

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Fourth Sunday After Easter

Texts: Luke 24:13-33; Psalm 23

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Letting Go For the Sake of Love

“And so, as soon as he took his place at table with them, he took a loaf, and gave a blessing; broke it, and started passing it out to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”

We don't get to hang on to those we love, do we? Life is full of hellos and good-byes. Have you noticed how the full meaning of them is usually hidden from us in the moment? It's when we live into the hello and develop it into a relationship that we begin to understand it. It's when we live beyond the good-bye and trust our loved ones to God that we begin to fathom what they mean to us all the days of our lives. Hello and good-bye, death and resurrection: only God knows fully the meanings these encompass.

Last Sunday the Gospel gave us a story that allowed us to eavesdrop on a hello and a good-bye all in one breath. It had to be the most painful and yet joyful moment of Mary Magdalene's life. In the midst of unspeakable grief, Jesus appears to Mary. In a split second, heartbreak turns to joy when Mary recognizes Jesus in the calling of her name. She must have wanted to throw her arms around him in the tight hug of hello. But remember Jesus' admonition? “Don't hold on to me Mary, for I have not yet gone back to God.” Letting go for the sake of love, must have been one of the hardest things Mary had to do.

This morning we heard another in our series of Easter Appearance stories from the gospels. This time, Jesus appears to two more disciples who are traveling the dusty road to Emmaus, hearts heavy with grief, eyes downcast. To their astonishment, a stranger becomes their teacher in the meaning of their grief. Through him, they learn the importance of Jesus' ongoing work in the world even after death. Though their hearts burn within them as they listen, they don't recognize him until that moment when, over a meal, Jesus breaks the bread in blessing and offers it to them. As their eyes are opened, he vanishes from their sight. They waste no time running all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the others they have seen the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.

Several years ago, I saw a special video put out by Shanti project, an advocacy organization for people with AIDS. The subject of the video was an interview with a gay man named Gary, who was very close to death. Gary had consented to talk about what it meant to him to face immanent death. At the end of the video I learned from the concluding credits that Gary died just three days later. I felt privileged, that I, a stranger, should be so included in this man's last thoughts about the journey awaiting us all, by whatever path we travel. As he spoke, what I remember about Gary's face was not that it was so thin and wasted, though indeed it was, but that it was luminous with love.

Gary said that the hardest part about dying was in having to say good-bye to all those loved ones remaining on earth. He also admitted that he had gone through a period of paralyzing

terror at the prospect of death a few weeks earlier. What got him through this was a visit from a close friend. This was no ordinary visit, for his friend had died the year before. Gary said his friend appeared to him as if in a waking dream. In that vision, his friend said, "Don't worry, Gary, you won't be alone in your passage. I'll be here to meet you." Then his friend vanished. This "appearance" was very comforting to Gary for a while. But then, once again, fear got the better of him and returned him to its paralyzing grip. In desperation, Gary prayed that his friend would come again to reassure him. Again, his friend returned, illumined in light and beauty. This time, however, he spoke to Gary in sharp tones. "Gary," he said, "I told you not to be afraid. I will be with you and so will others. But don't call me again. I have other work to do." And he vanished. And with him, vanished all of Gary's fears. In fact, Gary was now excited to begin the next adventure, knowing that it also would offer a new vocation.

On the altar today I have placed three communion sets: my grandfather's, my father's, and my own. Together, they represent ministry in the Lutheran church in three different centuries. My grandfather's set dates back to the 1800's and my father's to the first quarter of the 1900's. My grandfather did not live long enough to see either his son or his granddaughter become Lutheran pastors. I think he would have been pleased to know that his grace-based faith had left such a legacy in the world. As he died, my grandfather's last words, in Danish, were "'Preach the Good News, preach the Good News!" Sixty-two years later, my father's last words before he died were: "Forgive everything. Remember the best." These are worthy words to live by. They are also words to die by. What strikes me about them is that they speak from a conviction that life is a spiritual vocation grounded in forgiveness and memory and grace.

