Finding the Good in Goodbye
The Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year A), May 14, 2017
Church of the Ascension, Chicago
Father Patrick Raymond

Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” - John 14:1-14

A 2011 hit single by the popular singer Beyoncé includes the line, “Thank God I found the good in goodbye.” I doubt that many of us here are big Beyoncé fans, but that one line, at least, is worth pondering. It implies what we all know: not all goodbyes are all good, are they? Many of life’s goodbyes, in fact, are marked by grief or misunderstanding or anger or regret about what was or wasn’t said or done. Sometimes we might find ourselves asking: Where is the good in goodbye?

Any goodbye for any of us can bring to the fore what the spiritual writer Pema Chödrön calls the fundamental ambiguity of being human. In a 2012 essay by that title, she writes, “As human beings we share a tendency to scramble for certainty whenever we realize that everything around us is in flux. In difficult times the stress of trying to find solid ground—something predictable to stand on—seems to intensify. But in truth, the very nature of our existence is forever in flux. Everything keeps changing, whether we’re aware of it or not.” Goodbyes, it seems, are an unavoidable part of being human.

Our human endeavors ‘to find solid ground—something predictable to stand on’ can be seen in the query of St. Philip in today’s gospel passage: “Jesus, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” Can we feel for or in ourselves that for which Philip yearned?

The meaning of the Greek word translated here as satisfied is a little hard to get to, in part because the word is only used twice in the New Testament. But do we need the exact translation? To be satisfied meant certainty. He wanted the divine revelation that would remove all doubt. No more having to guess and question things. No more pain of disappointed expectations or loss or unpleasant goodbyes.

Jesus answers Philip’s inquiry, but maybe not in the way that Philip hoped or expected. “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?” I wonder if there are times that Jesus would like to ask that same question to you or me. “Have I been with you all this time, and you still do not know me?”

The answers of Jesus to Philip, and the answer he gives earlier in this passage to Thomas, are cornerstone texts on which whole theologies have been built and on which generations of Christians have built their faith and found comfort. We should not, however, lose sight of the
honesty and courage of Thomas and Philip in recognizing and naming their questions. They are stand-ins for us in our earthly pilgrimages, in our own sense that we haven’t yet arrived, in our own yearning to be ‘satisfied.’

Stepping back from the few verses of dialog with Philip, we can confidently say that Jesus was well aware of the impermanence of life and the potency of goodbyes. This is particularly emphasized in the Gospel of John, where a continuous five chapter section is devoted to how Jesus, on the night before he died for us, says goodbye to his inner circle of followers and friends.

This five chapter section begins with the foot washing that we heard about and memorialized on Maundy Thursday. The goodbye of Jesus is more than words. It begins with action, and it is a ritual action that is meant to define and redefine relationship, and to bring to the fore what is of most enduring importance and value in those relationships. This example of Jesus may lead us to look for ways to be more intentional about the rituals or symbols that we bring to our most important goodbyes.

The five-chapter goodbye of Jesus in John’s gospel ends with what we now call the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus, in Chapter 17. In that prayer he entrusts all to God, his heavenly Father. He offers up and prays for not only himself but those with whom he has most closely shared his life and mission. This prayer addresses the ‘fundamental ambiguity’ of being on which Pema Chödrön and many great religious writers before her have focused. The High Priestly Prayer of Jesus implicitly acknowledges the limitations of our human condition and capacities and understanding. Jesus gives us an example: when all has been said and done, all is entrusted to the heavenly Father.

In between the foot washing and the High Priestly prayer is a section of John’s gospel, more than three chapters long, that we call the Farewell Discourse. It’s Jesus’ long goodbye. He is preparing his closest followers and friends – and he is preparing us – for his bodily absence and for his spiritual presence that will follow his death, resurrection and Ascension. In fact we read from this Farewell Discourse both this morning and next Sunday in anticipation of Ascension Day. We also read these texts in order to take a look at our own perceptions of goodbye and our own understanding of how Jesus, though gone, remains with us.

We already briefly looked at the exchange between Philip and Jesus in this Farewell Discourse, and perhaps we should also briefly examine the prior exchange between Thomas and Jesus. Thomas, also, is experiencing anxiety and uncertainty. “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” To which Jesus makes the well-known response, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Sometimes, I admit, I think of this teaching as a run-for-cover theological battleground about the exclusive divinity of Jesus. Worthy or interesting to some as that question may be for some of us, we should not lose sight of the context. These words of Jesus are a personal and pastoral response directed to the apparent fear and uncertainty of Thomas. It may also be read as a personal and pastoral response that Jesus directs to the fear and uncertainty that any of us feel. “I am the way and the truth and the life.” In what way is Jesus seeking to be or show a way forward in our uncertainties and losses? What is the truth of our hearts in Christ to which we may need to cling in the context of our own questions or goodbyes or temptations or distractions? Can we even begin to imagine a manifestation of resurrection life that may be waiting for us on the other side of a troubling goodbye or a death?

The example and teachings of Jesus – and of Thomas and Philip – in John’s gospel invite you and me to courageously see and name and contemplate our own goodbyes uncertainties. In so doing, we may hear in some new way, how Jesus is inviting us again to seek and find our way, our truth and our life in him. And in so doing, we may find ourselves singing, or at least saying, “Thank God I found the good in goodbye.”

1 The Fundamental Ambiguity of Being Human, Tricycle Magazine, Fall 2012.