

Sermon Blurb (As Published in the Newsletter)

"The Whole Shebang" How do we find healthy closure? Say Good-Bye? Grieve? On this Memorial Day during our month of Wholeness, lets reflect on grieving, saying good-bye, and moving forward while honoring the past. How have we said good-bye in our community and what models do we have?

Opening Words (Spoken at the start of the worship service)

Welcome. Good morning.

Today we are going to spend some time thinking about how we say good bye.

What is important to us, and how we say good bye well. With wholeness.

In a recent memorial service that a colleague did, she shared this quote with me, which she got from a dear friend who's son died, “The Native Americans say, “Every human and animal is born with a certain number of days to their circle. Some lives are long and others are short, but each one is complete.”

Meditation/Prayer

Please take this moment to think of those to whom you have had to say farewell

Think about Mildred Dahm, long time member who has given us so much, who died last night

(PAUSE)

Take a moment in silence to reflect upon those farewells that have been joyful, and sad.

I want to ask you to reflect on some questions as we sit in meditation.

What do we know about saying farewell? What do you know about saying “good-bye?”

What did you learn from your family? Your school, career? Friends? Social life?

What have you learned here in this community? What does saying “good-bye” mean to you?

How do you say “good-bye” in a meaningful way?

Sermon

The whole shebang

Honestly I do not know what made me title this sermon that way

I wanted to write a sermon about saying good-bye in fullness

And really, I did not come up with better language than “shebang”

At least not on the beacon deadline

Its kind of lame, now that I am having to say it up here in front of everyone

And say it “The whole shebang”

Ah well, nobody is perfect...certainly not me...

I realized while writing this that I agreed to do a sermon on the last day of the quarter...

Between CPE units when only a few of us are covering the hospital

When I am graduating in a few days

Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time

Isn't it funny how things seem more clear 5 or 6 weeks ahead?

Does anyone else have that experience?

But actually the timing of this sermon works out pretty well for me

The current abundance of work notwithstanding

When I saw that it was Memorial Day weekend

That the word of the month was “wholeness”

I decided that I wanted to write a sermon that reflected on saying good-bye

And it appears that this is a season for saying good-byes

I am graduating in about a week. Saying good-bye to my fellow seminarians

Whom I have grown to love and respect deeply

We just finished a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at the hospital

I just said good bye to several colleagues, including Julie Vesley,

A member of this congregation, with whom I will share no more pastoral education

We just did our big event and our annual congregational meeting

Pretty awesome news this year by the way. Exceeding expectations on pledges.

In fact, in reflection, its been a pretty amazing year here for us

Solar panels. Filling holes in the parking lot. Raising more than we expected.

Not all of our closure has been so full of such a sense of achievement.

We have also had our losses this year.

Mildred is dying. We have to say good-bye to her.

We have had other powerful losses in this community. Family members. Friends.

How do we say good-bye well?

It seems a suitable question to ask on Memorial Day weekend.

For those of you that do not know, Memorial Day started after the Civil War

Its not exactly clear where and how Memorial Day started

In 1966 the US government named Waterloo as the official birthplace of Memorial Day

Because on May 5 1866 Waterloo starting hosting an annual community-wide event

when businesses closed and residents decorated the graves of soldiers with flowers and flags

General John A. Logan, was the first to call for a national day of remembrance

Decoration Day as it was originally called, set on the 30th of May

Because that was not the anniversary of any specific battle

At first Decoration Day was to just commemorate the 600k lives lost during the Civil War

But it was after the first World War that Decoration Day became a day to remember¹

The lives of all those lost in military service

This is most certainly a season, a weekend of farewells.

How do we say good-bye well?

I asked you to think about that during the meditation today

What you personally know about saying good bye.

What is important to you when you say good-bye?

How do we remember what is gone?

The first person to ask me about this was one of my CPE mentors

We were sitting in group with one-another, towards the end of my first unit of study

And she asked the group what we knew about saying good-bye

How we practiced saying farewell

It was an incredibly interesting conversation, every one of us answered differently

I remember a colleague who said that they did not say good bye. Ever.

Two of us, both from the east coast

Remembered how our families would leave a gathering

And then critique and insult everything and everyone that had been there

Generally, both of us avoided saying good by and tried to sneak out

In the hopes that nobody would tear us apart with insults after we were gone

I had never reflected on the ways we say good bye before

And certainly not with a group of people pastors and chaplains

1 Staff Writers, History.com, <http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/memorial-day-history>, (Accessed May 20, 2014)

Though thinking about it

It makes a lot of sense, since pastors and chaplains spend a lot of time

Helping people say good bye.

