

SERMON

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I caught myself saying something I never dreamed I would say, “Oh my God, it is only 103 degrees!”

Preparation for this message has caused me to think about some of the goodbyes in my life. My journey is not your journey but I hope you can relate to some of it.

My mother and father separated and divorced when I was three years old. I remember how old I was because it was when my mother and adopting step-father were together I received a birthday card with a huge number 5 on it. Somehow the size and bulkiness of the number five stuck with me and conveyed gravitas about turning five years old. I do not remember saying goodbye to my father or ever having the chance to do so. There is more to this story but that is for another time.

Between Kindergarten and Fourth Grade I attended 7 different schools and 7 different homes in 7 different neighborhoods. I do not remember saying goodbye to my teachers, classmates, or neighborhood friends but I do think I had a growing sense of loss

Finally, my family settled in one place; Mt. Vernon, IN. In Mt. Vernon I went through the usual transitions of grade school to junior high school to high school.

I remember someone asking me if it was sad to leave high school and all the fun and friends. I told them that I felt like high school was like a sopping wet dish rag and I had rung all I could out of it. I said goodbye and did not look back, at least not very often, and certainly with no regret or sense of loss.

My transition from high school to college was exciting for me. It was an easy step. I showed up a week early, moved in, met new people, visited fraternity parties and started outlining chapters in my textbooks. Saying goodbye to Mt. Vernon, home, family, and friends was easy because I knew I would visit but deep inside me I knew that in some very important ways I would never go back.

The dynamics of my family and my relationships with my high school friends would never be the same. I realized that I was saying goodbye to more than just family, friends, and a town. I was saying goodbye to a life. I was turning a page and beginning a new chapter. I knew it then but I understand it better now, 32 years later.

Looking back from where I stand now I see my good byes became more serious as I got older. Goodbye to being single. Goodbye to childhood. Goodbye to my Sunday school faith (I will come back to this particular goodbye in a minute). Good byes got more serious and they got a little more complicated. They were not just about what was left behind but what lied ahead. Goodbyes were not just about finality but about possibility.

This is one of the nuanced meanings of today's parable. The obvious connection is the mixing in of the yeast in order to turn a little bit of flour into a lot of bread. Because of the insertion of the yeast the bread is pregnant with potential. However, there is another notion at work with this parable and in order to get it we need to understand some cultural and historical biases.

The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

Jesus is comparing something very good, that is, the Way of God with something that was understood as a negative and unclean process. The reason yeast makes bread rise is the fermentation process. The fermentation process was associated with the bloating of corpses. Yeast was not a popular symbol for the Jews. It was a symbol of corruption. Pure bread for the Jews was unleavened bread. In the parable of the yeast, Jesus makes the yeast a positive thing, saying that the way of God is like yeast. We could paraphrase the parable this way;

“The kingdom of God is like this deeper thing that is hidden and a secret influence that you think is negative, but really it is positive.”

Jesus is challenging his listeners: If the things you think are evil and bad are to be excluded, maybe you need to look at it a little differently. That may be exactly what brings life.” This is the way it is with goodbyes. Goodbyes are pregnant with possibility.

For me, goodbye to being single meant hello to my life partner and soul mate. Goodbye to my childhood meant hello to adulthood and parenthood. This is the dance of goodbye. Let me share an illustration with you. In square dancing there was a call to the eight people dancing together called “Grand Right and Left”. As you move through each person in the square you grab one hand in front of you and you release the hand of the person who just moved beyond you. There is a constant exchange of hands, holding on and letting go, saying goodbye and saying hello; and you cannot do one without the other.

This dance of goodbye is an essential and defining characteristic of what it means to be a person on a faith journey. As I near the end of this message let me give an example of the ongoing dance of goodbye and hello in my own faith journey.

I went to college to prepare myself for ministry. I was not prepared for the demands such preparation would put on me. My simple Sunday school faith with its evangelical blood atonement formula was challenged by my studies in philosophy as well as the new and diverse people I ran into. It was a shocking and eye opening experience that my studies did not confirmed what I believed about God and that everyone in the world did not share my worldview. As it says in Isaiah I had an experience of “the shaking of the foundations!”

