

Words Upon Parting

A little over six years ago, I stood in this pulpit for just the second time, the first as your pastor, and preached a Palm Sunday sermon entitled, “March Madness.” It was, frankly, a sermon far better suited to the Indiana church where I had just wrapped up a shared interim pastorate than to Good Shepherd but we really didn’t know each other very well then. After these six plus years, I think it’s safe to say that we know each other a whole lot better than we did then. I know many of you as well as I know my own family and most of you as well as friends that I’ve had for years. You’ve seen me at my best and at my worst. Somehow, on this voyage of discovery, we’ve grown to love each other. You’ve even been kind enough to laugh at my odd jokes. But now the time has come for us to part, just for a little while.

I thought it was a nice bit of coincidence (not that I believe in coincidence) that today’s Gospel lesson is part of Jesus’ farewell to his disciples. Of course, like any preacher with a modicum of sense, I’m wary of drawing any direct comparisons between myself and the Lord. I’ve been accused in the past of having a messiah complex but I think even I know where to draw the line. There are some wonderful messages for us in this passage from John’s Gospel, though, especially at a time of parting and on a day when we remember those who have gone on before us and especially those who gave their lives for others. So, I want to spend just a little time with these few verses from John 14, thinking about the Comforter and how we are not left orphaned. Then, we’ll move to a far more appropriate parallel to my own situation: the farewell address from the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

In our Baptist tradition, we don’t give as much attention to the Third Person of the Trinity as we might; certainly far less than our sisters and brothers in the Pentecostal and Holiness traditions. This passage is key to our understanding of the Holy Spirit as at once both separate from Christ Jesus and a part of him. Separate, in that She is the “other” whom the Father will send. A part of Christ, in that through the Spirit of truth, those who love Jesus will feel his continued presence in their lives. I understand that our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is being technically as accurate as possible in referring to the Spirit in verse 16 as the “Advocate” – this conveys the most common non-Biblical usage for the Greek word *παρακλητος* which John used here – a legal term for one who pleads another’s cause before a judge. But I confess I prefer the translation used by the old King James Version and The Living Bible: Comforter. Particularly as I find less and less meaning for my life in the image of God as stern judge and more and more as Loving Creator, I experience the Holy Spirit far less as a defense attorney and more as the one who helps me feel like a beloved child of God. Then again, maybe it was the other way around. Maybe it was my experience of the Holy Spirit that helped to shape my theological outlook...

Regardless of which came first for me, the brooding hen of the Paraclete or the still-developing egg of my understanding, I think that the understanding of *παρακλητος* as Comforter fits this passage better. “I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus said. And while orphans may, in that time and this, need a strong Advocate to make sure that their vulnerable rights are not trampled, it is far more important that the ones left bereft have a strong, loving presence in their lives to keep them from despair. On this Memorial Day weekend, we pay homage to brave men and women who died in the service of their country, often far from home, often alone. And yet we can take comfort, as we grieve for them collectively or with one or two particular persons in mind, that in their last moments they were not truly alone for the great Comforter was with them. In my

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immediate family, we had no service members who'd given that ultimate sacrifice, but we used the holiday to remember those in our family who had died within our memories. When we lived in the St. Louis area, we would often drive on Memorial Day to Crystal City, where my Grandfather and my older sister and brother, and later my Grandmother, were buried. Were I there today, I would also take flowers to my mother's grave site in that same family plot. On such a day, indeed still today, I would be and am grateful for the presence of the Comforter, a sense of the love of God for me even greater than that that I'd known from my Grandmother or my Mother and a reassurance of the promise which we'd all claimed – the resurrection in joy promised us by our Creator. Although as a seventeen-year old I was nearly inconsolable at my Mother's death, I knew that I was not left orphaned because the Spirit of Jesus stood with me in my grief.

