

Going Away...
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – May 22, 2022

PLEASE READ:
Acts 16:9-15
John 14:23-29

I'll never forget when two of our four children first left the proverbial nest. We were living in Paris at the time, and Danny was going to university in England (that was expected) and Rebecca was going off to boarding school in Germany (that was unexpected). I took Danny by train, lugging his bulging suitcases on the Eurostar to London, and Kim drove Rebecca just across the French border. I was so proud of both Danny, entering New College, Oxford, to study Philosophy and French Literature, and Rebecca, going off to the Black Forest Academy for High School. Danny got settled into his dorm room and it was time for me to go. I was sitting in a pub with him and eating lunch before I got on the train back home. I was overcome with a flood of emotions, pride and grief, excitement and fear, love and regret. I knew I had to say goodbye and it was hard not to cry. Danny was reassuring, but it was so hard because although I had seen hundreds of other families go through this transition, I was utterly unprepared for the momentous turning of this page in his life, not from one chapter to the next, but from one book to the next. It was not a sail change, but a sea change for both our children and for our family.

Today is a poignant day also in the life of our congregation, as we bless our Senior High School youth going away to school in a few short months, and Evelyn Bergstrom, another senior member of our congregation, going away to Mystic. I did some etymological detective work on the word graduate, and the Latin for *gradus* can mean both degrees, or step. And so the verb to graduate can mean either to take a degree or to take a step. In that sense, life is full of graduations for all of us, some of course are bigger degrees, bigger steps than others. Most of the big graduations in life mean also a kind of going away...

Today our gospel text is from what is called the *farewell discourse* in the gospel according to John, a long monologue where Jesus is preparing his disciples for when he is finally going away. Goodbyes are painful. Parting is such sweet sorrow, we say. It's necessary, we know, but it's still hard, because it means change and reorienting to a new way of relating. For our youth moving on in life, going away from home, it's an important step in becoming an adult. It's necessary for what psychologists call the process of *individuation*. As parents we have spent years imprinting and forming our children with our values and example of what it means to be a human being, but at some point, they need to go away to realize on their own who they really are, apart from who and what we have tried to make of them. It's a dance in the teen years of giving more and more freedom and responsibility, and then, ready or not, we turn them loose in the world, and we pray they are ready for what challenges await them.

Of course, most of us are desperate to leave home when we are seniors in High School. We are so tired of the constraints of over-protective or controlling parents. We may even think we know better than our parents what's best for us. In 1922 a writer named Alexander C. Purdy observed "how our estimates of parents change with the years! Mark Twain says that at seventeen he could scarcely endure his father, the old man was so ignorant; at twenty he

noticed that his father said a sensible thing occasionally; and at twenty-five he was astonished at the improvement the old man had made!"

Part of the difficulty of going away is the instinct to give those final pithy quotes of wisdom so our loved ones are prepared for life. That's what Jesus was doing with his disciples. His advice is simple: As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. The qualification is the hard part: "As I have loved you..." Jesus spent time with them. He raised the ethical bar to bring out their best selves. He spoke the truth to them. He taught them how to pray and how to serve. He forgave them over and over, and he called them friends. He modeled for them genuine authenticity. "To be and not to seem." He laid down his life for them... And that's what he calls us to do for one another, and that's what we are called to do for our larger community.

In the Acts text Paul has a vision and just "knows" that he is supposed to go to Philippi where he meets a woman named Lydia, and she is the founder of the church there. She hears of God's wonderful love, and says, yes, that is true for me, and is baptized in the river just outside the town. Kim and I actually visited there and shared in a baptismal renewal service probably very near where this story takes place. It was a reminder how God enters into our history and is part of our transitions and changes. Indeed, God is the primary agent of transformation in our lives...

Going away for the people of God always involves going toward something new... New relationships, new learning, new opportunities to serve and make a difference in the world. Many of you know that the word mission comes from the Latin word "missere" which means *to send*. We are a "sent" people and so it is in our very nature to go away from the safety and security of what we know to the adventure out there to which God is calling us. Theologically, one could say that at the very heart of God is both *serene staying* and *spirited sending*. God sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit, and the Spirit sends the Church into the world to be the presence of God for the world. It's counter-intuitive, but sometimes God sends us to the most unlikely places.

The story is told of a man one night who is down on all fours under a streetlight looking intently at the ground as though he is searching for something. A woman walks by and notices him and asks, "What are you doing?" He says he is searching for a key. And so she gets down on all fours to help him. They look and look intently for about 15 minutes when she thinks to ask him, "Exactly where did you lose the key?" To which he replies, "About a mile back that way." "Why on earth are we looking here then?" she exclaimed! "Well, there's more light here..."

Sometimes we are looking in the wrong places for the key for which we are searching. And all the light in the world is not going to help us find it until we go to where we really need to go.

As hard as it is, we must let go, and even as comfortable as it is to stay where we can see what is familiar to us, we need to go away, sometimes even losing ourselves so that we can be found... The one thing I hope we'll take with us is this command of Jesus to love. That's what he thought we really need. That's what our world really needs. In fact, that's the light that will help us truly find what we're really looking for. And indeed, as we love God and love those around

us, we will receive and spread that peace that Jesus promises, that peace that passes all understanding.

The good news is that we'll never be alone. Jesus says, "I have told you this while I am still with you. The Advocate, or Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you. Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am leaving, but I will come back to you.'

And so as we all go away, and as we send you our beloved seniors on your way, we pray God's richest blessings on you. And I pray we may all graduate, take the next step in our lives, to embody the love and share the peace of God for those around us; to be the light wherever God sends us.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.