

"Parting Words"

II Corinthians 13:5-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

May 28, 2017 – 7th Sunday after Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

By the time Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians | this young church had already gone through many challenges. First of all, its members were living in a culture with standards of moral conduct very different from those taught by Paul. As a result there was understandable confusion as to proper lifestyle and behavior.

There were also divisions about who they should consider to be worthy leaders. Other teachers also came to Corinth and, to Paul's dismay, some tried to take the congregation in different directions. The apostle was not reluctant to write corrective words to the churches he had established or nurtured, as we see from this correspondence.

Paul ends this letter with an eloquent flourish: "Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

Now that's quite a way to conclude. Letter writers used to go to great lengths to say something more than just "yours truly." Today we've reduced more expansive closings of the past and replaced them with abbreviated endings like, "Well, gotta go" or "Time to sign off." And emails and texts often just the briefest form of an ending—perhaps just a smiley face.

In the past there was a time when people worked hard to find those right words of transition from the body of the letter to the signature. It wouldn't be at all unusual to run across such final phrases as "Thankful for your many kindnesses to me, who remains, and shall everlastingly be, your humble and obedient servant...." It sounds way too flowery to us today, but at least it has some style, some charm. And it took effort to create.

Truth is, we spend a lot of our time saying hello and good-bye. And whether it's the written word, or the spoken, we work hard at finding the best way to express greetings and farewells. It's not easy, as most of us can attest.

Most of us have heard those old familiar words, "Parting is such sweet sorrow." And, more often than not, that's true. It's hard to leave people, especially if we won't see them again for some time.

Saying good-bye in person often takes a while from the time people start toward the door until the car is finally out of the driveway. We delay our leave-taking as long as possible. The more you care about someone, the harder it seems to be.

Perhaps those long good-byes stem from our fear of separation. We don't like to be cut off from others, especially those we love. You can see it early on as children stall about going to

bed. When youngsters call for another drink of water, another kiss, another trip to the bathroom, another story, they are often just trying to postpone the inevitable.

Going to bed is a farewell, not only to the day, but also to the people children love best. Staving off bedtime may be the only way a child can delay things enough to get a feeling of settlement that makes them ready for sleep. Kids need a lot of reassurance to be comfortable but, then again, those same feelings get raised in grown-ups as well.

On Christmas Eve 1942 Corporal Richard Morris wrote back to his wife, Jan, in Akron. Young Corporal Morris had just arrived in England after the long voyage in a troop ship across the Atlantic.

After telling her how much he misses her, he concludes with, "Please don't worry about me 'cause I am OK and I will come back to you as soon as I can. I am having a lot of fun, but you're not here to share it with me. I love you, darling. Your loving husband, Ricky." His pain of separation is transparent, but he tries to put up a brave front as he concludes his V-Mail. If it's hard to find the right words to compose such a letter, it's even harder to choose ones to **end** with.

Like our Epistle and the soldier's letter, the Gospel reading from Matthew also records a farewell. In this instance it is the risen Christ who appears to his disciples. In both these Biblical farewells, that of Paul and of Jesus, there is a directive and an assurance. Paul tells the congregation at Corinth to "agree with one another, to live in peace." Jesus tells his circle of friends to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..., and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

In both farewells there is a reassurance that, although people must inevitably part, there need never be any parting from God. The disciples were to go forward in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or, put another way: Holy Parent, Chosen Child, Abiding Presence. And in that way, Jesus said, he would always be with them, even "to the end of the age." Paul's words echo this assurance: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit [will] be with you all."

These texts for today give us a positive thought to go with all our good-byes, no matter how painful they may be. The promise is that God is always with us, whether we're aware of it or not. We aren't alone in life, even if it should seem that way when familiar faces are missing.

That word *good-bye*, which we use so often, is actually a contraction in English of the old blessing, "God be with ye." An equivalent expression in Spanish is *vaya con dios*, "Go with God." So that even our common words of taking leave reflect a reality that underlies them.

Still, it's easy to lose sight of this promise. We get so busy with the moment-by-moment needs of life—the things that have to get done, the responsibilities we carry, the duties at hand—that we can get out of touch with spiritual realities. It's easy to forget that God is here accompanying us every step of the way, offering us strength when ours alone proves insufficient. Ironically, it may take such times of trouble before we can see more clearly | what we should be aware of all long.

Years ago I had surgery. An orderly came into my room in the morning and announced it was time to leave. I found myself reluctant to let go of the hands of those who had come to spend this preparation time with me and who would be staying until the operation was over. I found I didn't want to leave their side even though I knew I had to.

As I was being wheeled down the long corridor I saw no one, just the cold white ceiling with its fluorescent fixtures. Only the thought that God was with me at that moment prevented this from being the loneliest ride in the world. I'm sure that's what sustained me and got me through the operation and my eventual recovery.

Perhaps some of you have had a similar experience. Maybe not the same exact circumstances, but with the same sort of feelings. What a joy it is then to find God present in such an intimate way, to find God where God has been all along—at our side and holding us in love. It's a discovery that makes a difficult day bearable.

I was reading about a young woman in Central America, arrested because of anti-government activities to free her people. She was taken to jail and put in solitary confinement. In that antiquated cell there were no windows and only a single light bulb. After a few days there a sadistic guard unscrewed the bulb and took it, leaving her in total darkness. He taunted her, shouting, "We have taken away your light. Now what will you do?" She replied in a shaky, but strong voice, "You cannot take away my light. **God** is my light."

At the close of our worship every week is a reminder that, as we part from one another, God goes with each one of us to be our light. The benediction emphasizes that the Lord is not limited to our liturgies nor confined to our sanctuaries. God is truly present in our hearts in, and through, the Holy Spirit. And that active presence surrounds us and fills us wherever we are, whatever our circumstances, whomever we're with.

The benediction on Sunday is more than a farewell; it is a promise. It challenges us each week to go from this place and to live in faithful discipleship. At the same time it assures us that there is a sustaining love which will not let us go, and that love will carry us through whatever may come.

That kind of ending to our worship is not so much a stopping point, but an invitation to the next beginning; for we are carried from our gathering here in the palm of God's hand until such time as we come together again. Christ assures us that this is so. He tells us that through the provision of the Holy Spirit a supporting presence is with us each and every day.

Because of Jesus' assurance that we are not alone, not without hope, not without endurance, not without strength, we find that we can take most of what life brings us and see our way through. In the power and promise of the Holy Spirit with us we are sustained by Christ's parting words... and they remain with us always.