

September 17, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

II On the Road with Jesus: Letting Go: Saying Goodbye

Matthew 8:14-22; Matthew 10:34-39, 19:4-6

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In our sermons this fall, we're thinking about the Christian Life in terms of a journey. This is not an uncommon way to think about life in general, whether from a religious or a secular point of view. Books and movies often pick up this theme – from Homer's *Odyssey*, to *The Canterbury Tales*, to *The Wizard of Oz*, to *The Lord of the Rings*. And so, too, Biblical Christian faith.

One of the first stories in the Bible is the story of Abraham packing his bags and saying “goodbye” to his home and family and heading to “God-knows-where” (quite literally! Only God knows, and speaks about “the land I will show you”).

And Jesus himself explicitly speaks this way when he commands people twenty one times in the Gospel accounts to FOLLOW HIM: both literally and metaphorically to follow his teaching and example. As if to say,

“Let me take you on spiritual journey in which you'll find the best life and path for your one life. Come! Join me on the journey.”

The trouble, of course with going on a journey, and especially beginning a journey, is that you *can't* take everything with you. *Even if you're wealthy*, you may be able to take the contents of the house with you but you have to leave the house itself behind. And even if you live in a motor home, and it really is your home, still, as you move on your way there are always *specific people and places* you have to leave behind! You have to say “goodbye” to something or someone.

Abraham said goodbye to both home and family. And at times that can be difficult and painful. But not always, of course.

When I was at graduate school in Richmond, I was preaching at four small country churches: two every Sunday. And we wanted some stability for our three year-old daughter, rather than her joining Currie and me on the circuit each week. So we chose one of the churches, and each week a member picked her up to take her to this one church. And she went eagerly: no tears, no regrets, no turning back, no sad goodbye: she just jumped right into the car!

And later we found out why, when she pointed to one of the other members, a Mrs. Carson, and she told us her name: she called her “chewing gum Carson!” And that, of course, gave the game away: she was given chewing gum every week! So saying goodbye to Mom and Dad was easy!!

But this is not always the case.

In my case the hardest “goodbye” was the summer before I began seminary in Boston. I spent the summer working in some small churches in Nova Scotia, and I had this huge experience and realization, I think from God, that I would probably never again live in Scotland. And I felt a sense of betrayal: and that *I was the betrayer!* That I was not only leaving, but abandoning and

betraying in some way my parents, whom I loved deeply, and who loved me, and I cried for weeks (remember: phone calls were \$10/minute; no email or Facebook!).

But Jesus knows all this: that when he calls us to follow him, He's always calling us *to say goodbye* to someone or something we love; *to let go* of someone or something we love. And while, in the end, it's always for our own good, for the best, "in the moment," when the journey begins, it can be enormously painful and hard.

BUT he still calls us to do it. In fact, what he teaches is that there is no following him, there is never a true following of him, without some kind of painful letting go and saying goodbye.

So, on one occasion, for example, Jesus speaks about marriage as if it were a "new journey" in which we needed to begin with a "goodbye." In Matthew 19:4, Jesus is asked a question, and he replies by referring to, and then quoting from Genesis 1 and 2:24

"Have you not read that the one who made them
at the beginning, 'made them male and female,'

and then he adds verbatim:

*'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother
and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?*

Did you hear those words? "*leave and be joined*" – or as the King James Version puts it (more memorably) "*leave and cleave.*" And time and again,

when couples are having trouble in their relationship, what you find is that it's because they set out on the journey of marriage, and one-or-the-other hasn't ever really grown up, hasn't ever really "left father or mother," has never truly left home, never said "goodbye."

Biblical Marriage not only involves a new bond (a joining and a cleaving); but a "leaving" a "letting Go" a "saying goodbye" – a critical change in relationship with the past. Not that father and mother stop being in that role, but that the primary allegiance must be broken with the old journey, so that a new primary allegiance and journey can take its place.

