

Pentecost 1

John 14:18-29

Lex and Zonnie Last Sunday

29 August 2021

Our lives are full of goodbyes. Every relationship we have, except the most casual ones, will always have as a piece of it, saying goodbye. The goodbye might be temporary or it might be more permanent. Our English language doesn't really recognize this, but lots of other languages do. In France, when you tell someone "Au revoir," you're saying "Till we meet again." If you were to say "Adieu," which literally means "To God," your goodbye would be more permanent.

Personally, I always liked the way Roy Rogers and Dale Evans said goodbye to me every Saturday morning when I was a little boy. "Happy Trails to you...until we meet again." It was "Au Revoir" and not "Adieu." Goodbyes can be happy or sad or both. Goodbyes can be full of anxiety or full of anticipation or both. Goodbyes can range from the fearful to the exhilarating and capture every emotion in between. The worst goodbyes can leave us frustrated, feeling misunderstood or full of regret about things left unsaid or things left undone. The worst goodbyes of all are sometimes the ones that never happen at all. People part, a relationship is ended, and the parting doesn't get acknowledged. Maybe because we're too busy. Maybe because we fear what the other person might say to us. Maybe because it's just too hard to let go of the other person.

Goodbyes, even happy goodbyes, can leave us feeling conflicted. I'll never forget when Zonnie and I took our oldest son, Alexander, off to college. As we stood in front of his new dormitory – which was 1500 miles from home – and watched him walk away from us full of excitement and hope and probably a little fear – as we watched him walk out of our lives and into his own – tears streamed down our faces. It was surely one of the most profoundly bittersweet moments of my life. It's so hard to let your children go – but so necessary. And the way we parents say goodbye to our children will either give them the freedom to grow up or keep them tied to us in a way that isn't healthy for anyone.

So we gather here this morning to say goodbye, Zonnie and I to you, and you to us. Our twelve years here have been among the most wonderful and rewarding experiences of our lives. I'll tell you a little story. The night Zonnie and I decided to get married, we hardly knew each other. It was our third date! As we talked long into the night in a French Quarter bar, we recognized that we shared with each other a profound faith. Although she was from a French Roman Catholic background and I came from a family steeped in the Anglican tradition, we realized that faith was just part of our DNA. We had time to learn lots of other things about each other, but with that shared faith, with these shared values, we would be just fine. And that night, even though we were first year law students, I shared with her, the gnawing, insistent thought, that one day I might need to go to seminary and become a priest. To my astonishment she said, "Great. I'll be right there with you." So fast forward several years – after a lot of dithering on my part, Zonnie finally put her foot in my backside and said something like, "Either go to seminary now, or quit talking about it!" So off we went. Off we went, really, with the dream that we would do ministry *together*. Well, life being what it is, that didn't happen right away for all kinds of different reasons. It wasn't until we found St. Thomas – and St. Thomas found us – that we were able to

realize our dream of sharing ministry together. And what a gift it has been to us. You have loved us so well as a couple and as ourselves. You've allowed us to flourish.

Now, we, all of us in this beloved community, have grown together over these last twelve years. I look back at the vision we've shared, at the hard work we've done together, at the ministry we've all done in Jesus' name here, and my heart is filled with gratitude. Gratitude for each one of you. Gratitude for those who can't be with us today – many of whom are in God's nearer presence – gratitude for all the love and laughter and tears and hard and sometimes painful work we've shared. For your strong and generous hearts, I am profoundly grateful. Now, have I made mistakes along the way? Plenty of them. And some I'm sure I don't even know about. It's part of the human journey, you know. And for all of those mistakes, I ask your forgiveness. Forgiveness of course is at the heart of the story of God and God's people – people who lack faith, who drift away, who are selfish and self-centered; but it's these very people who are always pursued by a gracious and forgiving God, a God who always offers mercy and always invites God's wayward people back into covenant relationship. It's the great themes of Scripture. So, my dear friends, when we make mistakes going forward – and we will – let's acknowledge them, ask for forgiveness and offer forgiveness.

So here we are this morning, saying goodbye. Now Zonnie and I are going to continue living in Bellevue – we really do love the PNW – but whether we see each other next week or next month or next year, we'll never see each other again in these particular roles.

