

Title: Sacred Partings

Text: Acts 20 (selected verses from vv. 17 - 38)

Date: June 16, 2019

There are many directions in which we could go this morning, so let me share my thought process in terms of how I narrowed it down.

Since today is Trinity Sunday, a good option would be explain in simple terms what the Trinity means, and what difference this makes to your life. Alas, I figured that was something you already clearly understood, so why bother.

Likewise, I believe that today is Father's Day. Then I realized that it's not Mother's Day, so why bother.

Finally, it occurred to me that this might be my last Sunday preaching here, so something related to that might be in order. As a pastor, I have never been a great fan of parishioners who quietly slip off in the middle of the night never to be seen again. I think there is something to be said about saying proper farewells, and so then this might be a good opportunity for me to model an intentional farewell. I am not sure what a perfect farewell looks like, but at least this will be an intentional farewell.

If there are any visitors with us today, welcome! You should know that today is my last day as what is called an *Intentional Interim Pastor*. We all knew that this day would be coming – we just did not know exactly when. Having said that, there is a sense in which I think it is wise to realize that *all* pastors are Interim Pastors. Some just stay longer. Randy was an interim here for 41 years or so. You may *think* some pastors are permanent, but they are all Interims. I can imagine that your next called pastor – who will ultimately be an interim as well - will stay longer than I did, but not as long as Randy did. We are *all* Interims – pastors and lay people alike. That's a good thing to keep in mind.

So my first order of business in "checking out," is to return to you the plant that I found in my office when I arrived. It may not be a thing of beauty, but let the record show that I did not kill the plant! I consider that to be a good omen! I pray that Kathy will keep it alive, until it can be passed on to your next pastor – whatever her name is.

Some people think of an Interim Pastor as "place holder." I would prefer to think of the role as more of a "place filler," where I might fill the place with whatever is unique about me. Each interim comes with a unique set of gifts, and your job is to strive to learn what you can from their uniqueness.

So as I bid you farewell, I wonder if you are even aware that there is essentially a genre in scripture known as "farewell discourses"? In Genesis 47:29 – 49:33 we have Jacob's last words to his sons. In Deuteronomy 31:14 – 33:29 we have the final words of Moses. In Joshua 23:1 – 24:30 we have the final words of Joshua. In I Samuel 12 we have Samuel's farewell address. In II Kings 2:1 – 14 we have the last words of Elijah. In Matthew 28:18 – 20 and John chapters 13 – 17 we have the last words of Jesus. In II Timothy we have Paul's last words to Timothy. All of II Peter is essentially Peter's farewell discourse. There are even some examples in the books of the *Apocrypha*.

In a farewell discourse the departing leader's life is reviewed as an example for imitation and an apologetic for conduct. There are sometimes warnings concerning future dangers to the faith, exhortations to faithfulness, and God's benediction in an affectionate, sorrowful, prayerful farewell. Paul's address that we read this morning falls into this category.

Now I could follow Paul's pattern. If Paul says, **"I lived among you the entire time . . . serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me,"** I could say, "Yeah, me too." I could echo Paul's words when he says, **"I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God,"** but that does sound just a bit grandiose. I think, however, that I have a better idea. I'll just try and be myself.

One of the great gifts that you have given me was the gift of allowing me to be myself. You don't know how liberating that is. Rather than feeling hypersensitive so as not to offend anyone in a sermon, you have enabled me to feel relaxed. You have allowed me to play on the edges of orthodoxy, while hopefully not being guilty of any grave transgressions. Of course, the idea is not to "be radical" for the sense of shock value, but to be radical in the sense of going after the true root of something. So I am really, really grateful to you for allowing me to explore issues that I have not felt free to explore in other churches.

I think of some of the themes that I have tried to explore with you.

