

Praying Our Goodbye  
1 Corinthians 3:5-9  
June 14, 2009  
Final Sermon to the People of  
St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
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This has been a difficult sermon to write because it has forced me to deal with this goodbye to you and our ministry together. How do you put into words the feelings and memories of ten years of shared life? To be very honest it hurts. It just hurts to say goodbye.

We all know that goodbyes are a part of everyday life. We say goodbye to parents, spouses, children, friends, sometimes just for a day or a year, and sometimes until we meet them in heaven. We leave familiar places and secure homes to go off to college or to a new job. We bid farewell to strong, healthy bodies and minds. We change teachers, schools, and sometimes spouses. We place parents in nursing homes, allow children to risk and grow, and say no to love relationships that would be harmful to us.

You know the goodbye I am making this day. It is a goodbye for you too. But what other goodbyes are you facing at this stage in your life's journey? How are you dealing with the goodbye to your spouse who has died? How are you handling the goodbye of your goals and dreams in life because of poor health or old age? How are you coping with the pain of children who leave the nest? Teenagers, how are you dealing with the hurt of a broken relationship?

A goodbye is not something we simply say. A goodbye is something we need to pray. In her book, "Praying Our Goodbyes," Joyce Rupp shares how to pray a goodbye. The four steps are RECOGNITION, REFLECTION, RITUALIZATION, AND REORIENTATION. Through the entire gospel story we see that Jesus experienced these four steps as he prayed his goodbye to his disciples. The first step is RECOGNITION. We begin by identifying or naming the loss we have experienced. This is a moment of honesty for ourselves as we enter into the prayer process. It sounds simple enough but some people walk around hurting for a long time before they identify their inner woundedness. It took me 15 years to finally face up to the hurt I felt from one humiliating childhood experience on a football team.

What unhealed wounds from your past continue to scar your soul? Recognizing the loss is the first step in praying goodbye to it. Jesus recognized the pain of his goodbye to his disciples and his humanity. He wrestled with the pain as he prayed in the garden. He told his disciples at least three times that he was going to die. But they still did not understand. I don't always understand the goodbyes in my life, do you?

The second step in praying a goodbye is REFLECTION. To give ourselves to reflection is to become comfortable with slowing down, with stillness, with solitude, with not being afraid to look inward. In reflection we learn to spend time with the pain of a goodbye. We share our hurt, our questions, our anger with God. Check out the gospels. Jesus made time in the midst of his busy schedule to be alone with himself and with God.

The third step is RITUALIZATION. As we become reflective and ponder the pain of our goodbye, we also need to ritualize it. It is important to act out the pain. Ritual includes two elements: the use of images or symbols and the use of some kind of movement in our prayer. With these two elements we can act out some of the pain inside.

The author Joyce Rupp shares the story of a pain she felt from the loss of significant job change. After three months in her new ministry she was still feeling the loneliness of a different place and separation from good friends. Her heart felt heavy as she went for a walk one gray November day. She spied a milkweed plant along the road and looked at its almost empty seed pods. She felt a bond with the seeds, being twirled away in the wind not knowing where they would land. She took one of the seed pods home where it served as a reminder of her need to let go and to invest herself in the present.

Ritual. Jesus knew the importance of ritual when he offered his disciples the bread and the cup and said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

REORIENTATION, the fourth step, is a necessary part in praying our loss because this is where connections are made between our pain and the God of healing. It is where we bring faith to our grief. When we find some meaning through our reflection and ritual and it gives us courage to go on. Throughout his arrest, trial, and crucifixion Jesus experienced a radical reorientation of life as he prepared to die. His goodbye had been prayed.

I have a need to pray this goodbye with you. I don't want to build a thick wall around my heart. In a strange kind of way I want to feel the pain. I NEED to feel the pain as a part of the goodbye prayer process. What I would like to do now is to reflect upon some of the many memories I will take with me about you and our life together.

I have a secret to share with you. I wanted to be your pastor long before the superintendent offered it to me. When Jim Fellers and I did a pulpit swap in the mid-1990's I knew then that this church would be a good match.

When I arrived at St. John in 1999 I knew that I would have to pastor this church differently than the Soldotna church. My role was to help create a church system where I would not be the primary pastor relating with others, but to empower you all to be in community. To be honest it has been more lonely than in previous churches. My memories are more about ministry with the whole church than with individuals.

I remember being crunched in a tiny office with Linda Dunham's office just as small. Because we were in the preschool wing there were times I was called upon to help little boys pull up their pants in the restroom across the hall. Other duties as assigned!

With Del LaRue's leadership we realized that it was time to expand our building. Don Dunham and Jan Cawvey led our capital campaign where we raised about \$1.2 million dollars. We had an amazing building committee led by Chris Hyatt and Bruce Benson. Other pastors tend to dislike building campaigns but I loved it. It was a spiritual experience for us all especially working with our volunteers who paid their way from the lower 48 to give their time to help us. We decided to step out on faith and actually build two phases at one time: multipurpose room and classrooms. After five years of living with this new space there is not much if anything we would have changed.

I remember Fred Goff one of the saints we named this new wing after. Fred and I connected with the building of his J-3 Cub airplane. With a TV news team at Birchwood airport we were so excited and nervous when Fred flew that yellow plane for the first time.

