

Rev. Susie Putzke

## **The Four Things That Matter Most: Goodbye**

**John 16:16-25**

Our service today started with familiar words from Ecclesiastes. To everything there is a season. Turn... Turn... Turn... This scripture text and the lyrics from the popular BIRDS song sometimes get a little jumbled in my mind, but you know what I am talking about. *“A time to be born, a time to die. A time to break down and a time to build up. A time for war and a time for peace.”* Sometimes I wonder if this particular scripture text is a poetic way of describing how crazy our lives are and how we are often asked to hold multiple things at the same time. Joy/Sorrow, Fear/Hope, Death/Resurrection.

Today through the lens of scripture we continue discussing what Dr. Ira Brock terms as *“The Four Things That Matter Most.”* They are all considered to be valuable conversation starters within the art of saying goodbye to a loved one who may or may not be nearing the end of their life. I think as we explore the seasons of scripture and our lives it is helpful to focus on these themes of gratitude, love, forgiveness and the gifts they are to us in all, both in our coming and our going.

There are a couple different goodbyes that have been discussed around here. You may have heard of what is sometimes referred to as the Irish goodbye in which someone leaves the party without even speaking a word about it, just poof they are gone (a sneak out the back door scenario). If you are not familiar with that one you may, based on our location here, be more familiar with that of the Minnesota Goodbye. A salutation noted for being a long drawn out process, often consisting of multiple hugs, and various topics of conversation as you transition from inside your home, to the doorway, only to extend the process to the driveway, and perhaps out to the end of the driveway.

This conversation from the book of John today between Jesus and the Disciple's is somewhat reminiscent of a Minnesota Goodbye. Jesus and the disciples are in a conversation really debating semantics over how they are to define *“a little while.”* But what Jesus is trying to tell them is that his time with them on earth is coming to a close. A little bit of the boy who cried wolf story is in effect here because Jesus has spoken of his death to them many times by now. Things are further complicated by the fact Jesus is making it clear as mud stating: “I’m with you now, but soon I won’t be... I’ll be back, but not for long.

Jesus is attempting the practice of the art of goodbye. I imagine much was exchanged in addition to what is recorded, but this conversation is no doubt a vulnerable one as Jesus tells them that his time here is limited. That he and they in the coming days will feel sadness and experience pain. He has the audacity to compare it to childbirth, (thanks Jesus), but they are discussing some pretty heavy stuff in regard to how they will cope and feel in his absence. Jesus is sharing with them some of what they might have to witness leading up to the end of Jesus’

life. And in return they are able to speak and name some of their feelings and confusion over it all. Most of us can draw parallels right? We all know that this loving we humans do is vulnerable and tender and in the same breath we can recognize the strength and joy that our relationships hold. In this small pericope of text we are also given evidence of how processing our fears are helpful, asking questions of God is fair, fine, and acceptable. We hear and see how It helps to do this hard work with others as opposed to on our own. Jesus models this time and time again.

Jesus himself instituted some rituals around the end of his life. One of which we will participate in today in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. When Jesus invites his friends and invites us to give thanks, to remember, to receive, and to share.

As a church we have our own ways of remembering. We light candles, say prayers, celebrate the life of those we love by having a memorial service or a celebration of life in which we share stories, tears and laughter. And as a congregation we know first hand that people we are loving today may for one reason or another not be with us tomorrow. We share stories, keep memories and hope alive while holding both the sorrow and the joy somehow simultaneously.

Our words have so much value and this series really stresses that. Last week we talked about how forgiving and forgetting do not need to be linked to one another. What if this week we challenged ourselves to re-define goodbyes as more than an ending. For Jesus, in many ways, his death was a beginning. A new way for us to relate to God. A new gift of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Our scripture text today stresses that in his dying we were not abandoned. We were never and are never alone. Instead we are gifted the advocate of the Holy Spirit. A spirit who shows up and meets us where we are and translates all that we hold, feel and carry with sighs too deep for words. And by, and in, and through, that spirit we are able to experience Jesus today. We are able to experience amazing relationships, We can see God at work on the prairie, in our lives and in our hearts. In worship, at home, in the hospital, and in our own backyards.

When my dad died I was sure it was an ending. And like many of you I was not given time or a script to leave no-things left unsaid. I remember that evening when my friends who said I could call anytime were too sound asleep to answer their phones, that I went outside in my front yard, looking up to the night sky, almost yelling for my Dad. Pleading with him to tell me where I could find him. Where would he be? Where could I find him? And very quickly with a spirit filled assurance and peace it dawned on me that he was everywhere. In all the places he had brought me, in all the skills he had taught me. And he would be years later... in the faces and temperament of my children, in my work ethic, and in my sheer stubbornness.

In his book "When the Dying Speak." By Ron Wooten Green writes about life after a death as a time when *"All of a sudden, we must relearn the very world around us. So much of our world is defined through the existence of a significant other. When that person leaves our life, much of the world as we know it also leaves. Thus, we discover that so much of our notion*

*of who we are has also been defined by that other person's presence. With that person's death comes a need to redefine a process of learning all over again how to relate to everything and everyone in our world. It also requires a relearning of our relationship with the deceased person as well."* All this relearning takes time.

So even if we try to reshape our goodbyes to not be permanent they remain hard and the work ongoing. Most of us who can speak to having lost a loved one can also assure each other that the relationship doesn't end, but continues. It can even grow. We have a longstanding tradition of telling the stories of Jesus (a couple thousand years worth actually). As Christians we are well practiced in doing this kind of remembering. What we are less practiced in is pulling fourth the stories and memories of those regular people. The stories of our neighbors, our grandparents, our coworkers. Their stories matter, their names matter. We are all carried by the communion of saints as well as surrounded by the saints that are each other.

Perhaps today after worship you take a couple minutes to remember or share a story of someone you have said goodbye too. And as we leave this space and each other I invite you to see goodbyes as in a similar manner to how Jesus did. As blessings we give each other each time we connect. **The emphasis isn't on the fact that Jesus was going to leave them for a little while, rather, the emphasis is on the fact that they're going to see him again.** In the midst of incredible sorrow, he shares with them of a future hope. Jesus is likely speaking to them about resurrection and how often in our lives and in nature something has to change or die so that something can grow. May we all take stock in how precious and vulnerable we all are to each other. And give thanks to a God that comes alongside us in the form of the Holy Spirit and may in God our Joy be complete. Thanks be to God. Amen.