

September 1, 2024
“Sleep Loose”
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
September 1, 2024
Michael Stanfield

¹¹ 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. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

¹³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray. Gracious God bless my words this morning that they may be your words of comfort and of love. Amen.

Well, here I am preaching my final sermon to you. Today I say my last good-byes to you – a people I have loved deeply for a good chunk of my life. I feel sort of like an astronaut headed to Mars. At best it will be years before I see most or all of you after today and it’s quite possible, I may never see many of you again. How do I, how do we, who have laughed together, loved together, cried together, served God together, face that reality? Well, I decided to take my cue from Paul who was so eloquent when it came to expressing the inevitable final parting we all face – whether it is by distance in *this* life or the chasm that will be our deaths.



Up until I was 40 years old when I took a family member or a visitor to the airport, there was plenty of time for formal, cordial good-byes. Saying good-bye was an art. You had to work up to a high point, a final message, a last hug, at just the right time. Too soon and you would have to endure those last minutes knowing everything had already been said. Too late and you would end up shouting crucial messages at someone's back down the jetway. Timing was everything.

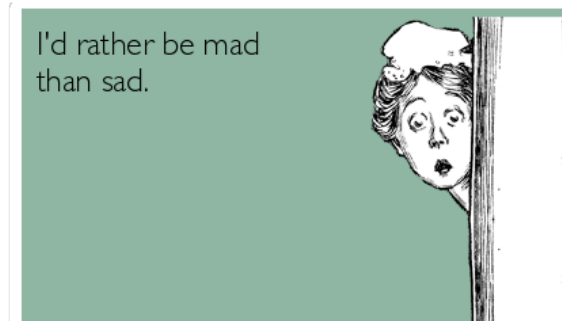


But ever since the era of tightened security ala 9-11, there is rarely time to get loved ones and their luggage out of the car before other vehicles are honking at you for blocking traffic. You can't craft a meaningful, heartfelt farewell while trying to get your luggage out of your trunk as you worry about that next car in line pinning you to the bumper. Our "good-byes" have become something we shout out from across the driver's side of the car, over the roar of traffic and the smell of exhaust.

That's a shame. Because good-byes are messages that can stay with us. Leaving family or friends is a poignant, and if we are honest, quite painful moment in our lives. Looking back on difficult good-byes we tend to remember the details of our final minutes together. And we usually learn a particular way of saying good-bye when we are young that we tend to repeat throughout our lives.



Leaving home for college or for a new job, or marriage, or saying good-bye to a divorcing parent who will be living in another city or a dying parent and even a dying pet who will be leaving for good, are all painful experiences. Our attachments define us. Letting go of those attachments means sacrificing a big part of ourselves and sacrifice is painful. We are forced to reckon with who we will be without that *one* or *those* ones we have counted on to help define our lives. And so, we do our best to cope. There are several ways we can do that.



We can get angry and irritated. This tends to be my go to as it is, I think, for many men. Anger is easier than sorrow because it feels more proactive and less helpless. It's a whole lot easier to let go of something or someone if you can associate some negativity with it. So, finding fault – not necessarily even with the beloved who is leaving or has left – but with something, anything, can actually be a quite nice salve. Being irritated or angry keeps us from having to face how vulnerable we feel. It lets us get through the separation by finding an emotion that feels more empowering.

Of course, the problem with this is that it is only temporary and it's also not very honest. The pain and the grief that is underneath the anger tends to gnaw at us and can eventually turn us into a perennial misanthrope if we are not careful – even making us sick if we don't find a way to feel the deep sadness and express it.



A second way we may try to cope is that we get very busy with as much as possible so we don't have to think about it and so don't have to feel it.

Pastor Roy Oswald was a member of the now defunct Alban Institute, an organization dedicated to the study of churches and pastors. He wrote many helpful books and treatises over the course of my ministry that I always found quite insightful.

One was "Running Through the Thistles, Terminating a ministerial relationship with a Parish." In it, he recalls a story from his youth about a huge field that was filled with briars and thistles. He and his two older brothers would have to walk around that field every day on the way to and from school.

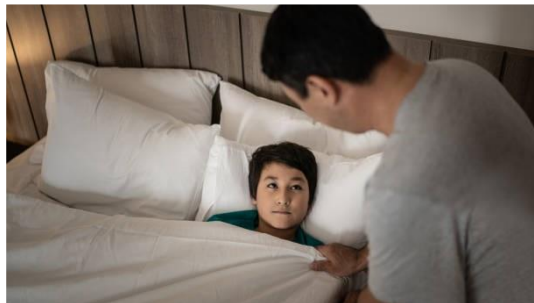


But some days when they tarried after school, in order not to be late, his two older brothers would grab him by the hand, and they would run as fast as they could through those thorns and thistles. On the opposite side of the field they would quickly assess the damage, remove the thorns they could from their bloodied bodies and hurry on their way home so as not to get in trouble with their mother.

Oswald says that many ministers take this tact when they announce to their congregation that they are leaving. They overload themselves with things to do – even begin things they will never finish in order to get through the painful final days as quickly as possible. But this “sprinting through the thistles” approach to saying goodbye also fails to honor relationships, fails to come to terms with what was that will never be again.

