

**“You Always Have To Learn To Say Good-bye...”**

**Text: “Little Children, I am with you for a little while longer. You will seek me, but where I am going you cannot come, not now. But a new commandment I give to you that you love one another, as I have loved you.”**  
**John 13:33**

**Rev. Richard M. Cromie, Ph.D., D.D.  
Sharon Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
February 15, 2009**

I have a friendly little sermon for you this morning: somewhat less challenging than the worries of finance in the nation, or the war clouds which continue to circle the globe, or our increasing awareness of the decline and fall of practically everybody. Surprise! It is not intended to disturb you. It does not even want you to change your mind. It will not force its way into your soul and psyche, unless of course you unlock the door to the other level down below the surface. It just wants to sit down beside you in your pew. Oh I know you do not easily welcome strangers there, but not to worry, it will wiggle gently in and be no bother at all. It is peaceful, almost passive, something like a quiet walk in the park, or like a little sit to on the front porch to catch the breeze on a summer's evening, or like any young mother knows, the quiet comes when the children are all in bed. It has no hidden goals: only to engage you in a little conversation with yourself in that private cherished core where no one else can enter

It begins in a little story Jesus told, recorded only in the Gospel of John, which he shared with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. I think it hurt him far more coming from Judas Iscariot than from one of his enemies. It always hurts more when someone close to you lets you down, than when a total stranger does. But maybe it all depends...

In the Thirteenth chapter of John, Jesus is speaking to the disciples. He was lonely and troubled. He really never had many friends. His family wasn't much help; his brothers thought he was crazy, as brothers sometimes do. It was time for him to depart this mortal vale and go home to the Father, and he wanted to share a final, cosmic farewell dinner with them; but they didn't know it.

They assumed they were there to celebrate the Passover meal. You never know when the extraordinary is going to break in upon you. Those especial days start out like all the others. They were seated around the table, something like you and I might at a Valentine's Day party. When they were done eating, he knelt down and washed their feet! That was rather common in that ancient desert country; but the servants normally did it. It is as though you invited your Minister to dinner; then he got up and cleared the table, and washed the dishes and mopped the floor. But Jesus said previously that if you want to be the master of yourself or anything else, you must first learn to be a servant of all.

Then when the chores were done, he said to them "Little children, I am only going to be with you a little while." Oops, listen now, this is serious. Such a little while to go together. Everybody knows it or should, but it is not normally a pensive sort of knowledge. You learn it in the trenches in the fox holes of your life. It is forced upon the best of us from time to time. Little children, he called them.

What an endearing term. To our Heavenly Father we are all "little children". Jesus loves the little children of the world; red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world. Why? Well, little children are so open and refreshing and trusting, so fragile and dependent and vulnerable. He continued: "Where I am going, you cannot come. I am going to the Father, but before I do I want to give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

We have such a little way to go together. We join in the circle and march around the chairs – until the music stops; and when it does, it's time for someone to leave, i.e., the one who doesn't have a chair. Could it be that simple? God just slips in unannounced and takes your chair away. And you are gone from the sight of those around you off into the shining light of the Eternal Christ. We all

know how fragile is the gift of life and how suddenly it can be taken away. There is such a little way to go together.

What seems imperative is that with all the things Jesus might have said, he left them with a commandment to love one another, as he had loved them. His last commandment was not you must be studious in defending the faith. It was not “Keep the church pure and throw the ones out who disagree with you.” Our Denomination is engaged in conversations now as to who is entitled to be ordained in the Church. Not unlike most other Churches, we have a division on both sides. I do want to explore that in detail here. But when I was a cub pastor in Pittsburgh in the earliest 1960s, we debated vociferously whether women should be ordained. Opponents quoted Bible, how it says that “Women should keep silence in the Church.” Or worse, “If there was something they did not understand, they should go home and ask their husbands.”

Then later we debated whether a minister who was divorced should be able to stay in the pulpit. Again the opponents quoted Scripture to prove that the ordained man should “be the husband of only one wife.” But think of it now: how much better off we are having women elders and ministers. God was moving the Church on to something new, and it was hard for many to learn to say good-bye to a long and cherished idea of how it should be done. Jesus did not use his last commandment to warn us of the evil or the perils of the world. No, it was “to love one another.”

Jesus loved his disciples totally and selflessly, as Professor Barclay once wrote it. Human love usually isn't like that. It has some portion of self love connected with it. What will I get out of this? What happiness will it give me? “I've been hurt before,” she said to me, “if it happens again. I don't think I could stand it! Do you think I should give into it?” I said “When it is love, you surely can.” Our reservations have to do with me and mine.

Not with our Lord; he loved them no matter what they did. We keep hedging our bets: What if love is taken away, lost, stolen, or ends? Jesus would reply, “But what if it isn't?” You have to take a risk once in a while or you turn into jelly. They did not have to agree with him to earn his love. What if the change is in us and not in Love? Grief and loneliness are the price you pay for love. If you didn't love, it wouldn't hurt when the love or loved one leaves or is taken away. Grief and loneliness are the price you pay for love. He was unafraid to love.

