

# “Sacred Moments”

*The Recognizing God’s Presence in the Inescapable Transitions of Life*

Trinity Sunday

May 30, 2010

Ecclesiastes 3:1,2,4  
John 16:5-33

*“... if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you;  
but if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7)*

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*There is a season for everything  
A time for giving birth  
A time for dying  
A time for tears  
A time for laughter  
A time for mourning  
A time for dancing  
Ecclesiastes 3:1,2,4*

## **For everything there is a season.**

In her book Praying Our Goodbyes, Joyce Rupp speaks to every season of life when, regardless of the calendar, we find ourselves thrust into to autumn; into that “season of vulnerability” when maples at the very height of their splendor find their shimmering coats of many colors stripped away by sharp and chilly winds.

**The “ache of autumn” can occur at any time.** None of us are immune. None of us can escape. This ache, she says, has two faces: *“One is an ache that lies deep down inside our being. The other is the ache that results from our own individual, particular losses – those farewells that are always going on in our lives”* .... regardless of season.

Autumn is God’s annual reminder of the transitory nature of life ... *“for everything there is a season.”* On this warm Memorial Day Weekend, autumn has settled into our hearts.

Here at Fourth, we have been living through our own *Season of Farewells* as we honored the nearly two decade pastorate and ministry of Allen McSween – praying God’s blessings and our well wishes upon him and Susan as they

begin a new chapter in their lives. And five days ago we commended the sweet, sweet soul of little Jack Huffman to the care and eternal comfort of his loving God – reaching out in compassionate grief to Molly Beth & Harold and all of Jack’s family.

**For everything there is a season.**

We are deep in a season of farewell – that which for which we have been preparing, and that for which we are never prepared. There has been no small amount of sadness ... significant events in life of our family have taken place. One whose leadership has guided this congregation for nineteen years has relinquished the helm, and along with the transition comes anxiety. Allen is somewhere else this Sunday. The death of one of our children has shaken us to the core. The comforting order of life has been shattered. The grief we feel is heartbreaking.

We are in the midst of that “*existential ache*” that seized the lives of Jesus’ disciples as he said his goodbyes. The text for this Trinity Sunday is a portion of his Farewell Discourse ... the New Testament lection read in many Christian churches around the world today.

This is God’s particular word to us today. For there is much in this text that God is saying to this congregation and each one of us on this particular Lord’s Day – in the particular season of our life together as Fourth Presbyterian Church.

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The Gospel of John is divided into 21 Chapters. And of those twenty-one the writer devotes nearly 25% of it to the setting and to the content of Jesus’ words of farewell to his disciples.

The Discourse begins with the first verses of the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter:

*“Now before the festival of Passover, Jesus knew that the hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (13:1)*

Five chapters later (an eternity in scripture) Jesus prays ...

*“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to*

*them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (17:25-26)*

In between are some of the most beloved and familiar words in all of scripture: words directly addressing those deep in the season of farewell; words of the Master that give comfort and hope; images of belonging; and songs of peace.

Most of us have heard them often. Yet most of us are surprised when reminded they are all found in the Farewell Discourse.

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me ... In my father’s house are many dwelling places ... (14:1-2).*

*“I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life ... (14:6)*

*“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (14:27).*

*“Abide in me as I abide in you ... (15:4a).*

*“I am the vine, you are the branches ... (15:5).*

*“This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you” (15:12).*

Powerful words. Comforting words. Yet words set in the context of a goodbye. Jesus, *“knew that the hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (13:1)* The form that act of love took, was to spend a lot of time assuring his followers that they would be cared for; that he would not leave them orphaned. Just as Jacob and Moses and Joshua and David, Jesus offers a farewell of significant proportion.

In commenting on it, **J. Louis Martyn**, in his History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel, states unequivocally that *“it is impossible to overstate the crisis that the believing community faced as a result of Jesus’ death.”* One only need to look back in the Gospel to a dialogue in the sixth chapter between Jesus and Peter ... when Jesus ask the Twelve whether they were considering leaving him because of the difficulty of this teachings ... and Peter exclaims, *“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life!” (Jn 6.67)*

Martyn points out that, *“at Jesus’ death it is the inverse with which the community of faith is struggling: Jesus is leaving them. Peter’s question is even more poignant “Lord to whom can we go?” Is Jesus’ death the end of his “words of eternal life?”*

In a word, **NO!** Death is not the final word. God’s presence has not moved to a far country. The emptiness they are feeling will be filled by the Spirit of Truth. The anxiety they are fearing will be calmed by the The Paraclete “*παρακαλεος*” – the Spirit of God standing with and for those who believe.