From my earliest days here, I tried to introduce you to the language of "the false self," and "the true self." Our "false self" is the image we have of ourselves that we would like to project for others to see. With this in mind, I would be off to a pretty poor start if my goal as a successful pastor was to "act like Paul." Our true self is who we are in God's eyes – beloved children of God. It has always been my goal to help you to rest in and delight in your True Self. As Cynthia Bourgeault says, **"It is the false self that we bring to the spiritual journey; our 'true self' lies buried beneath the accretions and defenses. In all of us there is a huge amount of healing that has to take place before our deep and authentic quest for union with God – which requires tremendous courage and inner presence to sustain – escapes the gravitational pull of our psychological woundedness and self-justification. This, in essence, constitutes the spiritual journey."** If you have been able to grasp some of this, my time here has been well spent.

Another theme that I have tried to convey while being here is that "the news is bigger than you think." Remember that theme from my first Advent here with "the Spirit house?" I have often said that it was my belief that Jesus did not come with the intent of merely starting a new religion. Surely, we are caught in a tribal mentality when we have an "us" vs. "them" mentality when it comes to religion. It is true that as Christians we talk about the Word being made flesh, but that Word has been around a lot longer than 2,000 years. The author of John's gospel tells us that that Word has been around since the beginning of creation. Are we to assume that the Word has been silent all those millennium? I think not! We should be thrilled to explore the synchronicity in the religions of the world – not fearful of this quest. The news is bigger than you think!

Another recurring theme has been that it is not all about "belief systems." Since the Reformation we have been overly proud of our intellect and systematic theology. In fact, we have gotten so caught up in our head, that it has gotten in the way of the softening of our hearts. We need to spend more time stilling our racing minds so that we might be able to experience the immediacy of God's presence. We need to nurture a more contemplative spirituality.

I think as well of themes that are dear to you where I have been enriched.

I have learned from your extreme sensitivity to power of words, and word choice. I have learned from your attention to numerous subtleties when it comes to reflecting on power, racism, and white privilege. And when it comes to LGBTQ issues, I have learned more about trans issues in particular, as well as the vagaries of gender.

I have learned from your commitment to the environment, and how that spills over into thoughtful activism. Caring for the environment is indeed part of a *deeper* spirituality, not a more superficial spirituality.

One of my more poignant memories of saying farewell is when I said goodbye to the tiny village of Waritzian, in Papua New Guinea, where I lived for 3.5 years. As part of taking this seriously, the entire village lined up single file, and I went down the line shaking hands or hugging each person individually. I was not prepared for this, and the whole thing ended up being surprisingly emotional. What really took me by surprise was when certain people who were not involved with me much ended up bursting forth in tears. You just never know whose life you are touching.

I was also given parting gifts at that time that were a challenge to handle since I would be getting on an airplane in a couple of days. Somehow or other I managed to get some of these gifts on the plane, and have been carrying them around with me for many years. Now, however, I am in a phase of my life when I am seriously letting go of many, many things that I have once felt strong attachments to. So, in the spirit of letting go, who would like a handmade clay cooking pot, in a unique style that can only be found in Waritzian? It's time to let go!

So then, it is in this spirit of detachment that I would like to close my little farewell discourse with a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye – a peer of mine – born of a Palestinian father and an American mother.

*Adios*

It is a good word, rolling off the tongue  
no matter what language you were born with,  
Use it. Learn where it begins,  
the small alphabet of departure,  
how long it takes to think of it,  
then say, then be heard.

Marry it. More than any golden ring,  
it shines, it shines.  
Wear it on every finger  
till your hands dance,  
touching everything easily,  
letting everything, easily, go.

Strap it to your back like wings.  
Or a kite-tail. The stream of air behind a jet.  
If you are known for anything,  
let it be the way you rise out of sight  
when your work is finished.

Think of things that linger: leaves,  
cartons and napkins, the damp smell of mold.

Think of things that disappear.

Think of what you love best,  
what brings tears into your eyes.

Something that said adios to you  
before you knew what it meant  
or how long it was for.

Explain little, the word explains itself.  
Later perhaps. Lessons following lessons,  
like silence following sound.

Amen.