Jesus linked the presence of the παρακλητος with the disciples love for him and with their intent to keep his commandments. In the conclusion of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the writer gives her version of just what those commandments are. Oh, perhaps I should explain why I said "her version." Although there have been some attempts over the centuries to attribute this epistle to Paul, the earliest witnesses to the book and its inclusion in the canon offer no clues as to its authorship. Had those who ultimately set the canon of the New Testament believed Hebrews to be Pauline in origin, it would have taken its place between Romans and I Corinthians as one of Paul's lengthier letters. Instead, it falls after his shortest, Philemon, and takes pride of place among the epistles from other writers. There have been various guesses by scholars over the years as to who wrote Hebrews. Paul's companions, Barnabas and Silas, have been popular candidates and so have been Luke, Philip, and Clement of Rome. A much shorter epistle known to have been by Clement, Peter's successor as Bishop of Rome, just missed the cut for the New Testament and is perhaps the oldest of the writings by the men known as "the Church Fathers" still studied today. But I was recently given a copy of a book by Ruth Hoppin, which makes a pretty good case that Priscilla is the mysterious author of Hebrews. Priscilla, or Prisca, was the wife of Aquila mentioned in several of Paul's letters as a co-worker and in Acts as the teacher of Apollos, Paul's rival as the greatest preacher of the time. I'll leave the argument for another time but for the purposes of this morning, I'll ask that you humor me and allow me to refer to the author of Hebrews as "she."

As I mentioned earlier, as I was looking for a passage that seemed to best address our situation here at Good Shepherd Baptist as I prepare to depart for a season, I felt that the last chapter of Hebrews came closest to what I wanted to express. The author's encouragement of her flock and her requests of them has a great resonance for me and I hope you will also find the comfort and the challenge in those words. She begins with an imperative that must have seemed to her like a "gimme" and so it does to me. "Let mutual love continue." From the very beginning of my time here with you, I have always been impressed by the mutual love that fills this community. To paraphrase Sally Fields, "you like each other – you really, really like each other!" You have embraced me and my family; you have moved to include guests and new members with genuine openness. Let me also encourage you to let mutual love continue. Be sure to embrace those who are new among us, and those who are new, let these long-timers embrace you. They're a pretty good bunch. Even though I've never seen such behavior among you, I encourage you not to let the slow schedule of the summer allow you to cluster with just your nearest and dearest. Keep loving everyone who is a part of our church family, no matter how different from you they are.

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In a like manner, Priscilla writes, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers...” You are good at welcoming guests. Let me encourage you to continue this with some specifics. On many of the Sundays of my leave, your fellow members of Good Shepherd will fill this pulpit. I hope you will show your love for them by honoring the gift they give of their gifts and insights. Show up to hear them! And as far as hospitality to strangers goes, show up to hear those preachers you don’t know, too. I know that beautiful summer mornings call many of us away to the mountains and the beaches and the water but consider those strangers who may be showing up at Good Shepherd on Sunday looking for a place to worship and a community to worship with. The first part of hospitality is being here to open the door to them. Please, make sure there are enough people here that our guests feel welcomed by a loving, vital community. We don’t want them to wonder if there’s really a church here or not. And don’t forget our long-term guests, the other groups that share our building. Welcome them when you see them, respect their space and pray for the good work that they all do.

Indeed, by supporting the recovery groups who meet here, you are fulfilling the third commandment of Jesus listed in Hebrews 13: “Remember those who are in prison...” We do not have a literal ministry to prisoners at Good Shepherd, although that might be a good future missional activity for us. But we do provide a place for those who feel trapped by their addictions or who are emerging into freedom from them. I think this is an important aspect of our ministry presence in this community and, as I’ve mentioned before, though we may never have the opportunity to welcome the majority of those guests to a Sunday worship, they think of this as “their” church. I hope that all of you are as gladdened by this aspect of our ministry as I am.

Just as we do not have a ministry to those who are literally in prison, we’ve not talked much at Good Shepherd about the torture issue. Frankly, I keep thinking that the people of God are going to rise up *en masse* and demand stronger statements from our government repudiating torture by the U.S. and our allies. In fact, I keep waiting for our government to do this just because it’s right. Sadly, I keep being disappointed. There are still elements in our military, our civilian government and even in our churches who apparently believe that the ends justify the means, even when it comes to torture. How the reputed followers of a man who was essentially tortured to death, Jesus of Nazareth, can condone state-sponsored abuse is beyond me. If this issue has not abated by my return in the fall, I think it will be time for us to address it.

