

Date: May 13, 2007

SUNDAY: Easter 6

SERMON: The Comings and Goings of Love

Text(s): Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:22-29

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Saying goodbye is probably one of the most common, and one of the most difficult, experiences in life. It's something we do all the time, isn't it? I don't mean those casual, daily goodbyes that we say when going off to work, or to the grocery store, but the longer goodbyes that separated us from loved ones or friends for more substantial periods or even permanently.

Sometimes it's we who go away; we leave home to go to college; we move to a new city or state, or even a new country, to take a job; we get to the point of age and infirmity where we have to leave a house we've lived in for years and have grown to love and move to a condo or to a retirement community and we have to say goodbye to our neighbors, to our familiar surroundings, to a lot of our stuff, and it's not easy, is it? My parents have adjusted to their new two-bedroom condo that's all on one level, and are glad they made the move from the house they'd built with their own hands and lived in for so many years, but which they could no longer manage. But they still find it hard nearly five years later to drive by that house and see that the new owners don't lavish the care on the flowers or the trees that they did.

Sometimes, it's others who say goodbye and leave us behind. Our kids grow up and move away; our neighbors who were close friends get transferred to a new job far away. Even harder is when the goodbye is a more permanent one—when our spouse or our parent or our best friend dies or disappears into what appears to be the living death of Alzheimer's. Those are the hardest goodbyes of all.

Goodbyes are hard, and regardless of the circumstances, none of us handles such departures all that well. (Although, perhaps I ought to qualify that by calling to our minds that

old definition of when life begins: "life begins when the kids leave home and the dog dies." I guess some goodbyes are not quite as difficult as some others.) But for the most part, "going away," whether it's we or someone we love, is one of the more difficult and painful experiences of life.

Imagine, then, that scene in our gospel lesson this morning, when Jesus is telling his disciples that he's going away. He's going to leave them, and in a short time, they will not see him any longer. I don't imagine they handled the news any better than we handle our feelings when someone we love has to leave us or we have to leave them. This passage is part of the long section in the gospel which John has written as an extended farewell speech of Jesus to his disciples. In this long farewell, the theme of going and coming, which is extremely important in the whole Gospel of John, comes into very sharp focus. Throughout the Gospel the question of Jesus' origins is an important question. His opponents, particularly, are always asking, "Where did this man come from?" Where Jesus is going, is also a primary concern in this gospel. He frequently makes reference to his "going away." In last week's gospel lesson from the earlier part of this discourse, we heard Jesus say to his disciples, "*Where I am going you cannot come.*"

As with many of the themes in this gospel, the theme of the comings and goings is rather like a kaleidoscope. It keeps reappearing in new and reconfigured arrangements, but we recognize it as the same theme. In our passage today, Jesus says, "*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. . . You heard me say to you, 'I am going away and I am coming to you.'*" No wonder the disciples are confused! One of them asks him how this is possible. How can he go away and yet come to them at the same time? If he goes away, how is it possible that they will still see him? How is it that if they can see him, the world cannot see him? Are we confused enough yet? And yet, in

the stereovision of this gospel, these two, seemingly incompatible movements— going away and coming— are superimposed.

Jesus himself provides the answer. His going away, he tells them, is a re-uniting with God. Though John often uses the term “going away” to explicitly refer to Jesus’ crucifixion, the cross is simply the vehicle for Jesus to return to where he came from. He is returning to his origins in God. He is, as he told his disciples in the opening verses of this chapter, “*going to prepare a place for them.*” Yet this leaving, painful as it will be in one sense, will result in a coming which will gladden their hearts and give them peace. But how is this coming to take place, how can he go away and come to them at one and the same time?

"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. . . The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will bring to your remembrance all that I said to you."

In the simplest terms, what John is telling us in this rather mystifying speech of Jesus is this: If we want to see Jesus when his bodily presence is no longer with us, we will have to see him in the community of those who keep his words out of love for him, and that loving and obedient community will become living reminders, living icons of Jesus. When they are together, and they love one another in obedience to Jesus' words, they are, in fact, experiencing Jesus' presence with them through the Holy Spirit. To ask “Where is Jesus now?” is to ask “Where is the Holy Spirit located?” and the answer to both questions, according to John, is, “He's in the community of those who faithfully follow Jesus and love one another as Jesus commanded.” Or, to put another way, the risen Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is in the church.

I'm not speaking of the church primarily in its various institutional forms throughout history. We all know that the institutional form

of the church does a lot of things that do not reveal or manifest the presence of Jesus. Sometimes, in fact, it seems as though there are more unholy spirits in the church than there is of the Holy Spirit. We're all too aware of the shortcomings and sins of the church, from the Crusades and the Inquisition right on down to the present time. The church as a human institution is no better than other human institutions, and may even be worse because it so often claims divine sanction for its actions.

Thankfully, the church is more than simply another human institution. It is a living community. To say that we are not a perfect church is simply to say that God isn't finished with us yet. The vision of the New Jerusalem spoken about in our Epistle lesson from the Book of Revelation, is a vision of a church and a world that is not yet where it's destined to be. Neither the church nor the creation is finished yet. In the City of God, there may be no need for a temple in which to worship, but we have not yet reached that City of God which is our true home, and so we still need the earthly community of the church to prepare us for that perfected human community we call heaven. The light of that city is the beacon that draws us together here and now, and guides our pilgrimage to God's future.

