

Sermon Text for February 9, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Deuteronomy 34:7-12, Acts 20:25-38
“Saying Goodbye”

I have served in settings of churches my whole life that have been unique. In Italy where we served you pretty much were a member of church for generations and if you came on then you stayed. When we left we were the ones saying goodbye. It was difficult. In Florida a similar situation as living in Lancaster County where you are not a local until you have been there for four generations and one of your children is married to a Smith, then you are a local. People didn't move much out of that community. So, when we left we said goodbye and it was difficult.

In Russia our time was different, people came and went constantly. A family would stay for two years or three years max and then they would be gone. We had a church full of students so they would leave for the summer and not come back. Every year September would roll around, school would start and then you had to start all over again building up the leaders of the church and the programs of the church. We said goodbye a lot while there to a lot of good people, not because we left, but because they were leaving.

In my experience in all of this I learned a basic truth about people and about churches, and about leadership in general. I learned in churches that no one is indispensable, from the pastor to the person working behind the scenes. I have seen God provide miraculously when I was nervous in August when a mover and shaker in the church was staying in his home country and would not be there for the year and God would provide someone who was better equipped. I know even in this church not that long ago we had some people leave and I know some of us were wondering how will we ever survive. We survive not because we are good, but because God is good and God always, always provides the right person at the right time.

I have learned that I am irreplaceable, I have learned that every single person is irreplaceable so saying goodbye is something that I don't like, I've never like it, but it never creates an anxiety in me of wondering how people will survive without me, that is narcissism, that is pride. The Scripture that we are reading today contains a model for leadership built around a succession plan which allows us to say goodbye without fearing that what we have built is a house of cards which will come crashing down if the right person isn't in place. This is true for our church, but it is also true in our relationship with Jesus. Our relationship with our Savior is not dependent on any person except God and God alone.

READ SCRIPTURE

There is no one in the Old Testament more important than Moses. He was considered the father of the Law. Look at the first Scripture in Deuteronomy where he is described as someone who knew God face to face. Vs.11 states that he was unequalled for everything that he did for Israel. Vs.10 states that never has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses. He was irreplaceable in the sight of many, the person who was coming after him had some pretty big shoes to fill. That person was Joshua, how would you like to take the position of the person who was the most admired in Israelite history, knowing it at the time? So saying goodbye to Moses was potentially also an act of wondering will we survive?

We find a hint in Deuteronomy that Joshua has all that he needs in order to succeed Moses and it is because of something that Moses did for him while he was still alive. Look at vs.9 where we see that Moses had laid his hands on him which allowed Joshua to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This act of leadership of giving himself up to Joshua, this act of emptying himself before the people so that they could see that Joshua was going to take the reins was absolutely crucial to the success and the life of Israel going forward.

The people were able to see this and recognize that we are saying goodbye to Moses and we love him, but we are going to be okay. The person who comes next isn't Moses, but God is on his side and that is all that we need to know. We also see in Joshua 1 the words of God in vs. 5-6: As I was with Moses so I will be with you. Be strong and courageous. At this point not only did the people know that God was with Joshua but Moses when before he passed away was able to know that this people in whom he had poured so much time and had given so much of his life to, would be okay. Moses had laid the foundation well so that the next person could build on it.

This simple concept is more important than you think. There are some people who go through life thinking that they are irreplaceable so they build things up not so that the next person can build on the foundation that was built, but rather only the person in power and the person currently leading is able to lead and then when they are gone nothing is left as a foundation. It has all been torn down. That is a sign of someone who is not in God's will and someone that Paul warns about when he says goodbye to the people who are surrounding him as he says he will never see them again. Keep in mind Moses was able to say goodbye knowing that it was God who carried the future.

