

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

May 24, 2020 (7th Sunday in Easter, Year A)
Acts 1:6-14, John 17:1-11

“We didn’t get to say goodbye.” Those are some of the most TRAGIC words I have ever HEARD. And some of the most DIFFICULT words that I have ever SPOKEN. “We didn’t GET to say goodbye.” The death was so sudden, so unexpected, that we never got the CHANCE to say the things that we NEEDED to say, or make RIGHT the things that we DID say.

This is one of the most HEARTBREAKING aspects of this pandemic. So many of the families of those who die never get to SAY goodbye. They can’t be WITH them. Some are lucky enough to be able to say something over the phone being held by a nurse, but, as all of us KNOW who have been stuck in our homes and UNABLE to be PRESENT with our loved ones, it’s not the SAME, and it’s not ENOUGH.

Saying goodbye is HARD, but it’s ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.

What do you say? You’re forced to set aside all the small talk, and get down to the BIG stuff. You tell the people you love how you FEEL about them. You tell them how much they MEAN to you. And you tell them the things they need to KNOW, the things you want them to REMEMBER, the IMPORTANT stuff.

I reminded of something. Every church has a Bible camp that it sends its kids to, and many years ago, when I was serving at my FIRST church in North Dakota, there was a song that the camp counselors and the kids sang as camp was ending. It’s called *What Can I Give?*

(Play What Can I Give)

As you can imagine, there was never a dry eye when we finished singing THAT song. Because we were singing it to each other. It was the IMPORTANT stuff.

In our readings today, we have before us TWO GOODBYES. The first is recorded in the book of Acts, at the Ascension of Our Lord. Now for those who are interested in such things, tradition has it that it was 40 days after Easter when Jesus ascended to heaven. Since Easter is always celebrated on a Sunday, the Ascension is always celebrated on a THURSDAY, so it doesn’t get NOTICED that much, but it’s become customary to at least ACKNOWLEDGE it the following SUNDAY, and so we remember that event TODAY.

The second goodbye we read today was the night before Jesus DIED. For the last few weeks we have been reading from Jesus’ FAREWELL discourse in the Gospel of John. In these readings, Jesus knows that he’s about to die, so he sits down with his disciples in the upper room, and he tells them the IMPORTANT stuff, the things he wants to make SURE they remember, because this is the LAST CHANCE he’ll get. It goes on for several chapters, and it ends with THIS reading. It’s a PRAYER. He PRAYS for his disciples and for US. Jesus says goodbye by PRAYING for us.

Has anyone ever told you that they were PRAYING for you? I don’t mean condescendingly like at the end of an argument, like, “You JUST DON’T GET it, do you? I’ll PRAY for you.” I mean SINCERELY, “I’m praying for you.” Prayer is a powerful thing.

It’s said that one of the most INFLUENTIAL things you can do for a TEENAGER is tell them that you’re PRAYING for them. It means you care.

It’s been PROVEN that hospital patients who KNOW people are praying for them HEAL FASTER than those who don’t. That’s why we have our prayer page in our printed announcements EVERY week.

And I'm certain that a huge part of the effectiveness of every PASTOR'S MINISTRY, including MINE, and the ministry of every CONGREGATION, including THIS one, is dependent on the people's prayers. That's why we devote so much TIME to prayer as a congregation.

It's both humbling and an honor to know that someone is praying for you. It's humbling because we know we NEED prayer. We can't MAKE it by ourselves.

But it's also an HONOR, because we know that someone cares, and that God HEARS ALL prayers.

Now if God hears all OUR prayers, what about JESUS' prayers? In our Gospel today, we overhear JESUS praying, and he's praying for US. Think about that – JESUS is praying for YOU. Whoa!

Have you ever THOUGHT of yourself like that, as a PERSON JESUS PRAYS for? You are the disciples, the ones called, chosen, set apart, sanctified in the truth. He was praying for YOU. And he STILL is; Jesus IS PRAYING for YOU.

And that's why we read these two goodbyes TOGETHER – because they point us to the PRESENT. Jesus' prayer is in the PRESENT tense. "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me...May (they) be one as we are one."

The angels asked, "Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?" (Acts 1:11). Like Pastor Jordan said in the children's message, the Ascension wasn't the END of Jesus' MINISTRY. We can't spend our lives gazing up at Jesus' feet. We need to look AROUND us. The Ascension was the BEGINNING of OUR ministry. Jesus gave us a MISSION – to do EVERYTHING HE had done and MORE. He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...and TO the ENDS of the earth."

"Why do you stand looking up towards heaven?" When we LOWER our eyes, we can see that our world is a world WITHOUT Christ, WITHOUT love, a world that CREATES DAILY NEW ways to make life MORE CRUEL. There is work to be done. It's the work Jesus HIMSELF did: proclaiming the good news, loving others selflessly, completely and unconditionally, even loving the UN-lovable.

THESE goodbyes didn't mean that Jesus was leaving the world BEHIND; it means that Jesus was going to be PRESENT in the world in a NEW way, through the Spirit, and through US. Jesus' going to be with the Father means that Jesus lives in US now.

He's EMBODIED HERE, in our COMMUNITY. We are LITERALLY the HANDS to do Christ's work, the FEET to walk his way, and the VOICES to speak his words. YOUR hands are the hands of LOVE. That's what we're all called to BE. As Luther put it, we are all called to be "little Christs" for the world. His ascension was OUR commissioning. The church is SUPPOSED to be, GIFTED to be, Christ's presence in the world, to be his BODY. And he knew that it was this MISSION, this PURPOSE, this DOING that would make us ONE, NOT our ideas.

So people of First Lutheran, why do you stand looking up to heaven? Look AROUND you. There's work to be done.

You don't have to look very long or far to find it. This world is SUFFOCATING. It needs a breath of love, it needs CHRIST'S love, and YOU ARE that breath.

Brothers and sisters, JESUS is PRAYING for you. Your CHURCH is praying for you. And I'M praying for you.

(Sing) "Until we meet again on another day." Amen.