*“... the Advocate, [the Helper; the Comforter] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”* John 14.26

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*Holy, Holy, Holy  
Lord God Almighty  
Early in the morning our songs shall rise to thee  
Holy, Holy, Holy  
God in Three Persons  
Holy Trinity*

Following his ascension Jesus would no longer be with them – physically. Yet in a strange and mysterious way, a way that would take the church centuries to articulate, the Divine Presence that was embodied in Christ Jesus would continue to be present with the fellowship of believers – through the Spirit.

John Sanford says, that *“as long as Christ was with them in the body, the disciples would not discover the greater mystery: that the Holy Spirit within them would lead them to the Christ who dwells within the soul, from whom they could never be separate”* (291).

Fritz Kunkel adds an interesting sidebar when he posits that if Jesus had not left the disciples, they might very well have fallen into idolatry ... by projecting *The Center* – the Spirit of God – onto another human being. In leaving them Jesus was allowing *The Center* to become that from which disciples and their Lord would never be apart.

For that band of disciples to become apostles, and for those apostles to evangelize the known world, building community after community of Christians, it was necessary for them to aggregate around a Divine Center to which they could cleave no matter where they were. It is the same for us.

It is particularly fitting, then, and uniquely providential that the gospel lesson for this Sunday is this portion of Jesus' Farewell Discourse – as our Lord speaking to those he loved in the light his impending absence, promises them that they will not be orphaned. They will not be left alone. One is coming who will continue to energize the ministry of this band of believers – in spite of their sense of loss - with the ever fresh and empowering words of Christ.

**Jesus was leaving.** He would no longer be with them. Yet the community he created would not die. A sacred moment was in the birthing. They were in a transcendent time -- and with it a new way of understanding God's way: **Trinity!**

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**For every thing, there is a season.**

We are in a season of loss; of emptiness. A beloved child; a faithful pastor. We have lost a sense of continuity – of balance – of comfort. Yet the God who brought forth Jesus Christ from the dead will not allow us to lay in our sorrow.

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**He writes from a wheelchair.** A rare spinal cancer almost killed him decades ago. Reynolds Price's book "A Whole New Life" is his memoir of the experience, and while he survived, as he puts it "*both the cancer and the cure,*" he was not able to avoid death altogether. "*When you undergo a huge trauma in middle life, everybody is in league with you to deny that the life [that preceded it has] ended. Everybody is trying to patch you up and get you back to who you were, when in fact what needs to be told is, 'You're dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow?'*" (Brown, 221)

Barbara Brown Taylor offers the base from which people of faith in the midst of loss have always shaped the answer: "*All we have ever needed to rise from the dead is memory, bread, wine and the Holy Spirit*" (Brown, 221)

Standing before the congregation the pastor pauses and then says,

Dearly Beloved ....

*This is the saddest and gladdest of times;  
when sadness is sweet and gladness is sober. Something has died; and  
something is being birthed.*

*This is a time between the times, a time without time,  
a moment that will exist for its own sake,  
for the sake of what we are in the process of doing.*

*It is, theologically speaking, a sacred moment,  
a transcendent moment.”*

(adapted from “A Free Marriage Service”)

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**Dear friends, take heart.** The Spirit given to the church at Pentecost is God’s gift to every community of faith – and this community of faith is not exempt. The Paraclete has been and will continue to be God’s gift to this congregation through every season of your life together. **As it has been with you in every season, so the Spirit of the Living God is with you now.**

*For when everything we count on for protection has failed, the Divine Presence does not fail. The hands are still there -- not promising to rescue, not promising to intervene -- promising only to hold you no matter what.*  
(Barbara Brown Taylor, Leaving Church)

**For these are indeed sacred moments;  
transcendent moments.**

Thanks be to God!  
In the name of the Father  
and the Son  
and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen!!

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#### References

Rupp, Joyce. Praying Our Goodbyes. Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1988  
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