When I went to seminary for my last gathering days

Gathering days is when distance students come to campus to earn residential time

I asked my fellow seminarians what they knew about saying good bye

Again, the conversation was rich and meaningful

You might think that we seminarians are all deep

That we sit around thinking deep thoughts and having deep conversations

All of the time. Sometimes that is true

We argue theology and philosophy and cite books nobody has heard about

But most of the time. We gripe about classes and tell jokes

And sometimes go to karaoke...and try to sing deep songs

Like Queen's “Who Wants to Live Forever”

But when I asked my fellow seminarians over dinner

What they knew about saying good-bye

We did have a deep conversation; personal and vulnerable

Like with my CPE group, everyone's answer was different

Some of us were uncomfortable and did not want to say good bye

In fact, I think that was most of us

But one person's answer stood out to me

He had been in drama earlier in life and had such an amazing experience

That he got cards for everyone in the cast

And wrote on them, something that he really liked about them

It was a very touching way of remembering what was important about what was ending.

And remembering what is important helps us connect with one-another even when we know

We have to leave, to say good-bye, become memories. Memorials to times past.

Ultimately, that is what happens. Isn't it?

Everyone, everything, leaves eventually.

Its part of what we have to do. After all, we are not eternal.

Well, maybe some church governance meetings are eternal

At least they seem to go on forever.

But we are finite.

Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson in their exceptional book on loss, grief and faith, “All Our Losses, All Our Grievs” which has been around for decades,

They connected finitude to the goodness of creation (Mitchell and Anderson, 163)

and the source of our sense of loss

We feel loss because we are finite.

In fact, thinking about finitude, I think that all of Creation is finite.

We might say “the universe is infinite” - but what we know of it?

How we experience it? Maybe we can conceptualize the infinite.

There are mathematical representations of it. Theological concepts about it.

Though even if there is something infinite, our experience of everything is not infinite, is it?

Mitchel and Anderson go on to make the potentially disturbing assertion

That being finite is part of what makes creation good.

There is always room for something more. Something coming next.

Our losses, our good-byes are part of making space.

It is our struggle with that finitude that is the source for our sense of loss.

But regarding finitude as beneficial to creation does not make our own specific loss any easier

Attachment is part of our reality as well. We grow attached.

Mitchel and Anderson connect our attachment to love.

We grow attached because we fall in love.

With things, events, ideas, each other. We are beings that are made to love.

Our good-byes set the boundaries around things.

They make the reality of our finite nature real to us.

So very real. And because we love, those endings hurt

This season has also been a season of saying good-bye at the hospital

We have had an unusual number of young men come in after a crisis

Without enough brain activity or resources to return

I spent this past Mother's Day with a family

Having to decide to withdraw care from their mid-20's son

It was a very real, powerful, overwhelming and painful good bye

But our medicine, as highly developed as it has become

Is still finite – and there was nothing that anyone could do

Unless they wanted him to live on machines with no hope of consciousness

And they knew, that he would never want that

While we were together, we talked about his life, its challenges, its losses, limits...and its joys...

The conversation helped the family to make some sense of the loss.

Not “sense” in the way of “rational” or “logical” sense

Because there is nothing rational or logical about a 20-something healthy young man dying like that

A “Sense” in the way of having a “sense” of the loss. Touching it. Sensing it. Exploring how it feels.

Building a relationship to the loss...and exploring that relationship

When he died, late at night, a few days after withdrawing care

The family asked me if I would do their memorial service

I was honored and humbled, so of course, in the middle of the night

I said “yes, of course, I will make time”

Then, the next morning, when I looked at my schedule, I had the horrifying realization

That I could not make time without failing some of my final assignments

For my final quarter of graduate school – and I could not afford to do that.

I was disturbed, in agony. I knew that the family had limited pastoral relationships

Could I do everything? I knew that this family had a history of doors closing on them

I was overwhelmed. I was attached. I wanted to help. To support them.

I called a mentor and spoke with her at length.

She agreed that I really did not have time to help them say good-bye well

And saying good-bye well is really important

My mentor also said something that I thought was really interesting

And helpful to me in a surprising way.

