

Never Can Say Goodbye
John 17: 20-26
May 16, 2010
Seventh Sunday of Easter
René Rodgers Jensen
First Christian Church
Omaha, Nebraska

Scripture

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 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. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

We moved to Omaha five days after our daughter Erica graduated from high school. She graduated on Thursday, and the moving truck came on Monday. She did not want to spend the summer after her high school graduation in a brand new city, so she stayed in Indianapolis with a friend.

I was surprised at how painfully difficult it was to say goodbye to Erica. I love my children dearly, but I always thought I would be ready for them to graduate and move on. I thought I would be ready to nudge them out of the nest, saying: "Fly away, little birds." But I was not anywhere near ready. I spent the weeks before our move grieving the thought of saying goodbye.

I remember quite distinctly one day about a week before Erica's graduation standing in line at the grocery store. In front of me was a young mother with her baby daughter. The mother was cooing at the baby and the baby was cooing back. I wanted to burst into tears, grab the woman by the arm and warn her, "You know that she is just going to grow up and leave you."

Goodbyes are hard.

The move from presence to absence, even when we know it is natural and necessary, is hard. As preacher William Willimon says, "The move from presence to absence is a frightening one. When someone is present to us, our space is filled, we are not alone, and there is conversation and communion. When someone leaves, there is crisis. Absence creates a void...No wonder we fear it, avoid it, cling to their presence, anything to avoid goodbye.

“But you had better become accustomed to bidding farewell. Life is a long series of leave-takings, of movement from presence to absence.” (*Pulpit Resource Vol. 26 #2, p. 36*)

Goodbyes are hard but they are inevitable. Snoopy from the *Peanuts* comic strip understood this when he sighed, “Why can’t we get all the people together in the world that we really like and then just stay together? I guess that wouldn’t work. Someone would leave. Someone always leaves. Then we have to say good-bye. I hate good-byes. I know what I need. I need more hellos.”

Goodbyes are hard. Goodbyes mean absence. Goodbyes mean change. Goodbyes mean the unknown. Perhaps that is why the original meaning for goodbye is a prayer. *Adios* and *adieu* literally mean “to God.” Our English word *goodbye* is a shortened version of “God be with you.” I think it’s too bad that we have lost that sense of what the word originally meant, because to say goodbye to someone we love, to move from their presence to their absence, in many ways is entrusting the one we love to God. Goodbye. God be with you.

In many ways, this is what Jesus is doing in his farewell to his disciples. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke it takes only a few short verses for Jesus to say goodbye. In John, it takes four long chapters, and our scripture for today is the final verses of that

long, long farewell. Jesus, who is soon to be arrested, tortured, and crucified, spends a long spring evening in a garden with his disciples, saying goodbye. New Testament scholar and preacher Fred Craddock says the disciples, on this night of farewell, are like little children playing on the floor, who look up and see their mother and father getting ready to go out. Their questions to Jesus are child-like: Where are you going? Can we come too? Who's going to take care of us while you're gone?

So part of what Jesus does in his farewell is reassure his disciples. "I will not leave you orphaned." (14:18) "My peace I leave with you." (14: 27) "I go to prepare a place for you that where I am you may be also." (14:2)

But even as Jesus reassures his disciples, he also prepares them for his physical absence. "In a little while you will no longer see me..." (14:19) *But* Jesus' physical absence does not mean Jesus is ultimately absent. In the final words of his long goodbye, the words of our scripture for today, Jesus prays that his disciples will be of one heart and mind with him and with God. He says that the love he feels for his disciples, and the love that they feel for him means that means that he will live on within them, even when he is no longer with them. "You will see me..." he promises.

In his goodbye, Jesus prepares his followers for his physical absence. He prepares them for his death. But he also teaches them that even when he is physically absent, he will still be present with them in another way. He is in them. They are in him. They are united, they are one, and they are bound together in God's abundant and unending love. Even when they are physically absent from one another, they are spiritually present to each other. Jesus wants his disciples—and us—to understand that there is more than physical presence that binds us to one another.

But even knowing this, goodbyes are still hard. And there is no goodbye that is harder, more difficult, more final than the goodbye of death. Jesus is teaching his disciples that the goodbye of death, painful as it is, inevitable as it is, is not really the end. We are in Christ, Christ is in us. And because of that we can say those very difficult, very painful goodbyes with faith and trust.

Sheldon Vanauken was a student of the English professor and Christian writer C. S. Lewis in the early 1950s. Lewis is best known for the *Chronicles of Narnia*, but he wrote many Christian classics such as *Mere Christianity*, *Surprised by Joy*, and *A Grief Observed*. In his book [A Severe Mercy](#), Vanauken recounts the story of his last meeting with his mentor, just before leaving

Oxford for the United States. Over a final lunch together at a pub, the two men spent time speculating about the nature of life after death. When they had finished eating, they stood outside the pub, talked for a few more minutes, and just before parting ways, Lewis said to Vanauken, "I shan't say goodbye. We'll meet again." Lewis then plunged into the traffic to cross the street while Vanuaken watched his friend walk away. When Lewis got to the other side of the street, he turned around, anticipating that his friend would still be standing there. With a grin on his face, Lewis shouted over the great roar of cars, "Besides—Christians never say goodbye."

With fear and trembling, I will disagree slightly with C. S. Lewis. I think Christians DO say goodbye, but we say goodbye differently. We say goodbye with faith and hope and trust. We say goodbye knowing that we are bound together by something—by Someone—far greater than ourselves.

Father Edward Hayes says this wonderfully in a poem that I sometimes read at funerals. The poem imagines a final blessing by the one who has died to their loved ones. The closing lines are

I leave you a solemn promise
That after I am home in the bosom of God,
I will still be present,
Whenever and wherever you call on me...

Whenever you are in need, call me
I will come to you,
With my arms full of wisdom and light
To open up your blocked paths
To untangle your knots
And to be your avenue to God...
Fear not nor grieve at my departure,
You whom I have loved so much
For my roots and yours
Are forever intertwined.