What is this Good News we are to preach? Nothing less than the Good News of God's unconditional, abiding, forgiving, searching, love. This love is a traveling love, going wherever our journey in life takes us: It is a love that travels with us through joy and sorrow, through trials and danger, even into death. As the psalmist sings, it is a love that pursues us with "goodness and mercy" all the days of our life: "traveling mercies," the writer Anne Lamott calls them.

Could we carry anything better with us for the journey? I doubt it, unless it is the love we have for each other. But I don't really think they're separate from one another. Rather, they are part of one beautiful rainbow fabric that cloaks us on the way; part of one hearty loaf of bread that when blessed and divided, feeds multitudes.

It shouldn't be surprising that even today, one of the ways we recognize Christ is in the blessing and breaking of bread. What better way for love to take a seat in our midst but at our table? This is love that nourishes both body and spirit. We don't own it. We can't hoard it. We can only receive the gift and share it with others. And when we do that, we discover we have not lost it. We ourselves are guests at Christ's own table. In the practice of hospitality, in the practice of open-heartedness, we receive forgiveness and blessing. Traveling mercies for the road.

I am immensely grateful that for fifteen years I have been given the privilege of traveling the road of faith on the same path with all of you, and with many before you. One of the ironies of being in community together is that we are always saying hello and good-bye to one another, because people are always coming and going in and out of community. I daresay that I predate most of you sitting here right now. Only a few remain who remember my coming. Many have left this mortal life altogether. And yet, we all live in the legacy of those who

precede us in faith and go ahead of us in death. Their legacy tells us that we have been given a faith that can travel the earth, and a love that can transcend the boundaries of space and time. Without faith in God's abiding love, we live life on too small a scale: our horizons are too limited, our dreams too modest. When we are given the gift of unconditional love, we are given a very big world in which to live. In fact, we are given all eternity in which to live.

Thank-you, for breaking bread with me all these years. Every time I do, you let me see the face of Christ through you. Like Gary, the hardest thing about leaving is saying good-bye to so many who have extended to me and my family the loving embrace of God. But I know that your embrace and the nourishment of bread at this table will be the traveling mercies that go with us on the road ahead.

As for your journey into the future: Allow me to share some parting reflections on this for a moment. The wider church is adept at finding ways to say "maybe" to those on its margins without ever fully saying yes. "Maybe" gives people just enough hope to keep waiting. But justice urges us to move forward. You must continue to proclaim God's unconditional "Yes!" to all those who hear only the church's "maybe." St. Francis intends to become a teaching parish, mentoring the finest servants of the Gospel. That is a wonderful resolve. But there are some learning curves ahead. As a community we are skilled in the welcome of those who identify as either lesbian or gay. We are as yet unskilled in the welcome of gender-queer people, those for whom the categories of male and female, gay and straight do not fit. Categories can be helpful if they give us a language for our experience. They become unhelpful if they constrict our experience. There is a new generation of young people who are growing up proud and challenging our gender constructs. It will be decades before the wider church dares to have anything to do with the theological and social issues they're raising among us. Let's learn from them *now*.

St. Francis wants to become a community that includes and nurtures families with children. So far, we have done that largely through our program known as Community Night. And we have done it well. But let me warn you of something. America's families are in trouble. They are lacking the village it takes to raise a child. Parents' energies are sapped by the struggle to be that nucleus that provides everything their children need. And today's urban children are becoming little adults before their time. We are now living in a world where children no longer have any window of freedom from the dangers of this world. They are growing up vulnerable. Their future is this government's policies, and our action or inaction, today. Faith communities have a more vital role than ever in becoming extended family to children and their parents. But incorporating children into our lives disrupts order and claims enormous energy and time. And you probably won't be around when they're old enough to thank you for it. Also, most struggling families aren't going to become the congregation's significant financial pledgers. They're just wondering if they can afford to stay in the city and how they can help their kids get a college education. Nurturing families is a tremendously difficult calling for faith communities today.

Then there's the information age. Technology shrinks the global universe. It makes it possible to instant message anywhere in the world. We now have the ability to gather information it would formerly have taken a lifetime to acquire. But all this instant communication also threatens to cut us off from what is truly important. As people of faith, we are called to see everyone as beloved ones of God and treat one another as such accordingly. This takes time. We are losing the ability to stay abreast with the important things in one another's lives. We are beleaguered instead by too many emails to answer and too many deadlines to meet.