“You don't have time, that's the right call – and – it feels awful to turn someone away who is in

need...but I think that for you, with your responsibilities, its the right thing to do...and it feels awful.”

I was supposed to feel awful in that moment. Sad that I had to say “no”

But I am finite. I have a finite amount of time, energy, attention...

And I did not have the resources to help them say a “good” good-bye

And it felt awful. Like it was supposed to feel. Because I was attached.

Because I wanted to support them, care for them, nurture them, share love with them

We are finite. I am finite.

I called as quickly as I could and left a voice mail because nobody answered

An interesting thing happened.

Because I said “no” – because I disconnected, said farewell, admitted my limits

They had to find another pastor; and the person they found was a better fit for their tradition

And had far more experience than I did in leading memorials

The person they found was a better fit to help them say good-bye well

I think this is what Mitchel and Anderson mean when they say that our finitude leaves space

It is very painful. There is nothing easy or ok about it.

When we are in the midst of a specific loss.

I think that all those phrases and platitudes that are designed

To try and make us feel better when we are hurting from loss

Are just not that helpful to us

I have heard people say “God must have wanted another angel”

Or “God must have needed them more than we did”

Really? God? The all-mighty? Needed them more than we did?

Not helpful to our sense of loss; saying that ends our conversation.

Our memory. It minimizes what we feel

Minimizing the emptiness that we feel, the sorrow, the anger

When we have to say good-bye to something that we love

Is not what nurtures and engages the depth of our being

And helps us to find our way to healing.

Minimizing is not what helps us to say good-bye well

No, what helps us to say good-bye well

Is to remember that which we loved

That which has been important to us and to honor it

Like my pastor friend who wrote something special for each person

At the end of his time with them and gave it to them

And yes, it aches to say good-bye that way

It is a time we are supposed to hurt. Because we love. Because we are finite.

This quarter I took a course on death and dying in pastoral care

One of the things we had to do was take a virtual tour of the memorial

Built at the site of the Oklahoma City bombing of April 19, 1995

The virtual tour was hosted by an Iliff seminarian who was a responder at the bombing

Honestly, I was moved to tears through most of the tour

I have never seen a more touching and graceful good-bye before

The memorial is designed with several areas

A survivor tree, a rescuers grove, a field of empty chairs, and a reflection pool

Each is like a space that invites into a different part of memory
The field of empty chairs faces the survivor tree and rescuers grove across the reflecting pool
The 168 chairs are of different sizes, 19 of them are child-sized
To represent the children that died during the tragedy
At either end of the reflecting pool stand two gateways, with columns
The eastern gate shows 9:01 before the bomb struck
The western gate shows 9:03 when the city was changed forever
Each of them setting the finitude of the space, its edges
What strikes me about the Oklahoma City outdoor memorial is that it gives space for wandering
In grief, in memory, in good-byes and loss we need space to wander
Sometimes we need to sit with the emptiness we feel amidst a field of empty chairs
Other times there is a sense of reflection, wistful and longing, as we gaze into a pool
Sometimes we remember moments of beauty and love, of being together
And we touch hope and longing, like a survivor's tree
What struck me about the Oklahoma City Outdoor Memorial was how
Incredible a metaphor it is for saying good-bye and remembering well
The way the space wanders, offers us different ways of connecting to the memory
Different ways of bridging to the past, space for a range of feelings
It does not minimize or try to control...it opens and gives space
One of the ways in which we find healing when we have to say good-bye
Is to allow our relationship with what we have lost to shift and change
Into something else. Something that honors what was there before

Not the same as it was. That moment is gone

But something new. A good good-bye is about sensing

Not making sense as in explaining or rationalizing

Which is what some sayings or platitudes are designed to do

To explain.

No, we need to sense the loss as in touch it, hold it, connect to it, know it

That is how we say good-bye well

There is a phrase in Celtic spirituality that comes to mind

It is called “Anam Cara”

Soul-Friendship

To be with each other openly, with love, and to care for each other's souls

Anam Cara is to engage in that open space, flowing between the empty chairs

The growing tree, the reflective pool

Leaving space for all that we feel, giving us room to sense it, and to know it

And being with one-another, walking along side in that space

Soul friends

That is saying good-bye well

Saying good-bye with wholeness

Allowing the whole of the space, the whole of the memories, the whole of who we were

What do you know about saying good-bye?

What did you learn in your past? Your family? How do you want to say good-bye well?

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