

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Paul Eldred

May 14th, 2017

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Goodbyes are a difficult thing for me. Knowing it may be a while until I see friends and loved ones again is never easy.

In my family, it's also not uncommon for goodbyes to last close a really long time – once we start saying goodbye, we keep talking and talking. It sometimes takes three or four goodbyes before someone finally leaves. I remember the first time Ryan experienced this phenomena after dinner at my aunt's house. It was late and we needed to head home, so I said, "Well I guess we should get going." Everyone agreed – we said goodbye and Ryan got up and put his coat on. Then my cousin started another conversation. About fifteen minutes later, I again said it was time to go with a second round of goodbyes. Ryan moved closer to the door as someone else started yet another conversation. Exasperated, Ryan finally sat down again and we were there for another twenty minutes. Finally, the third time took and we left about 45 minutes after Ryan had first put on his coat. As we got in the car, Ryan asked

why it took so long to leave – I looked at him confused and laughed, “That’s just how my family says goodbye!”

Well, here we are and I have to say goodbye to all of you wonderful saints of God at Wicker Park Lutheran Church. But don’t worry, I promised Pastor Jason my sermon would not be 45 minutes long. But I do want to use this opportunity to thank you all. Thank you for welcoming me into this amazing community. Thank you for partnering with Pastor Jason, Jordan, Mary, and myself in the ministry God has called all of us to. Thank you for making a commitment to the education of future rostered leaders in our Church both from me and from the future pastors and deacons at LSTC and especially those talented students who will join you here this fall. And most of all, thank you for being you – for your smiles and your gifts, for your love and support, and for living into your identity as what 1 Peter calls a royal priesthood – children of God and saints of the Church.

Unfortunately, goodbyes are part of life. I’m preparing to say goodbye to my home of three years, a city that has excited and intrigued me, and a seminary community that has shaped me into who I am as a pastoral leader, as I graduate and get ready to move back to a home across the country – to which I have also said goodbye before. We say goodbye to friends and coworkers, communities and homes, and a difficult goodbye each time we bury someone we love and commend them into God’s care. But I also try to trust that it is

never a true goodbye – that our love and connection can span time and space as we hold each other in the love of Christ that unites us into one body.

And with all the goodbyes today – we read part of Jesus’ goodbye message to his disciples in the Gospel of John. I would like to point out that this is also a lengthy goodbye – this farewell discourse takes up five chapters in John’s Gospel! A lot longer than 45 minutes! With all this talk about Jesus going back to God and making dwelling places for us, perhaps it’s not surprising that most of my experience with this text has been at funerals. And while it’s totally correct and valid way to read this, that Jesus is going to prepare a place for us when we die, there is so much more than that as well.

Jesus is seeing the sadness in his friends’ eyes as he tells them he must leave them and he is preparing them for life when he is not there. He’s reminding the disciples that they know how to live without him there. Through his life, love, and ministry, he has taught these people to follow his example and he empowers them to live out this compassion for all people. Through the cross, they know what it means to demonstrate self-giving love. Jesus promises them that even though he is going away, he is not abandoning them and promises them that through his love, they have already witnessed the fullness of God’s presence among them.

When Thomas asks Jesus how the disciples can follow him, Jesus replies with the famous line, “I AM the way, and the truth, and the life. No one

comes to the Father except through me.” Unfortunately, these words have often been used to mean that only Christians are going to heaven – that unless you accept Jesus as your savior, you’re not getting one of these dwelling places after you die. But these are Jesus’ words of promise and hope for his friends. He’s telling them that through his example they have seen God. Through his love and healing and teaching and dying and rising, the disciples have come closer to their Creator.

Jesus reminds us that this whole discipleship thing is more than just what happens when we die – it’s about living life following Jesus’ example. That if we live into Jesus’ love we will partner with God to do amazing things in the world here and now God draws us closer in love. That if we live into Christ’s resurrection from the dead, we will join with him in putting to death the areas of violence and destruction we see in the world around us as God’s reign expands on earth. That if we shelter the homeless, feed the hungry, and give sanctuary to the oppressed, we will join with Christ as he builds dwelling places for all people. Because if we only think about our heavenly home as something that happens after we die, we lose the chance to join with Christ in building the Kingdom of God on earth – the Kingdom that is built on expansive love, boundless compassion, and unending peace. The Kingdom that we glimpse in Christ’s life, ministry, death and resurrection – and in this Table set by Christ to

feed all people. Christ has laid the cornerstone for this Kingdom and with him we join in its building.

People of God, through my short time with you I have seen how you have taken on Christ's calling to you to build up the Kingdom. Through opening this building to the neighborhood and community groups like AA, you are building up the Kingdom. By caring for the Earth and creation, you are building up the Kingdom. By becoming a teaching parish for me and for other future leaders of the Church, you are building up the Kingdom. By raising thousands of dollars for ELCA World Hunger and the Interfaith Committee for Detained Immigrants, you are building up the Kingdom. Through feeding hungry bellies with the Night Ministry, you are building up the Kingdom. And through your interfaith work like a community dinner and dialogue with our Muslim siblings, you are building up the Kingdom. You, saints of God, are joining with Christ to build up the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth.

So as I say goodbye, beloved, I leave you with Jesus' words: Trust in God. Trust in Christ. Trust in the love and promises of God and continue to join as we build up the Kingdom of God – God's love made known for all people.