

Title: A Parting Gift
Text: John 14:23–29
Date: May 26, 2019

Many of you are aware that for preachers who follow the lectionary, there are several scripture texts to choose from each week. It was an easy call for me to choose this passage from John because it is part of what is referred to as Jesus' Farewell Discourse. I thought this related perfectly to these weeks leading up to my departure. So bear with me as I reflect on the parallels, keeping in mind that neither do I have a Messiah complex, nor do I have an expectation that this will end with my crucifixion.

Jesus' so-called Farewell Discourse takes the entirety of John, chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17. That's quite a long section in which Jesus not only prepares the disciples for his departure - a nice way to refer to his death - but also prepares them for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate (*parakletos*), who is to be with them forever (14:16). So in a sense this passage is a precursor to Pentecost, which we will be celebrating on June 9.

We almost imagine a lifetime of Jesus with his disciples, but that was hardly the case. This was not at all like Moses (or Randy) spending forty years leading people towards the Promised Land. This was just three years - a mere blip on the radar compared to the long sojourn in the desert. Another frame of reference is to think of Jesus' time with his disciples as just a little longer than the average length of an interim ministry in a Presbyterian church.

A lot can happen in a couple of years, but it is not always what you expect. Jesus did not leave the disciples with a sophisticated organizational structure, nor did I. Sure, it is nice to point to certain ways in which leadership has been reorganized, or ways in which leadership has reimagined its sense of call, but frankly that is not what I will remember the most. What I will remember the most is relationships that I have developed with many of you. When the disciples remembered Jesus, they probably were not struck with how Jesus always chose the very best to be on his team. More so, they probably just remembered how their hearts were strangely warmed when Jesus spoke to them. They remembered the relational connection. And though my time here has not been super long, many of you have commented on ways in which you have been surprised by ways in which you felt a relationship develop. Relationship happens when you open your heart.

Many of us are not good at saying goodbye, and so I think if nothing else, we can be informed by the considerable time that Jesus takes to talk about all this with the disciples, whom he has had such an intense relationship with over a three year period. It was not all crammed into the Last Supper. Jesus spent weeks preparing the disciples for his departure. On some level one could argue that Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure from the time they met.

As you think of friends who have moved across the country, or even of friends who were in the process of dying, how good are you at saying goodbye? Do you like to keep things superficial? Are you prone to avoid what is right before you? I know that when my sister was dying, her husband made a point of communicating to all in her sphere that "We don't talk about dying. We need to keep things positive." How glad I was that I broke those rules. How profoundly important it is to have honest conversations at such times.

In having these conversations, Jesus was trying to help the disciples imagine what life would be like without him. Then he said the darndest thing. "**I am going away . . . If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going.**" (v. 28) Now *that* will take some thought to unpack, especially for those who were starting to cling to Jesus.

But to understand this, you need to understand just how serious Jesus was when he said, **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”** (v. 27)

There were times this past week when I was starting to wonder how well I have learned this peace. With my wife in Florida, I have been doing a lot of intense, non-stop packing on my own. The moving truck was scheduled to come on Wednesday. Then on Tuesday they called to tell me that they didn’t have a driver available to pick me up as scheduled that was going to Florida. The best they could do was have a driver pick everything up, and then put it in a warehouse, to later be transferred to another truck. A disgruntled me agreed to put it off for another day until a driver was available who could go the distance with me.

The next morning they called with the same story. They could pick me up at 1 PM, but again it would have to go a warehouse in Upper Malboro, Maryland. A couple of hours later they called with “Good news! We found a driver going to Florida, and he can pick you up at 5 PM.” Sounded good to me. At 5 PM I got a call from the dispatcher asking if the driver was there yet. I said no. She said that he’ll probably be there shortly. Five minutes later I got a call from the driver . . . *from Virginia!* So no way was he almost there. He showed up at my house at 9 PM, and they didn’t leave until 1:30 AM. I was so tired!

The next morning I got a call from Lowe’s saying the front door that I had custom ordered was in . . . but it was not the right size, and they would have to order another door, which would take almost another month.

Then I had to scramble because the carpet cleaners were coming in two hours, and I had to pick up all kinds of debris, and vacuum everything, in preparation for them to do their thing. Can I be honest? I was not feeling the peace that passes understanding at that point!

I’ll tell you one thing that did help. This might sound a little strange – and will surely give you an insight into the unusual way in which I think – but several months ago I paid good money for an app on my phone that sends me a text message five times a day – at random intervals – which says, **“Don’t forget. You’re going to die!”** Does that sound depressing to you? I would contend that with the right mindset, it can almost be liberating. The things that we are prone to stress over can be put into perspective. We can stop taking ourselves, and our little world *sooo* seriously.

I can imagine that in the weeks prior to his death, Jesus was probably getting *ten* text messages a day saying, **“Don’t forget. You’re going to die.”** It framed his consciousness. His eyes were set towards Jerusalem, and he knew what lay ahead. And what was on his mind? Preparing the hearts of his disciples. Giving them a heads up that the Spirit is coming their way, and this Spirit will remind them of everything that he had said. The peace that Jesus knew will be given to them.

So when you are learning to have meaningful farewells with those dear to you, strive to pass the peace. Exude peace. Let them know it will be OK . . . and it will.

Having said that, Gerald May reminds us, **“Peace is not something you can force on anything or anyone... much less upon one's own mind. It is like trying to quiet the ocean by pressing upon the waves. Sanity lies in somehow opening to the chaos, allowing anxiety, moving deeply into the tumult, diving into the waves, where underneath, within, peace simply is.”**

With this in mind, I rather think that peace is one of those things that is “better caught, than taught.” It is hard to argue anyone into a sense of peace. Can’t say that I have been successful at that, and it is not clear to me that Jesus was successful with that approach either. Seems clear to me that it was the work of the Spirit that poured peace into the disciples’ hearts.

So I am hoping that in the weeks we have left we can learn to have meaningful farewells. I am hoping that we can not only cherish relationships, but know that no person is ours to hold on to. I am hoping that – mutually – we may learn something about passing the peace on to another.

Amen.

John 14: 23 – 29

“Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. “Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. “You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. “And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.