

Friended

A sermon preached by
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John 15:9-17

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Nora and I have a friend who has moved quite a bit during her life, so she has become very skilled at the important emotional and spiritual dimensions of the process. When Carol's kids were younger, she developed a liturgy of saying goodbye to their houses. After the moving truck had loaded up and left the scene, Carol would take her beautiful children through the house, room by room, and she would ask them to share a memory about something that had taken place in that room. In my mind's eye, I can still see those curly haired, red headed children visiting each room for the last time. Then at the front door they would say a prayer of thanksgiving and be ready to move to the next house.

The emotional process of saying goodbye is not an easy thing for many of us to do. We all have our own coping mechanisms for it. For me, the folks at Goodwill should set up a counseling booth at the drop off lane. I've been there at least 19 times just since the middle of March. Purging, sorting, shaking my head, and saying, "What was I thinking when I bought that?" Did I really need a third Kindle Reader or a second CD of CATS? It is all part of the process for me. It keeps me from rolling up in a ball in the corner of my study.

In this morning's Gospel lesson, Jesus is also engaged in a process of saying goodbye. The Lutheran scholar David Lose wrote about this in his blog this week. "Narratively, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure and wants to assure them of his presence, even when life gets hard (and it's about to get very hard). Historically, the community for which John writes has likely been thrown out, rejected by friends and family, and feels pretty alone and orphaned. They are, quite literally, feeling like they are being cut down. And John, through his retelling of Jesus' words of farewell and comfort, is offering a different frame of reference by which to reinterpret their experience. It's not being cut down, but pruned. At the same time, John is making a promise: Jesus is with you, for you, abiding in you, and will not let you go. Important words for people who feel cut down by circumstances."¹

John uses two important images to talk about this emotional process. The first is friendship. Jesus says to his disciples that there is more going on here than a master/servant relationship; instead you are my friends. Just as it does today, seeing each other as friends in ancient times implies a reciprocal relationship. It creates a community of people who are willing to sacrifice for each other.²

The second important theme that John uses is included in the word that is translated as abide. It comes from an Old English word signifying progressively to *await, remain, lodge, sojourn, dwell, continue, endure*. I think it is a beautiful concept that conveys a sense of connection, nurture, and growth that comes from an ever-present memory. And what Jesus reminds us, as he is preparing to take his leave, is that he is the one who does the choosing and appointing. For those of us who wish to abide in his love, that is all that is needed. Our abundance, dwelling, sojourn, or lodging isn't ours to make. Instead we are simply drawn in so that we might blossom.

In his classic book on grief, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*, Jerry Sittser³ writes about how the memory of a person's life and impact upon your life never goes away. Yet there is a transition in our understanding and appreciation for that loved one's influence on us. In this way, over time, it abides with us and it becomes the soil of lives, giving us the nutrients of meaning, direction, appreciation, and thankfulness.

¹ David Lose, *As I Abide in You, ...in the Meantime*, April 24, 2018, www.davidlose.net

² Osvaldo Vena, Commentary of John 15:9-17, May 4, 2018, www.workingpreacher.org

³ Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*, Zondervan, 2004.

So here in John's gospel, Jesus lays the foundation of the understanding of what it means to be connected to him and to each other. It is based upon a reciprocal, mutual friendship. This deep indivisible connection is the strength that gets the disciples through the challenging and threatening times ahead.

In contrast to this, later on in John, in the tomb where he is resurrected, Jesus stands before Mary Magdalene and says, "Do not cling to me." I think what John is saying is that there is a difference between abiding in Jesus and letting him go. It's only when Mary lets go of Jesus that she can really see him, recognize him and what he is about.

The letting go has a related aspect. It is not the letting go that we do when we have something old that needs to be recycled so we take the old thing to Goodwill. In the Gospel sense, letting go is an active giving. This choice means that we ready ourselves to give up possessions and ideas and certainties even when we see no path forward or no things to replace them.

At the most basic level, we practice letting go by releasing ourselves from our possessions. Most of us cling to these *things*, sometimes because of the emotions and meanings that they hold for us. But just as clinging to these *things* can make us captives, so too does our clinging to beliefs, ways of thinking or doing that keep us confined in tombs, often of our own making. And this clinging prevents us from experiencing the richness of new community, new life.

In truth, our lives are very much a practice of saying goodbye. As in John's community, there are times too numerous to mention when these departures feel more like we have been cut than pruned. The single mom or dad struggling to make ends meet and provide a nurturing environment for the kids while struggling with a profound and entirely unexpected loneliness. The kid who's been cyber bullied for so long just for being different that they begin to believe what the haters are saying. The professional whose employment was terminated and, despite the headlines saying the economy is at full employment, has no decent job prospects. The recently and unexpectedly bereaved and devastated parent. The caretaker who is losing a beloved spouse day by day, little by little to Alzheimer's.

Sometimes well-meaning people will say stuff like, God doesn't give you more than you can handle. To that I say, "Baloney!" Because most of us will encounter in our lives a goodbye that feels and is unbearable. And that is where these images offer us a faithful frame for our

life's experience. Are you clinging to the past like it is an old Abba mix tape, or is your life being nurtured by Jesus, a friend who is with you, abiding with you, holding on to you, loving you, a sojourner with you who will not let you go? Can you live in the faithful affirmation that what feels like a death cut now, may someday be seen by you as a pruning, that growth is ahead, that new life will come? That the resurrection awaits us all.