

“On The Way Out The Door” GPPC 5-28-17  
Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35, John 17:1-11

How do we say goodbye to somebody we love and we’re not going to see for a while? How do we do that?

I remember after I graduated from college and got married. It was a typical August day in South Carolina—blazing hot and sauna humid. Sweating like pigs my dad and I were loading my little red Fiat with my belongings. The last thing was to try to put a small metal rowboat on the roof of the car. It was an awkward thing to try to move. And we were already tired. So as my dad and I were hauling the thing, we got into an argument about how we were going to do it. And then my father just dropped his side of the boat, and said, “Fine, put it up there yourself.” He then walked into the house.

Rest assured it’s hard to put a metal boat on the roof of a car by yourself. I can’t remember if my dad finally came out and helped me, or if my mom did.

Decades later it occurs to me that my father and I were not just snappish from the heat and fatigue. We were also grieving. Our

Jeff Paschal

relationship was changing, and I was moving two hours away to become a high school band director. So there was a sense of adventure and a sense of loss. And we responded with impatience and anger.

How do we say goodbye to someone we love and we're not going to see for a while?

Sometimes we respond by having an argument, because sometimes anger is an easier emotion to manage than grief. If I'm angry at you, it's not so difficult to say goodbye. It's less painful, at least in the short run, to say good riddance than goodbye. But it's not healthy.

How do we say goodbye to someone we love and we're not going to see for a while?

Presbyterian minister Diana Nishita Cheifetz says, "A male friend called to say good-bye before he moved out of the area. We had not spoken for a while, and I was touched that he would think of calling in the midst of his packing. He and I had supported each other during rough times. I knew that he prayed for me and my family, and I had been there for him, too. We thanked each other warmly for the graces of the friendship, and during a tender pause, I said carefully, 'Now this is the

Jeff Paschal

point at which I would say, if you were a girlfriend, ‘I love you.’ With great feeling, along with his usual immaculate precision with words, he responded, ‘Well, I love you, too—and we know what we mean, and we know what we *don’t* mean, because you are married. And thank you for saying it, because life is too short not to say the things we feel.’” (Diana Nishita Cheifetz, “On Discretion: Musings of a Jesus-loving Woman at Pentecost,” *Weavings*, May/June 2007, 38.)

How do we say goodbye to someone we love and we’re not going to see for a while?

Jesus had told his disciples, not once, not twice, but three times that he was going to be rejected and crucified before being raised from the dead. He told them three times. And, of course, they still couldn’t grasp it, maybe because it was too painful and too incredible to accept.

So instead of announcing it one more time, putting it in the bulletin one more time, sticking a blurb in the eNews yet again, Jesus did something else. He prayed. On the way out the door, he prayed.

Jeff Paschal

And in John's typical writing style, the prayer is long and winding and difficult for us to absorb. Jesus says many things in this prayer, but we'll look at just two of those things today.

“Father,” he says, “the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.” First, Jesus reminds us of the nature of God. Who is this God who made us and created everything that is, seen and unseen? Who is this God who refuses to abandon us when we go astray but who insists on redeeming us, on forgiving us and bringing us back into right relationship with God and each other? Who is this God who flings the galaxies into the universe, who keeps the planets in their orbits, who makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall, who breathes life into human beings and into every living being? Who is this strange and wonderful God?

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.” In a world often devoted to power for power's sake, and “Me first! Look at me!”, and murderous

Jeff Paschal

envy, this God is not about self-centeredness. This God is about love, because God *is* love. And the nature of love is not manipulation. Neither is it narcissism, or jealousy. Love is about self-giving, not self-centeredness.

So again and again in John's gospel we hear the language of reciprocity. "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." Over and over we read of the Father giving to the Son and the Son giving back to the Father and the Holy Spirit giving to the church and the church returning thanks and service to God and empowered by God to do so.

The Eastern Orthodox Church envisions the Trinity as perichoresis, a circular dance within the being of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—giving and receiving, giving and receiving—in love. And the church is invited to take her place in that dance—not seeking dominance, not demanding attention, not consumed by envy, but giving and receiving, giving and receiving.

A Christian spiritual director says, "[The great Christian layperson apologist for the Christian faith] C. S. Lewis confessed that early in his

Jeff Paschal

conversion to Christianity he thought ‘religion ought to have been a matter of good men praying alone and meeting by twos and threes to talk of spiritual matters.’ He disliked the ‘fussy, time-wasting botheration’ of church-going. He came, however, to realize that the common life of Christians is not optional. [As he concluded] ‘God only reveals Himself to real people...united together in a body, loving one another, helping one another, showing [God] to one another....The one really adequate instrument for learning about God is the whole Christian community.’”

