My second sermon here was on that passage so it seems that we've gone full circle. In his invitation to throw out the nets and partake in this brunch on the beach Jesus reminds the disciples of their calling that was there from the beginning and that they are unable to fulfill it alone. Their work requires communion with one another and with God.

In our greeting this morning we invited each other to "Come home to connection and resilience, for we are the body of Christ." I wrote that line as we began experimenting with folks coming into the sanctuary as we were exiting the emergency stage of the pandemic. We are the body of Christ. And with all of our imperfections and growing edges, this spiritual home is a place of connection and of deep, expansive resilience. This is a place full of people who don't have to ask the question, "who are you?" when God calls us into something new, yet so familiar as a season of transition. For when are we not in a moment of transition in ministry and in our lives? This time has been marked by transition, and yet we kept doing ministry with our full hearts and ready hands for the work God was calling us to. When we meet the presence of God in the everyday-ness of our lives together we pay it attention, acting from that deep knowledge of God's presence and grace in the world, however imperfectly.

Despite our love of words and intellectual pursuit, which are worthy endeavors in the church to be sure and a core strength of this community of faith, admittedly my favorite moments here, the experiences that have

taught me the most about God, have been the moments where words were not enough. We acknowledge this truth every Sunday we participate in communion. It has been the way that I have presided over communion most of the time since you all were the congregation that ordained me to do so. As you remember, the one presiding says, “And now, O God, we fall silent and remember Jesus, the one who came because words were not enough.” We practice this embodied faith in the touch of healing oil we give and receive on healing Sundays, we embrace the grace present in the sound and touch of baptismal waters and in the joy and laughter present in shaking wet evergreen branches at one another during Epiphany on some of the coldest days in the year. We are reminded of God’s love for us through music that touches not just the body, but the soul with the peace and comfort we crave. We understand in our hearts after falling prey to urgency the importance of making space for the emotions that come with racial justice and healing work. We have felt the relief in the moments after extending grace and receiving forgiveness after conflict. We have made room for each other’s needs and humanity in wearing a mask.

And through this willingness to invite all of ourselves into the story of our faith we have drawn closer to one another and to God in one of the most challenging periods to be the church. I thank God and you for all those moments that can’t be put into words during our time together, those moments in which we looked to the shore with fish in hand, we turned to one another and found that all we could say is, “it is the Lord.” My deepest prayer is that you hold onto these everyday sacramental moments, knowing that we don’t have to articulate it all even when the distractions overwhelm and the calendar gets busy. Listen for the grace in Jesus’ call to come and have breakfast and invite others to join you as well. The essential stuff on the to-do list will get done. The net will remain unbroken and there will be fish for all gathered around the fire. Recalling Paul’s words to trust in God’s timing, not our own, we are reminded that the work of the church is not all on ourselves. He declares, “The one who calls you is

faithful, and he will do it.” I’m saying all this as a reminder to my recovering perfectionist self as much as I’m saying it as a charge to you dear friends.

Speaking of that portion of Paul’s letter we read together this morning it is labeled as “final instructions” in this translation, which is so very Paul. He loves to tell a group of people what to do. Apologies-I’ve got to get a last job in at Paul despite the fact he’s very much grown on me since having to preach his letters. A couple of years ago I shared a list of ways to center ourselves when the events around us destabilize or create uncertain futures for us. I found it on the Facebook page of Rev Heidi Heath, someone I followed during the pandemic and who is a part of the New Hampshire Conference of the UCC, where I am soon headed to serve. As you continue on in your ministry and as I step into a new journey of my own, my hope is that we remember these practices as ways to ground ourselves as we navigate what is to come- the joy and the challenge of doing ministry in these days. I share these not as any final instruction to you, but because I believe over these years we have learned how to practice these truths in this sacred place together. They are just some of what ties us to one another in the Spirit, no matter what other chapters our lives bring us. So, what are they? Here we go...

1. Breathe. Really. Long, deep, belly breaths. At least three in a row.
2. Hydrate. This also helps your heart rate.
3. Sleep. On a cellular level, we need this to heal, and keep going.
4. Lean into your hope muscles. Hope is a discipline. We have to practice it. Hope is not the same as optimism. It doesn’t promise all is well when nothing is well, but helps us remember how to keep working for a better world.
5. Practice empathy. Empathy is a spiritual skill, and one that evil counts on being the first to go in an us vs. them fight. Don’t let it.
6. Rage is holy. Hate is destructive. Rage can be sacred. It allows us to heal the world and be fueled for the revolution. Lean away from hate and

practice tapping into your rage at injustice and harm to others. Then use it to begin the healing.

And, I would add one more practice: 7. to remember that each and every one of you are beloved of God in the fullness of who you are, and that you are beloved to me; and that you are very much called and equipped to love and to serve this world for you are the body of Christ.

God be with you, First Church. Amen.

