

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“WHEN JESUS SAID GOODBYE”
John 17:20-26
May 16, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Jesus' famous prayer that his followers *“may all be one,”* was part of his preparation to end his earthly ministry. The prayer anticipates the gift of the Holy Spirit that would empower the disciples to continue Jesus' work.

It is difficult to imagine how Jesus' disciples felt when he began to prepare them to hear his farewell. This transition was difficult for everyone, especially Jesus himself.

Life is an ongoing process of saying **“hello”** and **“goodbye.”** Every transition in life involves letting something go and embracing something new. The newborn is brought kicking and screaming into a brand new world and this is but the first of many difficult transitions. Even Jesus had a difficult time saying **“goodbye”** to his disciples.

Sometimes it is very difficult to say goodbye. There are occasions of when it seems like the most difficult thing in the world. Parting can be such a great sorrow. It takes Jesus a long time to say goodbye to his disciples in John's Gospel. In Matthew and Luke it only takes a few verses to record Jesus' farewell, but in John it takes four long chapters. What can we learn from how Jesus said goodbye?

The English word “goodbye,” like the Spanish word “adios” and the French word “adieu,” implies giving someone to God. When we part, when someone's presence is about to become someone's absence, when we can no longer hold a loved one ourselves, it is best that we give them to God. “Goodbye” means “God be with you.”

On the thirty-first of this month we will celebrate a national Memorial Day. It will be a holiday for some, but a hollow day for others. For some it will commemorate one of their greatest losses - - a mate, a child, or a parent. Memorial Day will be a reminder that the world is much emptier than it once was. Memorial Day will re-open some old but deep wounds. Part of our grief in remembering is that we recall days of joy when loss was nowhere in sight. We recall the birth of the son or daughter who has been taken away from us. We recall a wedding day when life was bursting with love and promise. We recall a graduation day when none of the expectations involved dying on a battlefield. In such moments our losses seem monumentally greater than our gains.

Our experiences of gains and losses can easily lead us to a simple conclusion: gain is good, but loss is bad. As little children we experienced receiving as being far superior to giving. Arriving is better than leaving. Saying hello is better than saying goodbye. Gain beats loss every time. And, of all the losses we suffer, death is the greatest loss of all.

One of the most widely read books of our time is *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom. It is a moving chronicle of the Tuesday visits a younger man has with his dying mentor. Twenty years earlier they had been professor and student at Brandeis University. At the end of his life the teacher still has things to teach. At one point, Morrie, the dying professor, says to Mitch, the former student, “It’s what everyone worries about, isn’t it? What if today were my last day on earth? Mitch, the culture doesn’t encourage you to think about such things . . . We’re so wrapped up with egotistical things, career, family, having enough money, meeting the mortgage, getting a new car, . . . So we don’t get in the habit of standing back and looking at our lives and saying, Is this all? Is this all I want? Is something missing?” (pp 64-65) On another Tuesday, Morrie says, “Part of the problem, Mitch, is that everyone is in such a hurry, . . . People haven’t found meaning in their lives, so they’re running all the time looking for it. They think the next car, the next house, the next job. Then they find those things are empty, too, and they keep running.” (p 136)

When we measure life in terms of our external gains, we are missing the point of living. Jesus helps us see that not all gains are good, and not all losses are bad. Sometimes what appear to be losses are actually gains.

In John’s Gospel it is very unsettling to his disciples when Jesus starts saying things like, “*In a little while you will see me no more.*” (16:16) He

promises not to leave them as “*orphans*,” but he is clearly going away. (14:18) Imagine the disciples’ anxiety. “Jesus is leaving us!” Jesus was indeed preparing to leave his disciples. But he would leave them as a human, historical person in order to be with them, and with us all, as the Holy Spirit. “*Don’t hold on to me*,” Jesus says to Mary. (20:17) Jesus’ absence was simply a step toward his greater presence. Today is the last Sunday of Easter. Next Sunday is Pentecost, the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit in power. The disciples’ loss would paradoxically become a great gain for all of Jesus followers through the ages. Jesus’ goodbye was necessary in order for his disciples to welcome the Holy Spirit.

Saying goodbye is not a loss when it enables us to say hello to something genuinely better. A loss can become a true gain when it leads us deeper into life, and when it brings us closer to God.

We need not say that God is responsible for all of the goodbyes we must say. Everything that happens does not have God as its direct cause. Neither do we need to say that all losses result in some gain. Some losses remain losses. However, more often than we imagine, a particular loss may be the pre-requisite for realizing some important gain. God works in all of our experiences to transform them into gifts of wisdom and of grace.

Near the end of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie shares a simple story with Mitch. A little wave was “bobbing along,” enjoying the fresh air and the wind. Suddenly he noticed that the waves out in front of him were crashing against the shore. The little wave thought, “This is terrible! Look what’s going to happen to me!” Another wave came along and asked what was the matter. The little wave said, “You don’t understand! We’re going to crash! All of us waves are going to be nothing! Isn’t it terrible?” The other wave said, “No, you don’t understand. You’re not a wave, you’re part of the ocean.” (pp 179-60)

It is not at all uncommon for us to need help with saying “goodbye” and saying “hello.” It is not easy to let go of the familiar past and step into the uncertain future. Rituals are often used to make life’s transitions easier or more meaningful. Life’s passages need to be at least acknowledged, perhaps honored, and sometimes celebrated. Dag Hammarskjöld, Swedish former Secretary General of the United Nations, left us a small but beautiful rite of passage: “**For all that has been, Thanks. To all that will be, Yes.**”

For the families that are transitioning out this summer to other places, I want to thank you for allowing me to be your pastor. And for the families that are transitioning in this summer from other places, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.