

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 19, 2019
John 13:31-35

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Bloomington, Indiana

Farewell Discourse

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let me begin by offering a word of thanks. I want to commend the board members of LuMin and those who assisted them last Sunday in offering a fine farewell for Deacon Jeff Schacht. He has been a highly valued colleague, a wise counselor, and a welcome partner in the covenant we share with Lutheran Campus Ministry at I.U. His ministries and his fine preaching will be sorely missed. If not his constant references to some third rate ball club.

Some of you know that when I invited Jeff to lunch back in February, I intended that there would be only one surprise. We sat down at Viva Mas, ordered our food, and exchanged some pleasantries. Then I shared the decision regarding my retirement. I noted some odd expressions as I did so. And it didn't take long, once we had discussed the various aspects of my decision, for the cause of to be revealed. Jeff then shared his similar decision, along with the same ending date.

These circumstances are now beginning to make their way fully into the consciousness both of the members of St. Thomas and of those who oversee the work of campus ministry. And I fully trust that you will come to recognize that God is at work in all of this, if you haven't already.

Opportunities will present themselves. Indeed, possibilities for the future are already being considered, as the council met with a candidate for full-time interim ministry on Thursday and Friday. You will likely hear more about that at the congregational meeting following late worship.

There is much to do in the coming months and the coming year or more as the ground is prepared for new ministers and new ministries to spring forth. And, as is so often the case, I am amazed at how poignantly relevant today's gospel passage is—and how it may help to guide us in helpful directions.

Did you hear it as I did? Let me repeat the parts that seemed particularly noteworthy:

I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also

should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Now before I go any further, let me affirm that while I identify with what Jesus says here to his disciples, I am fully aware that I am not Jesus. It's a fact that Jeff Schacht and his son, Matthew, often remind me of when I preach about how scripture is reflected in my life or the life of the congregation. So (if Jeff is here), I really don't want to hear that again this morning! Okay?!

I stand before you, with but one more sermon scheduled for me to preach here at St. Thomas, and this passage comes up! I see God at work.

"I will be with you only a little longer."

This passage is placed at the beginning of what is known as the "Farewell Discourse" in John's gospel. Jesus spends more than three full chapters offering his disciples instructions, warnings, and appeals as he faces the cross. Immediately preceding these words, Jesus shares the Passover Meal with the disciples, where (in John) he washes their feet and exhorts them to do likewise. It's what I think should be our third sacrament—of service to others and the Earth. He then predicts the betrayal, just prior to launching into this prolonged speech.

This farewell discourse provides us a powerful invitation to do what I really don't want to do, and that is to talk about saying goodbye and how to part well. This sermon is intended to be something of my own farewell discourse, given in the hopes that there is time for us to see to a healthy process of taking leave of one another.

When a pastor is called to a congregation, it often feels like there is a permanence to that call. Indeed, there are no rules or regulations that I know of requiring a pastor to depart from a call prior to death. So, as one pastor writes about this, "we invest a lot of energy at the start of a ministry, but often pay scant attention to leave-taking. Truth to tell, all clergy are 'interim' clergy, and good leave-taking is as important to building up the body of Christ as good beginning.

"Consider the model set out in John's gospel. The start of Jesus' ministry takes a single chapter: one lovely poem, a stirring sermon followed by a powerful liturgy, then—Boom!—he's off recruiting (disciples). The closure of his ministry takes four chapters..., one-fifth of the whole book. There, in the farewell discourses, Jesus announces his departure, then reviews with his friends what they have done together, what they have meant to each other, and how their ministries shall continue...

"The spiritual dimension of the close of a (ministry) is more important than all the pastoral and administrative details. Our classic spiritual tradition understands every goodbye to be a little death. Every significant goodbye mobilizes to some extent all the

human responses that loom large at a time of death, from denial that the ending is real or has any meaning, to anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.” (“Leaving Well,” Rev. Richard L. Ullman, from *Leave-Taking in Your Congregation*).

And so, this morning, the scripture calls us to begin the process of saying goodbye. In my report to the congregation, which I hope you all have read or will read soon, I write about what we have done together and what you have meant to me. I have cherished the increasing invitations many of you have issued to share a meal or to meet together in order to do some of this holy and important leave-taking. And I deeply appreciated the time spent with the Mutual Ministry Committee last Monday evening. It is a wise and healthy practice of theirs to do exit interviews with staff.

I invite others who may sense a pull in that kind of direction to reach out as you are moved. And I encourage anyone who feels that there is unfinished business to let me know so that we can talk about that.