In her appeal for the sanctity of marriage, the author of Hebrews is calling for the living out of love for others in its most basic form. Marriage has come to have many different meanings in our culture and I doubt that we could come to a consensus among us this morning as to which of those meanings is paramount. But one thing I think we should agree on is that when two people enter into the bonds of what they understand as marriage, then they are making a promise to each other, their families and friends, and to God, that they will respect, nurture and truly love each other to the best of their abilities. Those of us who are married must do everything in our power to keep that promise for another human being has put themselves in our power, emotionally. When one partner abuses another, they are guilty of the most grievous breach of the love that God intends to exist between people. And those who are not married are called to uphold the marriages of their friends, family and neighbors. Human marriage is meant to show forth the

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closest possible likeness to the relationship between God and God's people, the Beloved Community. To follow the Son of God is to work to uphold the promises of marriage wherever we may find them.

If upholding marriage is to model between humans the relationship that God wishes to have with us, then the rejection of the love of money is a powerful example of disallowing a created idol to take the place of the Creator in our lives. Our attitude about money can be revelatory of other things to which we give allegiance over the allegiance which we owe to God. As A.K.M. Adam of the University of Glasgow writes, "Any object of desire that overshadows a primary allegiance to God – be it sex, or status, or spiritual virtuosity – imperils the faithfulness that sustains our sharing in Jesus." All of these things mentioned by Adam, and money as well, can be idols for us. In our culture, money is perhaps the most dangerous. I think we as a congregation passed an important test in this regard when we approved spending down an appropriate amount of our savings to make needed improvements to our physical plant. I think we'd all agree that the renovations have increased our enjoyment of being in our little building and made it, in very human ways, easier to come together in fellowship and worship. We did not allow our savings accounts to become idols that prevented us from moving forward together. We should now be prudent to rebuild our savings, but in order that we can do future projects and never at the expense of ministry projects. We must remember Priscilla's exhortation in verse 16: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have..."

Originally when I looked at these verses as a good base for this morning's sermon, I thought I'd skip over verse 17. I figured if I started talking about you all "obeying" me as your leader, I'd get hooted out of the pulpit and rightly so. But I decided I did want to read this verse because I'm not applying it to me (although you are certainly welcome to do so). While I'm gone, a lot of good people have volunteered to do things in my place and I want to encourage you all to be good to them. I've already mentioned those who are preaching in my absence; again, show up, honor their gifts of insight, show them that they are loved. Christy Deer is going to be handling the weekly newsletter for the next three months, which is an enormous gift of time and effort. Help her out by sending her pictures to feature and let her know about prayer requests or interesting events in the community or other news that affects our church family. Lynn Melby is going to be "first responder" for pastoral care needs and Lee Campbell will be coordinating other volunteers when Lynn is not available. Honor them by letting them know what's going on with you and your families. While I'm not here to keep an eye on the building from day to day, a greater load will fall on the Larsons. Be sure to help them out when they ask, especially while Ginny is still in treatment. Jen, Dale, Karen, Lannon and Brenda Hokkanen will be handling voice mail, snail mail and e-mail when I'm gone. Be sure to help them as they need it, too. And, of course, as our congregation President, Karen Heys will be catching things that fall through the cracks. Be good to her this summer! "Let them do this with joy and not with sighing – for that would be harmful to you."

Finally, my sisters and brothers, my dear friends, beloved in the Lord, pray for me while I am apart from you. I am so grateful for this opportunity for study and reflection, for prayer and rest, for dreaming it all up all over again. From June 8 to July 4, I will be traveling far from home. I ask for your prayers for safe travels for myself and for Connie. I've set an itinerary that I believe will both challenge and refresh my spirit. I hope to learn new things and to reground my spirit in

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some familiar but long-absent practices and places. Pray for me that God will lead me during this time. Know that I will miss you. I hope you'll miss me, too, but I'm aware of the wisdom of the old country and western song that said, "How can I miss you if you won't go away?"

And, "Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen."