

Making Our Own Way, May 29, 2022, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Acts 1.1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1.15-23; Luke 24.44-53

Prayer

Saying “goodbye” to someone you love is never easy. Even when you think you are prepared. Even when you have been anticipating it for some time. Even when you know that it is “for the best”. Saying “goodbye” to someone you love is never easy.

When Jesus was taken into heaven, the disciples were forced to say “goodbye”. They weren’t ready for him to be gone. Even though they were prepared and had been anticipating it and knew that it was “for the best”. They still weren’t ready. They weren’t ready for Jesus to be gone, and they weren’t ready for what life would look like without him.

I can’t help but thinking that this is like a parent and child. Jesus was the parent, in some sense, to these disciples: he was wise (beyond his years), instructive, loving, and took responsibility for their upbringing and development. Though he was probably younger than many of his disciples, he still provided a kind of ideal parental model for them. And then he went away, and they were left to figure out the rest on their own.

For me, right now, the idea of the “parent” is really resonating for me. I spent a bunch of time yesterday with my kids at the playground, trying to teach them how to ride their bikes. Despite my encouragements, my enthusiasm, my “wisdom” gleaned from many years of riding a bicycle myself, and, let’s face it, far too much frustration and impatience, by the time we were done yesterday morning, Ellie was doing a great job, all by herself. If I had the screen and projector we’re anticipating I would show you the video I made. But what I realized in that moment, despite all of my pride at how much she had improved in such a short period of time, was that *I* was not responsible for her success. I do not get to take credit. I was there for the ride and happened to be at the right place in the right time to see it happen, but I don’t deserve the praise for *her* accomplishment. That’s all on Ellie. She did it. Not me.

That’s the way it is with parenting so much of the time. You work hard to make sure your kids have what they need; you bend over backwards trying to instruct them in the right ways and to protect them from being hurt in the world and yet ultimately, they do what they want. As a friend said to me yesterday afternoon, “we’re not really responsible for them. They come out fully formed.” We get to be alongside them for much of their development, but who they are, who they become, what they do—it’s all *them*.

As a parent, that’s kind of terrifying. My children’s lives, what happens to them, how they turn out is *mostly* outside my control. Not entirely—there is some “nurture” with that “nature” as well. But it’s mostly up to them.

I imagine my kids one day, far in the future, when they head off to university or move out on their own in the world. That will be a hard day, not only because I will miss them, but because it is at that point I’m forced to realize that they really *are* on their own now. Blazing their own trail. Making their own mistakes. Being their own person. (Up until they leave the house, I can still pretend that I exercise *some* degree of control over them).

...is that what Jesus felt like, as he was ascending into heaven? Was this kind of like his “college drop off”? “Bye, kids. Remember what I taught you. Make me proud!”?

That had to be hard for Jesus too. His disciples were dependent on him. He had taken care of them for a long time. He had walked them through things that should have been so obvious if they had only been paying attention. He had helped them when their faith was faltering. He had shown them the way when they were struggling. And he had even sent them off on their own, on short trips, as a test of their independence.

But now, it was time for them to part ways. They were officially moving on, independent of each other. Saying “goodbye” to someone you love is never easy. Even when it’s expected.

We know that Jesus didn’t *really* leave. At least, not entirely. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit—we’ll hear more about that next week. This was part of Jesus making sure everything was ready. Maybe *he* won’t be there anymore, but they would have a “helper”, an “advocate” to go with them.

And more than that, even in the age before telephones, it was easy to “place a call” to Jesus and get back in touch. That’s what prayer is all about.

But it’s not the same thing.

[As an aside, I can’t help but think that this “college drop-off” metaphor is a useful way to think about prayer—at least in the way it worked in my family (and maybe yours as well). Once I was out of the house, I could call—my calls were welcome whenever and whatever the topic. But they were almost always initiated by *me*. Kind of like, “we’re here for you, when you need us, but we’re not going to interfere.” That seems to be how prayer works with God. But that could just be my situation.]

Many of us know that once we say “goodbye”, we just can’t make that same connection anymore. This is especially true when what separates us is not only physical distance, but death. Once we have said “goodbye” to someone who has moved on to the “great beyond”, we might still feel their presence and we may even have “conversations” with them—but that relationship that was once there is lost.

Jesus didn’t die. But he *did* go to heaven. And it sure changed the relationship he had with his disciples.

There’s an incredible amount of trust there, on the part of Jesus. On the part of God. Trust, and a sense of helplessness. Our God isn’t weak, powerless, or helpless. But God *also* isn’t a “helicopter parent”. God isn’t constantly hovering around us to make sure we don’t attempt something that is a little “too hard” for us, and where we’re likely to get hurt.

But God hurts just the same when we *do* fall. When we hurt. When we are in pain, and when we have pain inflicted on us. And when we fail to act to protect others of God’s children and let them suffer. Imagine the grief of watching your children suffer, knowing that they have the power to alleviate that suffering and that it is their own pride, folly, and stupidity that is preventing it!

God isn’t powerless to intervene. But most of the time, God entrusts us to figure things out for ourselves. To make use of the tools we’ve been given. We don’t always get it right. We *often* don’t get it right.

But that’s the other angle to this metaphor I’ve been considering. We are not all parents. But we *are* all children. Our experiences as children of our parents is not all the same, but we have some sense of figuring things out for ourselves. Of looking up to others: parents, family, older siblings, and even non-“blood” “chosen family” for answers, support, guidance, and direction. We haven’t always gotten the

help we've sought. We have been disappointed and left to figure things out on our own, at least some of the time. And there can also be a sense of us wanting to "prove" something. That doesn't always go well.

I think my favourite part of the story of Jesus' Ascension is the two men in white who appear alongside the disciples as they are watching Jesus while he ascends into heaven. In this metaphor, these angels (as they almost certainly are) are the older siblings: They've been watching the rest of us for years. They've seen the special treatment we get. There is a sense of jealousy with how much we seem to be favoured by God, but also the impatience of an older sibling who just wants their younger brother (in this case) to figure things out, already. "Men of Galilee," they say, while they are *still* looking up into the sky, "why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven,". Or, in other words, "why are you still standing around? Get *on* with it already! He said "goodbye". Time to get going!" in the way that only a loving impatient older sibling can manage.

Because it really was that sudden. Whether or not the disciples were ready for it, it was time to say "goodbye". Goodbye to Jesus, goodbye to their mentor and instructor, and goodbye to the way of life they had known. From that point on, everything was different.

That is where we find *ourselves* on Ascension Day. Not entirely alone. We have others with us, to help us carry out the mission. And Jesus is still...around, sort of. God is accessible through prayer and through the Word that we read from, but not with us, at least not in physical form. And we are trying to figure things out, on our own. Not alone. The spirit, the helper that Jesus promised is here. We will hear about that and celebrate that next week. We have been well-equipped. We have been prepared. We have been shown the way and given the gifts and been pointed in the right direction. Maybe we weren't ready to say "goodbye" yet, but here we are. Figuring it out for ourselves. We've been given everything we need to do this well. But now we're trying to make sense of it ourselves.

And on his way up to heaven, Jesus looks down on us and he smiles. "Don't worry," he says. "You've *got* this. You can do it! I know you can. And remember, I am with you even to the end of the age." Amen.