One of the highlights of our time together was when the Kansas pastor was planning on demonstrating against our church because we accepted gay and lesbians in our church. I was so proud of you when 200 St. John people lined the street protecting our church from the hate that we anticipated. I confess to feeling a bit deflated when the guy didn't show up!

I never had the kind of positive response to a sermon series than when I did the Wild Man sermons. From there we launched our wild man ministries which included camping, fishing, movies, snowmachining, and paint ball. Eric Triebwasser was on the opposing team at the paintball day. We had agreed not to shoot anyone closer than 15 feet. In the heat of the battle Eric must have thought he was an Army Ranger because he ran towards me rolling on the ground acting gun ho. Suddenly Eric popped out from behind a barrier and shot me four times in the neck and chest from 5 feet away! I was not a happy wild man at that moment!

St. John is a church where people give you the freedom to be yourself. But there are some people who really let me be myself, people who could handle their pastor acting in some non-pastoral ways. Nick Brawner was one of those guys, along with Don Hopwood and Gary Dodson. Gary and son, Kyle, and I came very close to spending a night out in the Placer River wilderness because we kept getting stuck in deep snow on our snowmachines. That night will be burned in our memories because that was the night we learned of the death of Jason Corbett in Iraq.

When I arrived at St. John I thought we should have a softball team. We have two teams that play and pray together. Last year at second base I made the greatest play of my entire life as an athlete. I dove to my right to snag a screaming grounder, and while falling away from first base I threw it to first and got the runner out. I don't know why I didn't quit the game right then and there!

There were two mission trips I led. One was to Florida where we put on a new roof for an elderly woman whose home was damaged by a hurricane. It was Ron Schaad's first mission trip. I learned recently that Ron is leading mission trips from his church in Illinois all over the world.

Just last week the former pastor of the Homer UMC thanked me for our St. John team that spent a Labor Day weekend installing a new roof over their sanctuary. One one day the plan was to go fishing on Bill Harbin's boat. Since moving to Anchorage I had not gone fishing once. This was to be my first time. We got up early, got my license, and went to the boat. But Bill could not get the engine to start. There would be no fishing that day.

One experience I will remember was flying to McGrath on a Marine C140 to deliver toys to villages for Christmas. Brent Goodrum arranged for me to join them. I was not in the best shape to absorb the pounding of the trail and -30 temperatures at 30 mph! But it was so fun to see children open their gifts.

We all enjoy David Fison's Easter totem pole. Did you know I was there when the idea was born? We were at a clergy retreat in Wasilla when Edith Greer suggested

that David carve an Easter totem. The dream was born and you could see the twinkle in David's eyes.

Staff over these past ten years have included Sue, Randy, Diana, Melissa, Rose, Jo Ann, and Adam. In the office we've seen Marie, Victoria, Judi, Debbie, Andrea. Linda Dunham has been my right hand support for the entire 10 years. The relationship with our preschool through Linda Padden has been a real joy. Our preschool is probably the greatest evangelism tool we have to bring in new families to the church.

I have many memories of basketball on Sunday nights where old guys exchanged sweat with young guys and in the process learned what it means to be a Christian man. Last Christmas my two sons and I finally won the three-on-three basketball tournament.

There were the goodbyes to those who left this life to enter into the glory of God: Fred Goff, Ryan Shearer, David Lott, and Jason Corbett. And there were the happy occasions of weddings and baptisms in this sanctuary. Since I arrived here in 1999 we have baptized 235 people. Weddings were far fewer but occasions of great joy. I will return in July to officiate the wedding of my daughter, Lauren, and also Megan Faulkner's in September.

I have grown in my tenure here as a leader and feel better prepared to serve as your superintendent. I ask to be forgiven for my sins, my lapses in judgment, my forgetfulness of important details. I offer my forgiveness to all who have shown the same to me. I hope you will continue to acknowledge your differences as you try to be a place of grace.

There are so many more memories of special people here at St. John. I am tempted to go on and mention them all. But the time of reflection and ritualization must end at some point if a goodbye is to be prayed. We cannot avoid the inner ache. We all hurt in our own way but we do hurt. The blessedness in the hurt within us is that when we grieve over the farewells, we both give ourselves and in the giving we find ourselves. We become one with whoever and whatever has met us on our journey. We choose to invest ourselves deeply even though we know that the investment might cost us the price of goodbyes and letting go. We believe that the investment of love is worth it, for we have entered into the mystery of life where the hello's that follow our goodbyes are our guideposts to our eternal home.

We all need to learn how to pray our goodbyes, to acknowledge the pain that is there for us so that we can eventually move to another hello. Those of us who met Pastor John Dodson last week were impressed with his energy and enthusiasm for this church. Everyone knows that he will be here for a year. He will not be a placeholder pastor, just keeping things going until the permanent pastor arrives next summer. No, he will want this church to move forward with your mission in new and exciting ways.

When we learn to say goodbye we truly learn how to say to ourselves and to others, "Go...God be with you. I entrust you to God. The God who promises to wipe away all tears will hold you close and will fill your emptiness. Let go and be free to move on. Do not keep yourself from another step in your homeward journey."

Our paths have crossed at this moment in time. You have your journey. I have mine. But praise be to God that we are all going to a place where there will be no more goodbyes, no more injustice, no more pain, no more tears. Praise the living God! We are going home!