A third way many of us try to cope with letting go of relationships that have meant so much to us when the time comes is to try and slip away unnoticed so that we will not have to say any goodbyes. This is similar to the “running through the thistles” approach, since both are basically ways to avoid the pain of facing loss and the messy emotions that go with it.

You have not let me do either. The work and planning that went into this day have just floored me. I have shed many tears uncontrollably since June 23, the day I announced I would be leaving and I am sure that more are coming today.



You know, as children, we all experienced a very important “good-bye” every day of our lives – when we were tucked into bed and left alone in the dark. Our parents called it “good night.” But this end-of-the-day ritual is really a good-bye, a farewell to the day we shared together.

Do you remember the last words your parents spoke to you before you went to bed at night? I do. After a bedtime story and prayers it was “Good-night, sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

What is the nighttime ritual you shared with your parents or that you shared with your children or your grandchildren? When Carl and Grace were young, Janet and I switched back and forth between the two. If I had Carl, I read him a few stories and then Carl would always say, “Daddy, I want us to talk about some things.” That was my cue to recount the events of the day and prepare him for the days to come by letting him in on what we as a family had planned. With both, I would make sure I spun an imaginary web over their heads.

It was the nightly dreamcatcher to ensure their dreams would be good and helpful. We’d then have prayers, I’d say I loved them and they would always responds with “I love you too, Dad.”

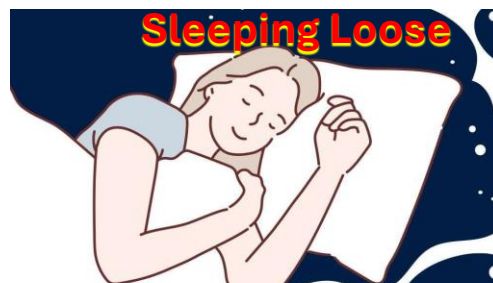
To this day whenever we part, those are the last words we share. I love you Carl. I love you Grace which is always followed by, “I love you too, Dad.”

What is it you said to your parents or that you say or said to your children or your grandchildren? There was one woman I knew years ago who had two little girls. Her name was Susan. At the time, Susan’s girls were ages 6 and 4. Each night when she tucked her daughters into bed, she shared that she repeated a somewhat different mantra but one that has always stuck with me. It was: “Remember, you are special to God. Remember how much I love you. Sleep loose.”

“Sleep loose.” Susan recited this strange-sounding directive to her girls each night for a very important reason. She wanted her children to relax and let go to the love of God that surrounded each of them. She wanted her children to sleep loose in the security of that divine love.

And you know, she was right. Too many children, too many of us adults, in fact, are sleeping way too “tight” – tensed and ready to bolt and run at the slightest appearance of danger, the smallest indication of risk. With many I talk to, it is the same: they regularly awake with a start as if the house has been invaded or on fire or something and then lie awake with worry over the state of the world.

It’s hard to get a good night’s rest when all of our muscles are taut. “Sleeping tight” when you really think about it may actually be an uncomfortable, unhappy way to go through life.



But when we rest in the knowledge that we are “special,” that we are “loved,” each bedtime, indeed each goodbye we have to say in life can bring the comfort and security of “sleeping loose.”



Paul's final words to the Corinthians this week demonstrate how a well-crafted "good-bye" *can* be meaningful and moving. And so, he shows us a fourth way – a more excellent way of saying goodbye. Paul's future and the future of the Corinthian Christians was pretty unclear. The apostle continued to face the possibility of persecution, arrest and execution. The Corinthian church had both its internal battles and the external threats from religious and political authorities to cloud its destiny.

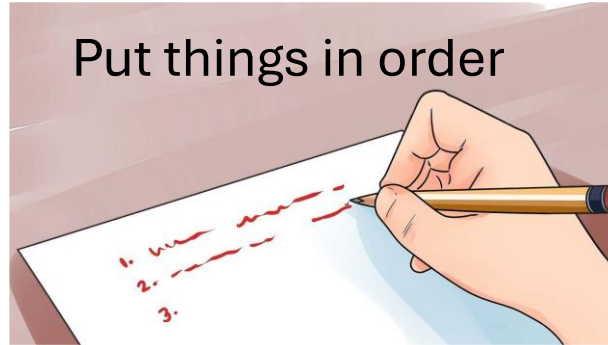


Paul invokes his message of "farewell" to these Christians in that specific place and time. Yet it reaches beyond the moment of its reading. It reaches *us* today who are saying our final farewells as pastor and congregation.



"Farewell" also means "may you have a good journey" – and the *journey* Paul constantly envisions is the one that travels through this life toward that ultimate destination with God. Paul's good-bye to the Corinthians, then, is like his spiritual "triplist" for their own journey through this life, even unto death.

The words left ringing in their ears offered the Corinthians a prescription for living – a way to sleep loose, not just at Paul's parting, but every night of their lives. These are appropriate words for us today as our journeys take us in different directions. There are six things that Paul prescribes.