I spent much of this past week pondering and reading about healthy leave-taking. I even pulled out a set of hand-written notes given to me during my internship some 38 years ago by a Lutheran Social Services counselor who was a member of my internship congregation (in Baraboo, Wisconsin). Those notes have been a helpful companion over the years.

The first thing she writes (I believe it was from a workshop she attended) is that goodbyes are very important and often overlooked. Then this: “It is necessary to say goodbye before you can grieve the loss. Grieving is the integration of the loss, once you’ve acknowledged it.”

What strikes me upside the head about this is that a farewell discourse, an effective saying of goodbyes, only sets the stage for the grieving. Grieving can only begin after the parting or the death.

And so, as your pastor, I want to help us to say goodbye well. Read what I’ve written. Hear my regrets, appreciations, wishes, and memories. Share your own. And so, our spirits will be prepared to bid what is hopefully mostly a fond farewell at the event scheduled for June 14 and at worship on my final Sunday as your called pastor, June 16. Let us be intentional about the spiritual work of holy leave-taking.

We do all of this with the hope that grieving (or celebrating) may begin following my departure. I will be with you only a little longer.

I skimmed quickly over the steps that my Lutheran Social Services friend offered in those notes. They are intended to lead folks through grief following a death, but they’re relevant to any transition. Let me spend a bit of time with them:

First, identify regrets: What are the resentments or regrets? Is there anger? Try to be specific.

As an example, I deeply regret that life does not offer unlimited time. I would treasure being with you longer. And yet, life and circumstances and leadings of the Spirit call me to focus more on family and the care of God's good creation.

Second, identify appreciations: What has our relationship meant to you and to the congregation?

I have spent considerable time identifying these with the Mutual Ministry Committee and in my reports. Please know that these years have been filled with manifold blessings. You have been so gracious in receiving ministry. You have been so faithful and active in expanding the mission of this congregation. You have opened your hearts to the Lord's Supper so that no one is ever excluded. You have offered your gifts freely and applied them well to the work of teaching, learning, service, and mission.

Third, identify wishes: Here is where we consider what we will miss.

For me, the fundamental thing I will miss is worshipping with you. Worship here is so vital, so open, so beautifully done, and so forgiving when something goes wrong. Grace and forgiveness, peace and celebration, word and music all blend into a holy and spiritual worship that edifies, buoys, strengthens, and gives glory to God. And, in truth, I will simply miss being your pastor. I will hopefully remain your friend, but the honor of serving as your pastor will cease.

And finally, identify memories: What memories will you keep? What stands out?

It is the rites of passage that I will treasure most. I have pictures of every confirmation class since I arrived. I have been blessed to be a part of baptisms, first communion, marriages, reaffirmations of wedding vows, and yes, even funerals. I still think fondly of Marcella Calvert, Penny Pennington, Edith Unger, Walt and Nona Johnson, Otto and Lydia Spehr, Lori Rowold, Wayne Selk Gloria Squiers, Charles Sweet, and so many more.

I will remember our celebrations. Do you remember the South America Festival? Or the fund-raiser that J.C. and Evelyn put on in the narthex? Or the capital campaign celebrations? Or the dances? Or the Vacation Bible Schools—one where Marie and I brought chickens and guinea fowl keets? Or working with so many of you on projects—from lighting to construction to the community garden? I remember, with perhaps undue joy, swinging a sledge hammer along with others of you in order to take out some of the walls as we developed the office suite back in 2007. There's just something about destruction—appropriately directed, of course—that feeds the soul!

Okay. Now I've said too much.

I do hope and pray that we complete our leave-taking well; that you will ponder and share your own regrets, appreciations, wishes, and memories; and that once I am gone you do the work that no one wants to do but is so important—that of grieving. By the way, interim pastors are trained especially for this work. The interim pastor that the council selects will be tasked with helping you through grief, considering where the new edges of mission lie, and taking on for a time the work of pastoral ministry. All of this is essential as you prepare to interview, call, and welcome a new pastor. Let me repeat that: All of this is essential if you are to be well prepared to call and welcome a new pastor. You will be in my prayers throughout these processes.

My hopes, in the end, are the same as those of our Lord. One is identified by Jesus this morning: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (13:34)

Yes, (Jeff), I know that this is Jesus talking!

Another hope that Jesus expresses comes near the end of the Farewell Discourse: "I ask...that they may all be one... As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, (John 17:20-22)

So. love one another. Be of one mind and heart with our Lord. And the God of all goodness will bless you and keep you in the blessings and work of mission and ministry. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.