

Sermons at Oak Grove  
May 24th, 2009  
Mark 9:38-50  
*"A Community Prayed For"*  
By Andries J Coetzee

Saying goodbye is never easy! Very few of us have mastered the art of saying farewell, either permanently or temporarily, either to family, friend, or foe. We know the feeling all too well of the pending departure of loved ones, and most of us dread going through the pain of grieving the loss of not having the person with us. We also seldom realize that even if the relationship was antagonistic, it is equally important to have a healthy sense of closure.

So it is with churches as well. It seems that we here at Oak Grove Presbyterian have had our fair share of saying farewell these past years; two years ago to Pastor Mark and then last week to Pastor Gale. With each pastor's exit we go through the emotions of saying farewell, and in most cases it is permanent as our Book of Order does not allow the pastor to be in contact with parishioners after the pastoral relationship has been dissolved. For many, each time we say farewell to a pastor we also remember previous times when other pastors have left our faith community and relive those experiences, whether good or bad.

After each pastor's departure there are those who are reluctant to let go, who have found the pastoral relationship so meaningful that it seems that our church community cannot continue without his or her leadership and wish that the ministry could have last longer. Then, on the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are so ready to move on that they can't wait for the old pastor to clean up his or her office and return the church keys. Most people, I think, are somewhere in-between these two spectrums, able to celebrate the good and the bad of each pastoral relationship.

But what we all sometimes miss is that our struggle to say "farewell" and to "let go", can keep us from living to our fullest in the present. Somehow churches are prone to get stuck in the past with its good and its bad, and we forget what it

means to do ministry in the present, building on the past with our eyes on the future. It is so human to hold on to the past, to cling to what we have known while realizing that things are no longer what they used to be and that they will never be the same. How many times do you hear; "remember the times of Reverend?...., or "We have tried that before and it did not work!" or "Those were the good old days".

And so it was with the our reading of today that takes us back to a time before Jesus' arrest and is part of Jesus' farewell message to his disciples. The disciples knew that Jesus was soon going to die and here they are in Jerusalem together on that last night, eating their last meal, saying their parting words, ... saying goodbye.

As it is in such moments, the disciples are clinging to Jesus and find it difficult to let go. For them, as it is for us, the reality is that we can't hold on to possessions, to people, and not even life itself. There comes a time for all of us, sooner or later when we have to let go, when we have to release and most difficult of all, ... when we have to trust. If we don't we can so easily choke to death the very beauty we wanted to keep alive.

In this parting prayer of Jesus he models to us what a life of "letting go" looks like. He challenges all of us who want to find meaning during uncertain times by exerting control, control of situations and of people. Here Jesus reminds us that the life of the church does not depend on any one of us by ourselves, but rather on the community of believers.

In His prayer Jesus asks God that the community be protected, entrusting them, and all who would follow, into God's care. Jesus asks that we will be one, that we will be made holy. More than that: that we will experience joy. It seems to me that these words, "to trust, to love, to be one, to be holy and to know joy" are important words as we say farewell to beloved pastors and as we welcome with excitement Pastor Bill as part of our community.

This community's future, Jesus reminds us, is not entrusted to ourselves, but to God. In Jesus' final words before his death, resurrection, and ascension, he does

not give last minute instructions about what it should do in Jesus' absence; instead, in prayer, he turns the future of the community over to God. This congregation's life rests in and depends on God's care.

This care of God is so evident in this prayer as Jesus is holding God to God's promises: You have given, you have sent, you have loved; now keep, sanctify, let them be one...."

This simple but profound prayer of Jesus has the potential to be life-changing and life-giving for us as a Congregation. How much more enriching will our ministry be if we are willing to let go of our control and what and who we think people should be and rather allow them to be themselves, those whom God created them to be. To allow them to be the leaders God called them to be. It is then when we don't limit ourselves to the predictable and the past, that ministry will happen with an energy like never before, full of challenges, surprises, and joy. This prayer of today challenges us to take Jesus by His word that we should not be anxious about tomorrow but let tomorrow take care of itself.

I know that you are a people that can do that! How else could my family and I have found a church home and such a meaningful ministry here at Oak Grove.

Now as we prepare ourselves for the new leadership of Pastor Bill we are called anew to be that people who are willing to redefine ourselves to form yet a new identity true to our present tense and even more open to our surroundings.