And that's not always easy. In fact, I believe that it's no coincidence that it's this same family relationship and dynamic that Jesus refers to when he speaks about what he expects from those who follow him. He's looking for nothing less than a marriage: the priority of the new relationship with him over every other relationship. Remember his words in Matthew 10 --

³⁷ *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;*

and then adds this edge --

• *whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;*

• ³⁸ *and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me -- is not worthy of me.*

[In other words, there has to be a kind of a death to the past before the journey can truly begin]

And it's this same sharp edge we see in Mathew 8:

¹⁹ A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." ²⁰ And Jesus said to him, "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*"

[in other words Jesus is asking sharply: "Have you really said 'goodbye'?" And then he adds what must be amongst the harshest sounding words in the Gospels]

²¹ Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

²² But Jesus said to him, “*Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.*”

Now let’s be clear – this is Hebraic Hyperbole! Of course Jesus wants us to love our children and take care of our parents! The Ten Commandments are explicit: “*Honor Your Father and Mother.*” And just before the passage *on foxes and birds and the dead burying the dead*, Jesus heals the mother-in-law of one of his friends, Simon Peter (Matthew 8:14-16): He cares for our families, and wants us to care for our families!

But the hyperbole makes the point: that there’s no following Jesus unless we realize that this call to follow, that this journey with Jesus, will change all our relationships, including the closest ones given to us by God. There has to be a *goodbye*, a *letting go*, a *moving on*; a *growing up* tied into our following.

In 2012, British professor, Francis Spufford, part of the literary elite in the U.K., wrote a book called *Unapologetic* (Harper One, 2013; pp.1-2) in which he comes out in public as a Christian, and in his case, risked the mockery and cynicism, the loss of respect and potential abandonment of his colleagues:

The book begins like this

My daughter just turned six. Sometime over the next year or so, she will discover that her parents are weird. We’re weird because we go to church.

To his colleagues, being a Christian means among other things (Spufford’s list is at least twice as long as this!)

- We’re self-righteous
- That we advocate wishy-washy niceness
- That we’re too stupid to understand the irrationality of our creeds
- That we promise the oppressed pie in the sky when they die
- That we build absurdly complex intellectual structures, full of meaningless distinctions, on the marshmallow foundations of a fantasy
- That we cover up child abuse
- That we’re the villains in history, on the wrong side of every struggle for human liberty
- That we’re stuck in the past
- That we’re childish and abject and solemn and awkward
- That we fend off common sense
- That we’re embarrassing

He gets it. He could easily have kept his discipleship and church-going as a secret, but he didn’t, instead he chose to make it, “unapologetically” public, and, at the least, lose credibility or relationships, left right and center, willing to wave goodbye to the whole literary subset of society in which he moved: a huge cost, but one he obviously decided was worth paying.

“*Before you can truly follow me,*” says Jesus,
“*you have to be willing to say ‘goodbye’.*”

“Goodbye” to *people and old relationships* – but also

“Goodbye” to such things as *plans and professions and possessions*.

In the story of the early church and the first Christians, this is a repeated theme. In Matthew 4:18-22, Jesus calls 4 people – Peter and Andrew and James and John to follow him. They’re all in the fishing business on the Sea of Galilee – James and John, in particular, we are told, are in business with their father. And when Jesus calls them, they leave both their father (a key person, a key relationship in their lives), and their nets (their profession).

Matthew, a tax collector is another one to whom Jesus turns and says “Follow Me.” And Mathew leaves his profession – *tax collectors were sub-contractors with the occupying Roman forces, collecting taxes and getting a huge cut of the amount (about as lucrative a profession as you could find in those days)*. And he leaves this behind in order to follow Jesus

[This section was not included in the sermon preached at NPC on September 17, 2017]

And so too, the Apostle Paul. When he first encountered the risen Christ and heard his call he was on the fast track in religious circles sharp as a tack and committed 100%. But this is what he writes in his letter to the Philippians about the change in his life.

(He begins in Philippians 3 with his impeccable heritage, his family tree)
*circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel,
of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews;
as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

(And then he adds his professional credentials, his CV:)

as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;

But this is how he *now* feels, having decided to get on the road with Jesus:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss

because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss

because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

In other words, “I said goodbye to all that:” social climbing, professional qualifications, the fast track; all the accolades, in order to do something far more beneficial: follow Christ.

Sometimes this leaving is at the beginning of our adult life and it’s 100%! It determines the course of everything that follows, and the witness to Christ of such dedication can be powerful.

New York Times journalist, Nicholas Kristoff, in an article in March 2015, describes the powerful dedication and witness of some he’d met, who’d left everything to follow Jesus:

I have little in common, politically or theologically, with evangelicals or, conservative Roman Catholics. But I’ve been truly awed *by those I’ve seen in so many remote places*, combating illiteracy and warlords, famine and disease, humbly struggling to do the Lord’s work as they see it . . . In fact, a disproportionate share of the aid workers I’ve met in the wildest places over the years, long after anyone sensible had evacuated, have been evangelicals, nuns or priests.

