

September 2, 2007

John 16:16-24

FOR A WHILE

By Mark A. Bayert

Children and youth with their sudden sympathies can be quick to bond with others, and often at the end of a week of summer church camp there are tearful goodbyes and promises to be in touch and to see each other again made to new friends who were strangers just the week before. Frequently, though, in spite of those good intentions, those young people never meet again.

On our Reformed Heritage Tour to Europe last spring, Carol and I got acquainted with a number of fine people from House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul. We had many enjoyable chats over meals or on the bus. So when it came time to say goodbye at the airport after our return flight to the Twin Cities, we hugged or shook hands and talked of a possible reunion, of getting together again in the near future. I was pleased when two of these new friends attended Oak Grove a couple weeks ago to hear me preach and to visit with us after the service. But as for a reunion with the whole group, it hasn't happened yet and maybe never will. But that's all right, because it is not possible or practical to make permanent friends of all the people who cross our path in life. It is enough that they have shared in and enriched our life for a while.

The Bible reminds us in many places [Gen. 23:4; Lev. 25:23; Heb. 11:13 etc.] that we are strangers and aliens on this earth, temporary residents, a pilgrim people on the move, and that only God is our true home, our permanent dwelling place. Indeed, human life is busy with comings and goings, arrivals and departures. People are born; people die. Couples are married—and divorced. Families move here and there, now and then. Parents change jobs and children change schools. Young people grow up and leave their hometowns. We welcome new neighbors and say goodbye to old friends. And in the last fifty years that movement has accelerated. On the whole, we enjoy the arrivals but find the departures painful.

In our lesson from Acts 20, there is not a dry eye among the Ephesian elders when the Apostle Paul tells them that they will never see his face again. In his years on the road as an itinerant evangelist, Paul had started congregations in many places, and he had spent three years in Ephesus, establishing the church there. But he has had a premonition that his ministry is ending and that arrest and imprisonment await him. So he challenges the elders to keep the faith and guard the flock as he passes the baton of leadership to them.

In our lesson from II Kings 2, we witness another transition of leadership, as the great prophet Elijah, after a long and colorful career, is taken from the earth, caught up in a whirlwind, swept away in a heavenly chariot of fire, while Elisha, his hand-picked successor, is left behind to continue the work of his mentor. In the last scene, we see Elisha pick up Elijah's mantle and strike the water of the Jordan River, crying out, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" And just

like that, the waters part, as they had earlier for Elijah. So the company of prophets respond in one voice, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

In any congregation there are many offices to fill, many tasks to be performed. Some positions are of short duration; others require a longer commitment. One of my greatest joys as a pastor has been to see new people join our church, see them grow in faith, see them blossom and flourish in new positions of responsibility. Conversely, I have experienced grief when people I have come to know and love in our church family become sidelined because of age or poor health, die or move away.

Each December, I have felt a tinge of sadness when the outgoing elders attend their last Session meeting. But then in January I have always been encouraged to see the mantle of leadership passed on to new elders and deacons as they kneel to receive the laying on of hands. In ordination we recognize that God is the one who continues to call and equip women and men to serve God's saving purpose, just as the Lord has done since the days of Elijah and Elisha.

The same holds true for pastoral leadership. I like to think that the spirit of Gideon Pond, Oak Grove's founding pastor, has rested in various ways on all of his successors. As I retire later this month, after almost ten years of ministry among you, I am confident that the God of Elijah and Elisha, the God of Paul the Apostle, and the God of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, will guide and provide for you. This Tuesday, our personnel committee will be approving a job description for an interim pastor, and the Session has already authorized a Passage Team to lead the congregation in a process of visioning for the future. It's an exciting plan, and I commend the elders and Pastor Dries for their wisdom and initiative.

It has been my pleasure and privilege to serve as your pastor for a while. There is indeed a "for-a-while" character to human life itself. We live on this ancient earth only "for a while" — whether it be for 30 or 60 or 90 years. Even our deepest relationships, lifelong friendships or 60+ year marriages, eventually come to an end when one of the partners dies. On the night before his death, Jesus told his disciples, "A little while and you will no longer see me" [John 16:16]. Jesus walked and talked with those hand-picked disciples for only about three years before his death and resurrection. In that case, though, it was certainly quality not quantity that counted. It is because of the "for-a-while" character of human life that I find great comfort in the doctrine of the communion of saints, our belief that in Holy Communion we maintain fellowship with all of Christ's people in heaven and on earth. And I look forward to that Great Banquet, that ultimate family reunion, when we'll all be together again in the joy of God's Realm.

In the meantime, I give thanks for all those who have been a part of my life for whatever duration. Occasionally, I page through old church pictorial directories from the congregations I have served in the past. Some of these people are still our friends, and we visit each other from time to time. Some we have seen again when we have returned for a church anniversary—how satisfying that has been! And some we have never seen again, but I'm glad that I knew them for a while, even those who were "thorns in my flesh" at the time!

Sermons at Oak Grove

As I near my retirement and the end of my pastorate at Oak Grove, I am grateful for all that we have accomplished together and that I have gotten to know you, grateful that we have shared times of joy and sorrow. I will never forget you. Thank you for being part of my life for a while.