We sometimes treat love as if its purpose is to bring us happiness. But we are not supposed to love each other for what it does for us. St. Paul noted that even the sinners do that. There is a certain honor among thieves. They will lay down their lives for their friends and family. As long as they get something for themselves, they will take, protect, and care for someone else. But if you get nothing back, and still love unconditionally, you're the champ. That's what the commandment means. He had lived with them, traveled with them, eaten with them. He saw all their failures and foibles, but he loved them anyway. They often gave up on him – remember, or better try not to - in the end they all forsook him and fled. In his hour of need, they copped out and ran away. But he never gave up on them. No matter what they did, he loved them anyway. He kept giving and giving and giving. He was always there.

People often tell me they would have done it differently, if had they only known. “If we had known how sick he was, we would have been nicer.” “We would have stopped by or at least we would have called or sent a card or a ubiquitous email.” But, wait a minute, who is kidding whom - you already know how fragile life is. The Bible says, “You know not what a day may bring forth! And

it adds, “You fool, this night your soul could be required of you.” So quit the games; don’t try to fool anybody; don’t pretend that it’s some big surprise that people face illness and turn the corner. The ultimate in wonder is not that life breaks down but that it ever builds up. The ultimate in wonder is not death, but life. Just be surprised by the love which transpires in between while they go along the way.

Life is precious. You only have one life to live for eternity. The only stuff you have that will ever distinguish you is the life you live in the here and now. Whatever else our eternity is, it has to reflect back on the days and decades you and I lived on earth. I think we will look back and re-live it – the good and the bad and the indifferent, a million times perhaps before it’s over, if it ever is. Like a piece of information whirling through cyberspace, it will never disappear, not from the mind of God anyway.

This life is it! (Are you listening?) Each and every minute is eternal; every millisecond will be circling the universe until God brings down the final curtain if he ever does. You cannot believe in re-incarnation and be a Christian: your soul and mind and psyche are eternally sacred and individual. There cannot be another you, any more than there can be another Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The only journey which matters is the journey you take.

The famous Polish Rabbi Zadok from 19<sup>th</sup> Century wrote that “When I get to heaven, no one is going to ask me why I was not like Moses or Elijah or Isaiah or one of the prophets.” They will ask, “Zadok, why were you not like you? Why were you not true to the vision I gave for yourself. Why did you pretend to be some one else so that people would think you were grand?” Worry not about what other people think. Worry only about what God thinks of you. Walt Whitman wrote in his confession of faith, “I love God and flowers and little children, and all the rest can go to seed.”

W. H. Auden wrote, “You must learn to love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart!” The hours too swiftly fly, the days race into decades - and you know it. And you keep crabbing about the same old things. In Christian churches I have heard the worse sort of threats and accusations. If they do this, I will do that. “If they dare ask me for another dollar,” Ralph said one day, “I will quit the church!” If they don’t follow through on my suggestion, I will hit the roof. Which all being interpreted means, “If they won’t do it my way, if I don’t get what I want, there will be hell to pay. Ooops, brother-sister, there sure will, only not the way you mean it: Hell meaning Hades, and guess who will collect on the bill down there. “You must learn to love one another, as I have loved you.”

Our worst sin might be the way we treat each other. How unkind we can be, even to those who bear the same religious name. I have heard people in the same congregation gossiping about one another. Our worst inhumanity might be the way we treat each other. There is a lot to worry us across the nation and around the world, of course. There are hungry people everywhere. It’s inhumane not to care about them. There are poor people right down the street. It’s inhumane not to care about them. There are victims of abuse, and innocent bystanders in warfare. It’s inhumane not to care about them. But somehow the way we walk right by each other, or worse, talk trash about a fellow member – well Christ just might ask you that first. It is understandable that the struggling pigmies out in New Guinea might not make it to the top of your list; and you might forget to pray for or against the Afghan terrorists, but Lord God Almighty, there is no excuse at all for harboring ill feelings against a fellow Christian.

Our sermon title says, “You always have to learn to say goodbye” (Are you listening?) You have to learn, emphasize the verb. Nobody ever prepares you for that. I often tell young ministers to begin working on their Farewell Sermon the moment they arrive at a church. It sounds misleading, like they should not devote full time attention to the job at hand. But what I mean after 47 years of ordination is that it’s a reminder that life is transitory. That way if God calls they are always ready to say good-bye and follow where he leads. The Bible says we have no continuing city here, not on the earth and not in a Church. And that’s true with members and elders and would be power players in the pews. Someday soon, you have to learn to say good-bye. Jesus did not command them to hold on the old ways of doing things. He said you have to learn to love and you have to learn to say good-bye.