These are people who got the message quite literally: for Jesus they left people, homes, families, plans, professions and possessions to follow. Though of course, not everyone can do this so radically. Life gets underway and it's half over before we even come face-to-face with the question of following and saying goodbye. So what we need is a "mid-journey correction."

Two great Christian authors realized this about a decade ago, and wrote a couple of books to help people consider "Jesus' call to follow" in the second half of life.

One is by Bob Buford who wrote "Half-Time," and called people in the middle of life (half-time) to move from "thinking about *success* to thinking about *significance*." What does Jesus want me to do in life that is truly significant?

And the other is by our own member, Dale Hanson Bourke, who wrote "Second Calling," especially for women (though it's helpful for men too – indeed, even if you are starting out in life, these are good books to read about the path ahead!). Dale writes this (p.8):

I believe God has a special purpose for women in the second half of life that is world-changing in its scope. If we can understand what God is calling us to and can turn away from those voices calling us to stay attached to our youth, we will be given a power and purpose beyond anything we have ever experienced.

Let me add a phrase to what she says:

I believe God has a special purpose for women in the second half of life that is world-changing in its scope.
If we can understand what God is calling us to, and can turn away from – *that is: SAY GOODBYE TO or LET GO OF* -- those voices calling us to stay attached to our youth, we will be given a power and purpose beyond anything we have ever experienced.

And this hits the nail on the head. Sometimes "following Jesus" is not about going anywhere else at all geographically. It's about staying in the exact same place but letting go of, OR saying goodbye to *the power of old voice, that have kept us in the same old rut for far too long . . . voices about our plans, our profession, our possessions, our status, the value of wealth*. These voices may actually have been the right voices to listen to at another time and place. Not wrong at all, at that time. But now – not the right voice for us at all. Though some "old voices" really are wrong! – *Voices about injustices and grudges and bitternesses that others have perpetrated against us -- and can that destroy our souls*.

I've previously shared some powerful words from Dr. James Forbes, former pastor of Riverside Church NYC, that are worth sharing again (and again!). He said this:

Some offenses can never adequately be atoned for (this side of death). "Even if I stand up all night repeating, *"I hate them, I hate them, I hate them!"* Yet, at some point

(unless our own lives are to be dragged down in the mire too)

there has to be the movement (*DR: a saying goodbye? A letting go?*) beyond the fixation that by holding a particular bitterness or injustice in my mind, in some way, I am going to improve the situation, or fix the situation, or show adequate atonement for the situation.

[2007 PBS documentary, The Power of Forgiveness]

In other words unless you are going to be eaten up by what someone else has done to you or didn't do for you, there are times when you'll have to LET IT GO and simply head off in a different direction. Or, if you continue in the same direction move on from the old journey of assigning blame, to the new journey of solution-finding, using your energy in a way you never thought was possible.

Never forget that in the New Testament, the Greek word for "forgiveness" ("I forgive") is APHIEMI, which literally means, "I let go."

"Follow Me," says Jesus. Even when it's painful!

- Not because he hates us, but because he loves us
- And knows the path ahead in life better than we ever will
- And want the best for us – Abundant life is what he calls it (John 10:10)

Follow Me! says Jesus. Knowing full well that for us to do this, means *saying goodbye*, to something or someone we love dearly

- Maybe a *person*
- Maybe a *plan or a purpose*
Or the *hope of possessions or wealth*
- Maybe a *place* (maybe we really do have to travel geographically to be on the right journey with Jesus).
- OR it Maybe *our youth and a myriad of voices* we thought were wise, and perhaps, once they were, but now we're in a different place and time in life, and God has something new for us – and it's time to let go and grow up!
- OR maybe the goodbye is to something else internal. The *voice of bitterness, or envy, or unfairness* – justified or perceived:

And God says:

"Let me handle that -- you say goodbye to that, and good riddance and let me take care of it, and move on your way with Jesus

- ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;
- whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;
- ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross [there has to be a kind of a death to the old life] and follow me -- is not worthy of me.

IT'S HARD but there's no true journey with Christ without it who, thank goodness, also makes this marvelous and encouraging promise of safety and blessing:

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, *and they follow me*. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. John 10:27-28

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