This was a serious faith crisis for me. If what I have believed my whole life (all 19 years) is wrong then all the people I love and respect are wrong and my plans and work for the future are for nothing. If my faith and future is wrong headed then what is left? The philosophy department was on the top floor of the liberal arts building. I sat on the top landing of the stairway. At that time and at that place I decided to do my best to be a “tabula rosa”; a clean slate. I made a commitment that moment. It is impossible to be a complete blank slate but to the best of my ability I will try to start all over again and give my life over only to the truth. When the foundations are shaken to little pieces it is painful but it is also an opportunity to start over and to start fresh!

To throw my worldview onto the ash heap of broken and irrelevant ideas was painful but it was also liberating. This was the beginning of a life long learning process for me. I learned that as one idea or worldview was taken from me I was never left completely barren. As one ideological “idol” was broken another deeper and more profound worldview emerged to take its place.

I read an essay about the way science and the history of ideas would advance. The idea the essay presented was not so much that ideas and theories accumulated with later ideas built on the backs of earlier ideas. Real progress in knowledge was revolutionary, not evolutionary. An idea may guide human history for centuries but over time enough contradictions will occur until the idea can no longer stand the scrutiny. With the breakdown of one idea another emerges to take its place. This revolutionary process is the way we can understand paradigm shifts in human history.

In our covenant statement we say, “We covenant one with another to be that sensitive part of humanity that perceives and responds to God’s newest thrust in the midst of human history.” For humanity to go from many gods to one God is a revolutionary paradigm shift. For our thinking about God to go from the idea of a “God up there” to a “God out there”, to a “God in and here everywhere” (ground of all being) are several revolutionary paradigm shifts.

There are other important goodbyes and hellos that we are called to share and they also require us to make major paradigm shifts in our thinking. I want to very roughly paraphrase from the prologue of Dr. Robin Meyers book, *Saving Jesus From the Church*.

As the people of God we are called to say goodbye to fear that is the greater enemy of our society and the moral life. Out of fear we justify a lot of inhumanity and therefore lose our own human dignity.

We are called to say goodbye to the rhetoric that polarizes and denies that the welfare of the citizen is intimately connected to the welfare of the poor and the immigrant.

We are called to say goodbye to the idea that the nation state with standing armies is the highest expression of human community.

We are called to say goodbye to closed religious systems that claim sanctification for their own and condemnation for everyone who disagrees with them.

We are called to say goodbye to those same religious systems who wallow in their self righteous refuge and provide no comfort, no hope, no sanctuary for the lost, the broken, and those considered disposable.

We are called to say goodbye to the worldview that promotes faith as intellectual assent to the idea that there is some cosmic scale to be balanced and it is balanced by satisfying the wrath of a cosmic being through the sacrifice of innocence.

When we say goodbye to these painful and ignorant absurdities then we are greeted by a new life. When we say goodbye to the ideas that currently threaten our planet and the quality of our life together on this planet, then we are empowering ourselves to co-create a new world. Say hello to wisdom, peace, justice, and love.

I want to make two points about my journey. First, the goodbye of one idea has never left me bereft, forsaken or alone because it was always replaced by a better idea. Second, I am always ready to lay my views on some sacrificial altar because I trust the dynamic faith process. The dance of goodbye is the way the universe unfolds and it unfolds in humanity's favor.

Goodbyes often have intense feelings of loss and grief to them; taking your children to college, a beloved youth director, Brian, leaving for seminary, the death of a life partner. These feelings are real, but the dance promises that every goodbye also has a hello.

Hello Goodbye

You say yes, I say no, you say stop, and I say go, go, go
Oh no - you say goodbye, and I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello

I say high, you say low, you say why, and I say I don't know - oh
Oh no - you say goodbye, and I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello

Why, why, why, why, why do you say goodbye, goodbye - wow
Oh no - you say goodbye, and I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello

You say yes, I say no, you say stop, and I say go, go, go
Oh no - you say goodbye, and I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello
Hello, hello - I don't know why you say goodbye I say hello - hello

Hey-la, he-be hello
Hey-la, he-be hello
Hey-la, he-be hello
Hey-la, he-be hello
Hey-la, he-be hello - ah