(Deborah Smith Douglas, *Staying Present Together: Rooted and Grounded in Love, Weavings*, Vol. XXVIII, Number 1, 13-14.)

So a first thing we learn in this prayer is that when Jesus describes the self-giving love of God he is also describing the self-giving love of the church, a self-giving love that we are always learning in the Christian community.

And that leads to a second thing this prayer teaches. In John’s gospel (and in the prayer today), Jesus spends a good bit of time talking about the church and “the world.” On the one hand, Jesus says God has chosen the church and plucked it “from the world.” The church is in a

Jeff Paschal

special relationship with God; as it follows and trusts in Jesus it experiences eternal life, life on a higher plane of existence now. As Jesus says, “For the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” In old Presbyterian (and biblical) language, God has elected the church for service and salvation.

And what about “the world”? Sometimes it sounds as though God doesn’t really care about “the world,” e.g., folks outside the church. As Jesus says this morning, “I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.” Does God only love Christians, only love the church? Is God just a tribal god?

But then we remember John 3:16 “For God so loved *the world* that he gave his only begotten Son.” And constantly we read Bible passages in which Jesus shows love for people outside the faith community and people outside the faith community sometimes teach the faithful.

There’s a tension here, isn’t there?

Maybe the last verse helps us understand better. Jesus says, “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am

Jeff Paschal

coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”

Jesus knows he is going away and leaving the church “in the world.” Now he could pray, “Father, destroy the world.” But he does not pray that. He could pray, “Parent, don’t let the church suffer.” But he does not pray that. He could even pray, “Help the church hide from the world,” or “Help the church fill a basketball arena.” He does not pray that.

Of all the things Jesus could pray, Jesus prays for God to protect the church’s unity. “So that they may be one, as we are one.”

So strange. Jesus reminds the church of the nature of God and its own nature of self-giving love. And then Jesus leaves the church behind “in the world,” and then prays for God to grant the church’s unity. Why? Maybe because the world is not the enemy. Maybe because the church has been called together, formed in Christ, and called to unity so that the church, the Body of Christ, may help to save the world. Our unity does not mean we agree on everything. Our unity means we remember that

Jeff Paschal

we are one, just as God is one, and we work together, as an instrument of God to save the world.

Kate Braestrup, serves as a chaplain for the Maine Warden Service, basically a chaplain for the game wardens and other people who come to the beautiful and dangerous wilderness of Maine. She says, “A six-year-old girl [Alison] has wandered off from a family picnic near Masquinongy Pond, and she remains missing after a long day of waiting. The Maine Warden Service has mounted a search.” Braestrup paints a picture of the situation. Dozens of people, game wardens and volunteers, walking the woods, looking, looking. Handlers with their specially trained dogs. A plane flies overhead.

The parents, of course, are terrified. Braestrup is called to meet them. “We’re not churchgoers,” they say.

“I’m not a church minister.” She answers.

“Actually, [says the husband] I should probably tell you; we’re atheists.”

“Ah.”

“No offense.”

Jeff Paschal

“I’m not offended,” [Braestrup says] “What a long, hard day you two have had.”

The father says he’s an engineer and he wants the truth, even if it’s hard. His daughter’s probably dead, right?

No. Braestrup has already talked to the wardens and they believe they’ll find her alive.

Braestrup writes, “And this is how the Maine Warden Service found her: At about three o’clock in the morning, a few miles almost due west of the [Place Last Seen], Warden Ron Dunham’s K-9, Grace, found a little girl in an Elmo sweatshirt curled up under some brush.

“Ron hunkered down and let the dog’s cold nose awaken her, ‘Hey, honey,’ Ron said gently. ‘Do you want to go home?’

“The girl sat up and rubbed her eyes. ‘Yes,’ she said calmly. She crawled out from her nesting place and got to her feet.

“‘Want me to carry you?’

“‘No, thank you,’ Alison said politely....

“‘Want me to hold your hand?’ Ron asked.

Jeff Paschal

“The child considered for a moment. ‘Yes,’ she decided.” (Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me*, 3-18.)

We are not perfect ourselves, but we are part of the self-giving love of God. And Jesus sends the church to search and to show that love to the world that often loses its way.

And on his way out the door, Jesus says to the church, “You know God’s love. God’s love is in you. Care for the world. Search for the broken and missing. Stick together. Hold my hand. I’ll hold yours.”

Amen. © Jeff Paschal