So how do we say all these goodbyes? Well, in this morning's Gospel reading we're dropped right into the middle of a conversation that Jesus is having with his friends in which he's telling them goodbye. It's the last night of Jesus' life and he's preparing his friends for what life is going to look like without him. And he shows them, and he shows us, how to say "goodbye." His friends are all in denial. The thing they fear – and it's something we all fear – is the fear of being abandoned. They just don't want to talk about it. But denying reality is bad for the soul and so Jesus steps up and confronts the unpleasant fact that he'll soon be leaving. Now notice how Jesus says goodbye. He does it in a way that leaves his friends with hope. He tells them they won't be abandoned. His departure is necessary. While he's with them, they're dependent on him to take care of their needs. But now it's time for them to carry on his work in the world – to stand up on their hind legs, as it were, and so he's going to leave them the Spirit of Truth – the Advocate, he calls it, the Holy Spirit, to guide them along the way. Like all healthy "goodbyes," this one gives the ones who are being said goodbye to some hope for the future. What they had thought was the end is turning into something like a new beginning. New truths – new discoveries – are waiting for them, Jesus says. When Jesus says, "My Father will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you," Jesus is telling them that the best is yet to come. In the most profound sort of way, Jesus turns this "goodbye" into a "hello." This is what healthy, God-filled goodbyes always do. They allow us to see that God always has something new for us just around the corner. Healthy, God-filled goodbyes allow us to see that each chapter of our lives doesn't end with a period but with a comma. God always has a new chapter waiting.

Now, please don't for a minute imagine that I'm confusing myself with Jesus. What I'm pointing out is that what Jesus did for those scared and anxious friends of his gathered in an Upper Room, two thousand years ago, he does for us today. Right here at St. Thomas. In this time of transition, in this time of change – in this in-between time between the departure of one Rector and the arrival of another, God has sent the Advocate – the Holy Spirit – to guide and protect and nurture and grow this beloved

community. And if you don't take away anything else from this morning, please take away this: YOU are the Church. The priest isn't the Church. The Rector isn't the Church. Sure, we clergy have our role to play, but at the end of the day, that role isn't any more important than yours. The Greek word for the Church is "ekklesia." It means "the called-out ones." That's who you are. *You* are the called-out ones. Called out in the name of Jesus. Called out to minister to each other and care for each other. Called out to be Micah 6:8 people. Remember what that fiery prophet said:

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness,  
and walk humbly before God."

That's what you are called out to do. And what a place, this beautiful place, to carry out that call. *You* are the church and the Holy Spirit is your guide.

So you see, these goodbyes, these healthy God-filled goodbyes, remind us that our own stories are more than our own stories. They're God's stories too. So whenever we say our goodbyes well, we give those who are nearest and dearest to us over into God's care and keeping – to nurturing and guiding companionship of the Holy Spirit.

In a moment, we're going to sing a hymn that means a lot to me. "Come, Labor On" was my grandfather's favorite hymn. Robert Watts was his name and he was such a profound influence on my life that Zonnie and I named our third born child for him. Robert Dillard Watts Breckinridge, who's here today. My grandfather loved Jesus, loved his family, loved the church, and loved a strong bourbon highball at the end of the day. He began each day sitting at his dining room table and saying the Office of Morning Prayer with my grandmother before eating his breakfast and heading off to work. And in what I can assure you is a model for extremely poor church governance, my grandfather served as Senior Warden of St. Stephens Church for over 25 years. He was known for years around the Diocese of West Virginia as "Mr. Episcopalian."

As a young boy, he modeled for me the virtues of faith, hard work, love of family and true friendships. "Come, Labor On" really captured for my grandfather what it meant to live those virtues. Towards the end of his life, he told me that the last verse of this hymn had become his daily prayer:

"Come, Labor On. No time for rest, till glows the western sky, till the long shadow o'er our  
pathway lie, and a glad sound comes with the setting sun, 'Servants, well done.'"

As I enter the next chapter in my life, this hymn has been speaking to me just as it did to my grandfather, those many long years ago. It's my prayer now, and will be my prayer at the end of my life, too. Remaining seated, please join me in singing, "Come, Labor On."

Goodbye, my dear friends. Vaya con Dios, my dear sisters and brothers. Go with God.