But if we haven't yet reached our full potential, in our better moments on the journey toward that city, in our life together as the community of Jesus' disciples, we are the place where the risen Jesus is seen and made known in the love that we offer to one another, and in the obedience to Jesus' words that we commit ourselves to in our life together.

We come together, and the thing that draws us together is our love for Jesus. We want to keep his words. We want to do what he taught us. We want to reaffirm that we are his disciples. We want to love one another as he commanded us. So we tell the stories of Jesus to each other; we listen to those stories to hear his word to us; we baptize, and we join one another in fellowship

around the Lord's Table, we pray for one another's needs, we reach out in loving service to the world around us. And in doing all those things, we discover that the life of Jesus is really present among us. We discover that we really can love one another, that we really can muster up the courage and the energy to live the life of Jesus outside the church building. We discover that our shared memories are more than just sentimental impulses; our worship becomes the channel by which the life of Jesus becomes present within us and among us.

Let me share with you one memorable way I saw this rather mystical truth take on flesh and blood in the life of a real congregation. In May of 1977, following our first three years of mission service in Malaysia, we were about to return to the U.S. for our first home leave. Due to Malaysia's rules, we had to leave the country for six months in order to get our visas renewed to come back. And we had to pack up all our belongings ready for shipment in case our visas to return were not granted. So we were very much occupied with our "going away"—with saying goodbye to a congregation that we hoped would not be a final goodbye.

In the midst of that process, one of the last things I had to do just two days before we left, was to conduct the funeral service for a 19 year-old girl in our Youth Group. Sylvia Tan had become a Christian about two years earlier, and I had baptized her. The only other member of the family who was a Christian, was her older sister, 21 years of age, who was Roman Catholic. **In** Sylvia's parents were very much opposed to any other of their six children becoming Christians. They were afraid that if all their children became Christians and there would be no one to venerate their memories in the traditional ancestor cult after they passed on.

Sylvia died of a relatively rare and, at that time, deadly disease called "aplastic anemia," which is caused by one's own immune system going haywire and attacking the bone marrow so

that it stops producing red and white cells and platelets. Within the space of two or three months, she was gone, terribly wasted by the rapid onslaught of the disease. The morning she died, her older sister, the one who was Catholic and who had been staying all night with Sylvia, called me from the hospital about 5:30 am and said, "Pastor, come quickly, Sylvia just passed away, and I need somebody to be with me." I got out of bed and went immediately, arriving there before the parents and other family members, because I lived quite near the hospital.

When they came, they were shocked to see their daughter being **held and** comforted by a white man they'd never laid eyes on before. After we'd been introduced, they expressed their surprise that someone not belonging to their family would come to share their grief with them. Later, the older sister who was a Christian and the two younger ones who had begun coming to youth group shortly before Sylvia became ill, asked if I would pray with them around Sylvia's body which was still in the room. Although I invited the rest of the family to join us around the bedside, they preferred to stand outside watching through the door as the four of us held hands and cried and prayed together around the body of their daughter and sister.

That evening, my Chinese co-pastor and two laymen and I went to the family home to talk with the family. They, of course, had no understanding of Christianity or Christian practices, but had decided that Sylvia should have a Christian burial, and wanted to know all about what Christians believed about death. So the Chinese pastor and lay leaders talked with them for a couple of hours. The next day, three women from the congregation went to the family home and sat all day with Sylvia's mother, comforting her, and while they were there, sewed up a white pall with a red cross on it to put on her coffin. Again, this was an unheard of thing in Chinese culture for complete strangers to come to a family's home and offer condolences and

comfort.

The next day, at the funeral service, the family came to the church—the first time they'd ever been inside a church. They sat mutely, just watching and listening, as first the Youth Group sang some of Sylvia's favorite choruses, then as one of the group spoke of their love for Sylvia and of how she had inspired them during her illness.

Two days later, we were on the plane coming back to the States for our home leave. Due to visa difficulties, it was a full year by the time we got back to Malaysia to begin our second three-year term of service. One of the first things I did when I got back was baptize both of Sylvia's younger sisters who had made their decision to become Christians. And during my year away, the family had invited my Chinese colleague to come tell them more about Christianity as well, because they had never experienced anything like the caring and love they'd received from a group of total strangers who owed them no social obligations. And within two years, Sylvia's parents and all her other brothers and sisters had become Christians too. They discovered that a group of people living right in their city, had the power to move beyond the boundaries of their cultural patterns, beyond their own extended family systems, to show love to outsiders, to strangers—to become, in fact, a new family where Jesus had come to make his home. And in that congregation's love, in their keeping of Christ's words, Sylvia's family experienced the presence of the risen Lord himself.

That's our calling and our glory as the community of disciples, not the institutional forms we create, not the magnificent or historic church buildings we build, but to be the place where the Risen Lord who has gone away, comes to make a home among us, through the Spirit, so that in our keeping of Jesus' words, and in our acts of love for one another, others may encounter Christ also, and discover the life that is really life—eternal life.