

How To Say Goodbye

[Acts 20:17-24](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, May 7, 2000

When someone you love dies, it feels like your heart is also being buried. It takes years to make your way through the dark valley of bereavement, but our society is no longer very patient about permitting this. Now we give grieving people, at most, a couple of months and then gently encourage them to get on with life. "Get over it," we say. "Get back to the business of living." But when you are trying to get along without your heart, life does indeed seem like just a lot like business.

It does not matter if you have loved the person who died your whole life or only a short time. Saying goodbye is always one of the hardest things that is asked of humans.

Last Friday I attended the memorial service for Dr. Bryant Kirkland that was held at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, where he served as pastor for twenty-five years. After serving there, he came to our church for a couple of years to serve as our Interim Pastor for Preaching, and finally, as our August preacher for the last seven years. To say that we all loved Bryant would be a great understatement.

Bryant died at the age of eighty-six. He lived one of the finest lives I have ever seen. Some would say you can't grieve the loss of a life like that. While it is true that we have much to celebrate in those who have long and gracious lives, that only makes our investment in them all the greater, and our grief all the harder. At the service, I watched his three daughters, who had spent their whole lives loving their father, each tearfully rise from the congregation to call him blessed. But I also watched Lola, his wife of only two years, who sat quietly in the pew and simply missed her cherished new lover. She told me she was thankful for what God had given them, but how she wished for a few more of those precious days with him. So again, it doesn't matter how long you've known the person who dies. What matters is how much you loved. And at the funeral, what matters even more is how much you believe in the resurrection to life after death.

Bryant Kirkland died on Easter. Always the poet, leave it to him to make a great statement even by the day he died. It was just two weeks ago that we were celebrating the resurrection. As Bryant would tell us, that makes all the difference in how we handle our grief, and in how we say goodbye.

Our text today finds the Apostle Paul near the end of his third missionary journey. He is heading back to Jerusalem. Along the way he stops in Miletus, which was near Ephesus where he had spent more than two years establishing the church. So he calls for the elders of the Ephesian church to come to him. When they arrive, he first reminds them that in Ephesus he did everything out of faithfulness to his calling. Then he tells them that the Holy Spirit has now called him to Jerusalem, even though the Spirit has also revealed it will mean his imprisonment and persecution.

Luke describes Paul's address in language similar to Luke's description in his gospel of Jesus' farewell address to the disciples. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they had both set their faces toward Jerusalem, a place of imprisonment and death. Jesus' disciples thought Jerusalem was the end of the story. But later, after Easter, they discovered that death was only the beginning of the story of life.

The speech that Paul now makes to the elders of Ephesus is the only speech in Acts given to those who believe in Jesus Christ. All the other speeches are either evangelistic or they are legal defenses, which are actually also evangelistic. It is striking that the content of this sole sermon given to believers is devoted the subject of saying goodbye. According to Paul, it is something that we ought to be good at, which doesn't mean that saying goodbye is less painful. But it does mean that we who know about Easter, ought to know how to say goodbye.

After Paul's sermon, we are told that there was much weeping among the elders. "Especially because of what he had said that they would not see him again." But then they brought him to the ship on which he would sail away. How could they do that? How could they let him sail away knowing they would never see him again? They could say goodbye because they had been listening to all of Paul's other sermons about the resurrection of Jesus from dead, and about the importance of seeing ourselves "in Christ," which Paul reaffirmed in his letter to them. They had to know this was not the last time they would see him. For if Christ was risen from the dead, then in Christ, Paul too would rise from the dead.

Frederick Brooks, the younger brother of the great preacher Philip Brooks, began a very promising ministry as the rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland. But he died before his ministry reached its full potential. The death left his congregation stunned and grief-stricken. Seeking to memorialize him, they commissioned a large stained glass window for the church that depicted this scene of Paul bidding farewell to the elders. In the window, the sails of the ship are raised waiting for the wind. The elders are bidding him goodbye on the shore. The people of St. Paul's Church and every church have always found the strength to say goodbye knowing that there will be another shore called heaven. And on the shores of heaven we will enjoy a day of glad reunion. That is how you say goodbye! You can let the person go, only because you know that a time will come when in Christ, we will all be resurrected for an eternity of communion.

The great theologian Karl Barth has written that eternity can only be understood in light of the relationships of the three persons of the trinity. We tend to think of eternity as everlasting time. But the Bible speaks about it more as everlasting relationships. Each member of the trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, enjoys a communion that is so extensive that every time one appears the others are also present. So that when Jesus is born, it is as the Son of the Father conceived by the Holy Spirit. It is also for this reason that later when the Son was anointed by the Spirit, he said, I and the Father are one. The persons of the trinity are always in communion. But as a trinity of relationships, Barth reminds us, each of the three persons maintains their own identity: Father, Son, and Spirit. So

they are always recognized as a communion of three persons.

As Paul kept telling us, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to so adopt us into this eternal triune relationship that the trinity now consists of Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Bob, Judy, Ted, or Bryant. Always in communion; always as recognizable persons.

The question I receive the most by the bereaved is, "Will I recognize my loved one in heaven." According to this important doctrine of the trinity the answer is an unequivocal, "Yes." That is not because that person is a cherished member of your family on earth. It is because he or she is a cherished member of the triune family, who will be as recognizable as the beloved Son of the Father.

Heaven is a place where we enjoy an interminable communion with the triune God. That does not negate our individuality. Rather it frees us to be more ourselves than ever before. So the only change you'll notice in your loved ones when you get to heaven is that they will be a perfect form of themselves. They will be the persons God created them to be from the beginning, the persons whose nature is restored by participating in holy triune communion. That is why we remember our deceased loved ones by celebrating the sacrament of communion. At this table, we get a glimpse of the communion of all the saints. For the Holy Spirit meets us, lifts us up to encounter the risen Christ. And we commune not only with him but with all who died in Christ.

If you believe that, like the Ephesian elders, you will still grieve the loss of loved ones but not as people who have no hope, You will be able to place them on the ship called death, knowing that it is only taking them to the other shore where they are waiting for you. That changes not only the way we grieve, but also the way that we love. We are made less anxious, less driven to cling to people. We are made more grateful, even more playful, in our relationships because we are no longer in fear of losing them. It is only then, when our anxiety has turned to playful gratitude, that we can commit our lives to authentic love. And it is only when we have learned to authentically love that we can authentically live.

In a sermon entitled, "How to Handle Your Grief," Dr. Kirkland exhorted the congregation to "build a life worthy of grief." You do that by learning to love. Why do we grieve his death and the death of all those who loved us? Because they gave us a glimpse of heaven's love. That is why we miss them. But on this side of Easter we know that a day will come when we will see them more fully than ever before.

Eternal Father, by your Holy Spirit, strengthen this hope in us that we may easily give our hearts to others believing that nothing, certainly not death, can ever separate us from love. For we ask it in the name of the Son, the good shepherd who will eventually lead us all to our home with you. Amen.