When we turn to our Acts Scripture we find Paul on his farewell tour. He is saying goodbye to the elders of one of his favorite churches in Ephesus. He gathers them together in a

town called Miletus as he is making his way back to Jerusalem. He tells them in 25 that he will not see them again. So this is final, he is saying goodbye. He reminds them of how he has equipped them and that when he is gone they are perfectly equipped to carry on the work without him. He basically is telling them in his goodbye, I am not indispensable. I have worked to ensure that you are able to carry on the work even without me in your midst.

Jesus does the same thing to his disciples at his ascension as he tells them to go out into the ends of the world baptizing, teaching, doing good works because I have commanded you. A basic common thread in Christian leadership is that you leave behind you a situation where the person who comes after you can build upon what you have done. Remember Jesus when he describes true leadership to his disciples by washing their feet? True leadership is being able to be a servant to others. Everything else is pride. When you gather with people to pray and you talk about yourself and how life has been unfair to you, that isn't prayer, that is narcissism. Jesus gives us a different example, Paul here in this Scripture gives us a different example.

Paul tells them that he has prepared them by preaching to them the full Gospel. So he can say goodbye with a clear conscience. He warns them of those who will come into the community, into the church who will only be seeking to divide the church with false teachings. He calls them wolves. My brother was out walking his dog in upstate New York in a park and he saw a young coyote ahead of him on the trail. His dog took off after the coyote who seemed to be playfully leading him away from my brother. My brother knew that this is what they do, they lead the weak ones away from the flock and then pounce on them.

Paul uses the example of a wolf because he knew that the church is a place where those who are new to their faith or not as strong in their faith will believe anything that people say either as authority even if it is intended not to build up but to tear down. For Paul the litmus test for whether we should pay attention to something is does it reflect the person of Jesus? Or does it focus on building up the individual and their need for power and complete control. Or does it, as Paul states, reflect the ideal of it is better to give than it is to receive. Is a leader able to be a servant to those around him, or does the image of a servant run completely contrary to whom that leader may be?

Interestingly even though Paul points to the ideal of a servant he does use himself as an example. Who do we have today as examples of what it means to be a Christian leader? Examples of holy living and dying make a great difference to the church in every age, and especially in this age. It seems like the court evangelicals of today have run contrary to the prophets of the Old Testament who demanded repentance from a nation and its leaders and rarely if ever were used to support the actions of the king of Israel.

If we can't point to Christian who have lived their lives righteously or are willing to take a stand for servant leadership like Mark Galli then we are only left with people like Franklin Graham, or Robert Jeffress, or Jerry Falwell, or Paula White, and we as a church have very little preach. The world is right in assuming that if the Gospel of Jesus is true it will be shown in the lives of the people who follow Jesus. That's us. Leadership in the church has to be matched with a life and a lifestyle that is consistent. If my life isn't consistent with my calling and my teaching, I would want you to call me out on it and when you do I pray and I hope that I have the servant leadership to repent, ask for forgiveness, and to continue to seek God's face and approval. That is how you lead. I would never use my life as an example as Paul does here, but by default as pastor of this church I would be naïve to think that my life isn't, or shouldn't be an example.

We looked at today two leaders who said goodbye to their community and they were able to do it because they were servant leaders. Moses had laid his hands on Joshua to equip him with all that he needed in order to get the job done. He had laid the foundation in such a way that Joshua was able to build upon it. Paul tells the leaders of the church of Ephesus that he has equipped them with all that they need. He reminds them of what it takes to be a leader, that when he isn't around, that they have to be reminded to lead by being servant first.

There is a marked difference between how the world marks leadership and how the church marks leadership. The world is narcissistic the church is directed to Jesus. I will leave you with the words of one who like Moses was allowed to look over the mountainside into the promised land and so was relieved knowing that God had the future laid out and that it was no longer up to him to see that it would take place.

On his last speech the day before he was killed in Memphis MLK said the following: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've seen the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine Eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

That's leadership. Being able to say goodbye even knowing that your life might be asked, but at least you have laid the groundwork for those who come next.