When was the last time you felt happy to hear your phone ring? When did you last hear your doorbell and feel eagerly curious to see who was at your door? We go to parties and know how to network. Do we know how to make friends anymore? We are living in a society that has forgotten how to simply abide with one another. We don't even know how to say "I'm lonely" or "I miss you" to one another because it might be construed as too needy.

These are tremendous challenges for a faith community. In some ways, we are preaching an anachronistic gospel for the twenty-first century, and yet what century needs to hear it more than this one? This gospel tells us that *everyone* matters. Everyone is precious in God's sight, particularly those at the margins of society. Human life has ultimate value and human relationships are fundamental to human life. From the beginning of time, God has created us for relationship—relationship with God and relationship with one another. At the end of our lives, when we lie down to die, I don't think we will say, "I wish I had more time to work harder." We are far more likely to say, "I wish I had more time to love more wisely." Well, dear ones, you do have time. God has given us eternity wrapped in mortality. Let's not waste it.

A large part of how I have been privileged to use my portion of the gift of eternity wrapped in mortality is by serving this parish as one of its pastors. I want you to know that even if I never have another opportunity to do word and sacrament ministry in a parish, I will always be content with the fifteen years you have given me to host the Lord's table, preach the Good News of God's unconditional love, and sing the music of God's amazing grace. These have been rich years for me as a pastor. And as a mother, let me say that I am so glad you all have been the village that has helped to raise our daughter. I think you can feel proud of the results. She, and we have been well loved here.

In accordance with the protocol expected of departing pastors, I will be stepping back now to allow space for the changes ahead and to complete the stained glass commission I have undertaken. I will also continue my work as Chaplain to the national ECP roster. I thank St. Francis for continuing to be the congregational arm by which I can do my chaplaincy work for another year.

Some of you have wondered why our family isn't choosing to stay here in the Bay Area. Apart from the challenge of affordable housing, our answer to that is: How could we abide the thought of living here and not being part of St. Francis for the next three years? Furthermore, after five years of transition, St. Francis needs and deserves new energy and frankly, so do we. I know that God is not finished with any of us yet.

Though you will not see me around as much, I will not altogether vanish from your sight. Until we all depart in late summer, I will still be connected to you through my family. I will not entirely give up the opportunity to sit in the pew with our daughter, though I will be more often attending other houses of worship now. I will continue to enjoy Community Night, simply as another parent, for the next couple of months. I say good-bye to you today in my role as your associate pastor. Our final good-byes will be exchanged in late August.

I cannot end this sermon without expressing my heartfelt thanks to all who have been my cherished companions in the important work of ministry over the years. First, my thanks to all of you dear people who are so dedicated to the work of justice-love in the world. Together we are truly the priesthood of all believers. Then, I thank those friends and family outside this parish who are here today--some in body and some in spirit—who have loved and sustained me over the years. My thoughts turn this day to my mother who made it her vocation in the

last decade of her life, to become a vociferous advocate on behalf of LGBT people in the church.

These fifteen years of my pastorate have been lived out in the context of team ministry. While any team has its challenges, in the main, it has been richly rewarding. I wish to thank James DeLange, who had the vision to see that St. Francis needed to challenge unjust ELCA policies excluding LGBT people from ministry. I thank Jim Lokken, who was among those who founded Lutherans Concerned, an advocacy movement that has been foundational to our work today. I thank Michael Hiller who taught me most of what I know about liturgy as the work and play of the people of God. I thank Fr. George Belcher for noticing our good work individually and as a team and for encouraging each of us in it. Finally, I thank Phyllis Zillhart, my colleague in ministry, my partner in parenting, and my spouse for life in the eyes of this city, this community and of God. You are the pearl of great price that was hidden in the field for me to find. Truly, God gives in abundance. My cup runs over; surely, goodness and mercy *have* followed me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever! Thanks be to God!
† Amen.

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