No one ever teaches you how to say goodbye – say, to your father or mother. You have to learn it by yourself. I think it’s the prior relationship which stands in the way. I mean, he was Big Daddy when you first met him. He held you and guided and guarded you. In some cases, maybe he didn’t do a very good job. That’s sad. But it is over now and what of it if he was not the perfect Father; you were not the perfect son or daughter when he got cruising on in years and you were busy doing your own life and struggling with your own demons or so that everyone would love you.

You have to learn to say goodbye to a wife, husband, child, grandparent, friend or playmate or to a church. There are no lessons even on the Internet which you can Google to find out how to do it. It is a cumulative process, a growing awareness, a sometimes bewildering turn of events. It starts the first day the child leaves for school, maybe sooner. Some pediatric psychologists believe that the greatest emotional trauma of our lives is the initial one, the moment we are born, and tears still mark the beginning of a life. When later a child seeks each new beginning, you have to learn to how to deal with it. He or she is also learning. How you handle it is the first step of a child who is catching the difference between what is permanent and what is transitory.

That’s a lot to hold on to when the five year old steps out the door. But, from there it builds and deepens. Each separation is a preparation for the next one, (Are you with me?) on through college and graduate school. To marriage or employment in a faraway town, and when your parents die, or you oldest daughter gets divorced, or your youngest son is different, or you lose your job, or you got transferred to another city. It’s life, it’s movement, it is what it’s supposed to be. “Foxes have holes in the ground and birds of the air have nests in the trees, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head.” How you handle the last separation is related to how you managed the other ones along the way.

We start out believing that we are entitled to 70, 80, 90 years of uninterrupted blessing and happiness, and if this or that goes wrong, we feel insulted by the Lord and we ask God to change the nature of things and bring it into line to satisfy us. God says “Wait a minute, here’s the drill.” “Why?” Not why did it go wrong, but how on earth did it ever come to be? What is, is what is supposed to be there, not the other way around.

Paul wrote, in Philippians, “I have learned in whatsoever state I am to be content.” Hear the verb? “Learned”! You don’t find contentment by osmosis. It doesn’t rub off on you by nature. You have to learn it. You have to learn to say goodbye.

Willy, nilly...we live in a stressful world, with increases in crime, noise, traffic, pollution, immigration, cultural shock, financial troubles, etc. Family relationships are under more pressure

than ever before. Moral choices have become convoluted. Fulfilling the need for love, for recognition, for the feeling that our lives matter have all dwindled in recent decades. Loneliness is on the loose.

Some stress is caused by the events in the world around us: accidents, war, illness, tornados, economic fluctuation, and circumstances beyond our control. But, other stress is caused by the choices we make, the failure to learn. The first time it's the dog's fault; after that it's you. Pogo said it "We have met the enemy and he is us." And sure, some stress is caused by others.

Join me for a minute in a little experiment, a sort of "show and tell sermon." Take your bulletin or a little pencil or a pew card...anything you can get hold of. Go ahead, everybody. Place it between your thumb and middle finger and hold it tightly. (Now don't feel foolish, you can't get this kind of thing in most churches.) You choir people in the loft, please do it too. Now hold it out in front of you, and squeeze it hard...as if your life depended on not letting it fall to the floor. O.K.! Now squeeze it harder. Don't hurt yourself...but press it together as hard as you can for as long as you can. It gets a little uncomfortable. I feel a little heat between my fingers. Keep pressing it, as long as you can.

O.K.? Are you ready? Now ... just let go of it! Let it fall to the floor. Someone will pick it up for you if you can't reach down there yourself. But, what a relief! The experiment is over. Covet the release when you let it go! That peace and relaxation you feel in your fingers is a sign and symbol of what your soul and psyche feel when the stressful experiences of your life are released.

Well, the dinner finally ended that Thursday night, and they went out to the Garden of Gethsemane. When they were there, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him. Little children, I will be with you for just a little while longer. You will seek me, but you will not find me. Where I am going you cannot come. But meanwhile, a new commandment I give to you that you love one another, even as I have loved you. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." They will recognize you, in part, for your faith. Sure, faith is good. They will note that you have good music and nice prayers. Sure, faith and good music are good. But none of those matters quite as much, St. Paul is speaking, as love. If you have enough faith to remove a mountain but have not love, you gain nothing!

Hundreds of thousands of God's children on Planet Earth started out this past week, getting up and going and doing the usual, just like every other week. But for a multitude of reasons, they did not make it through the week - like cardiovascular diseases (298,000) and traffic accidents (22,500) and cancer (129,000) tornados, plane crashes, suicides (12,500) and starvation, tribal warfare, and senseless murders, 1,150,914 were taken from the earth in one week.

They woke up last Sunday in the morning and made their plans of what to do when and where and how to get there, but before that day was done, the learning days were over; it was too late to say "I'm sorry," too late to wink or smile, too late to blow a kiss, too late to whisper in the night, too late to say "I love you." Too late to share the love of God and make someone else's life a little easier. It was even too late to learn to say Good-bye. You always have to learn that. For now, but not forever more. Amen.