First, he says, we need to **Put things in order**. This is Paul’s attempt to get the Corinthians to prioritize. That which is important we need to separate out from the extraneous “junk” we find cluttering up our lives. As I approached my final good-bye with you, I attempted to prioritize my time with you so that I could honor my pastorly commitments, but also spend time on the relationships I have had with you. I have also tried to do as much as I could to prepare you for the period of transition that is to come.

As I leave you, you too will need to begin the difficult task of prioritizing, as you look to calling first an interim and then a new pastor to lead you onward. As I shared in my final newsletter, this is not a time to step back to see what is next. It is a time to step up your game. More is now required from everyone – especially after a healthy, thriving pastorate. If asked to serve – especially as an elder, you need to agree if that’s at all possible. It will make everyone’s job here easier and more delightful if there are more to share the load, getting what needs to be done, done well and efficiently.



The second thing Paul tells us is, **Listen to my appeal**. The most important word here is *listen*. That means listening and making room for the hurt, the sadness the grief, the sorrow. Please hear mine. Yes, I have been called elsewhere and I am looking forward to that. But this is probably the most difficult move, emotionally, I have ever made. I ache over the loss of the pastoral relationship I have had with you.

We can’t hear if we won’t be quiet and tune in. If you are an elder, I adjure now to listen to Ramona Dobson, the Chair of the Commission on Ministry and Barbara Chalfant, our new general presbyter and Ann Bouchard who sees the big picture that is this church and beyond. And Susan Winkelmann who is your clerk of session. If you are a member, listen to your leadership. Listening saves us from the task of going off half-cocked, misinformed and

misdirected. To sleep loose, we must especially listen for the message of God's love even in the midst of the pain of separation.



Third, Paul says, **Agree with one another**. You are not just to tolerate each other's company until a new normal is established by a new pastor. You are called to celebrate one another's journey. Since God's love extends to each of us, there is reason to celebrate those journeys. And I will have to say that of all the congregations I have served so far, I have found you to be the most agreeable. In fact, it is one of your great gifts – I hope you won't forget it and I hope you will be as eager to share that gift of agreeability with a new pastor as you have been with me.



Fourth, Paul says, **Live in Peace**. Or as that great expert on death and dying, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross put it, we need to move to the acceptance of the death of this separation. When the differences in the roads of our journeys are celebrated as much as they are mourned, we can begin to experience harmony and shalom and the new normal that awaits for each of us ahead. That's hard to do, I know, when it means that our journeys have now reached a final fork in the road. But it is good advice nonetheless.



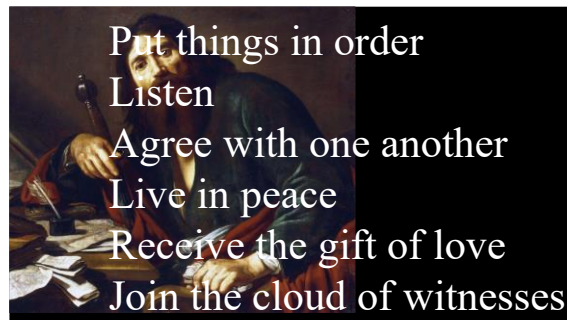
Fifth, Paul says, **Receive the gift of Love.**

I hope you know how much I love you. It is a love that will not die in spite of our separation. You will live on in my cherished memories by day and in my cherished dreams by night. And I hope you will understand that because I love you, I cannot act as your pastor any more – even when I might want to. You will need time to bond with a new pastor and you can't do that that if I keep sticking my nose back here in your business. There will come a time when I may come back for some future celebration you have here and not be in the way. And I look forward to that day. But hear this, congregation of Trinity: You will always have a special place in my heart and in my prayers.



Sixth and finally, Paul says, **Join the Cloud of witnesses.** Paul invoked the presence of “all the saints” in his farewell to the Corinthians. Likewise, we must feel a part of all the saints, the entire community of faith. It is in just times such as we are in that it is helpful to remember that each of us is a part of a church that is much larger than just the Trinity Presbyterian Church. We are part of Missouri Union Presbytery, the Synod of Mid America, The Presbyterian Church USA, the church universal and so we are part of that great cloud of witnesses. It is in feeling the strength of all that support that we can, indeed relax and “sleep loose.”

So:



Put things in order
 Listen
 Agree with one another
 Live in peace as you accept this separation
 Receive the gift of love
 Join the cloud of witnesses

As we part from one another, this worship experience being the last we shall have together, I invite you corporately to participate in a little ritual of good-bye.

Quite simply, if you would repeat after me:

Remember how much God loves you (REPEAT)

Remember how much I love you (REPEAT) Thank-you.

Sleep Loose my beloved, and farewell.

Let us pray. Lord God, we give you thanks for the years we have served together as a pastor and a congregation. As we part, help us to remember to put the things in order that need to be in order

To listen for your urgings from all the right places to find our agreement in and with you, to live from the peace that passes all understanding as we continue to receive the gift of your love and as we join with the great cloud of witnesses who know both the pain of separation and the joy of reunion. Amen.