

A sermon by the Rev. Wendy DeFoe Lane for 7 Easter
May 4, 2008; The Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, Illinois
Year A; Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:2-14-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

How do you say good-bye?

For almost two years now, I have had the honor and privilege to serve on the Board of Trustees for Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, the Episcopal institution that formed me and countless others for ordained leadership in the church. The professors there helped shape my theology, find my preaching voice and hone my leadership and pastoral care skills.....the community of students, faculty and staff affirmed my call to ministry and became the center of my prayer and worship life during the three years I was a student there. It was an idyllic time in my life.....and I am grateful for the opportunity and for the excellent formation.

Yet, as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of Seabury, the board of trustees has declared financial exigency and we must seek a new mission and ministry for the seminary in this quickly changing 21st century culture and church.....our task as leaders is to discern fresh ways of serving the church and the needs of those now training for ministry..... and to begin that exciting process, it is necessary to say goodbye to the old model of offering theological education. This news has been devastating to the Seabury community and beyond.....our hearts are breaking for what has been, so I ask for your prayers as we commit to the current students and dream new dreams for adapting to the needs of today's church for theologically trained leaders, not the church of thirty or forty years ago.

How do you say good-bye?

In the gospel passage from John this morning, Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples. In his final hours in their company at the Last Supper, Jesus reassures his friends that he must leave them but that he will go and prepare a place for them.....and that he will return and take them to him.....the very last thing that Jesus does before his betrayal in the Garden at Gethsemane and his cruel suffering and death by crucifixion is to pray for his disciples. And Jesus prays, not only for them, but for all who believe in him "through his word."

The last thing Jesus does is to pray for us, too, because we number among those who believe in him "through his word." He prays that we might remember that God loves us as much as God loves Jesus, God's only and eternal son.

Jesus also prays this prayer because he is aware that we as well as his first disciples live in a dangerous, frightening, and conflicted world. He knows that they and we are going to have to live and minister in the

so called “in between time” – that time between Christ’s own life, death and resurrection until his coming again – in glory. The disciples would have to say goodbye to their rabbi, friend and Lord and to face a period of time in which they must wait for his promise to be fulfilled.....for some event in the future.

Living between times, living between occasions in which all of our hearts, minds and energy are absorbed in something significant and fruitful.....can be quite wonderful. It can be for us a pause that refreshes.....a time in which we gain strength, perspective, grace.....a time in which we may quietly grow in our faith and prepare for that which will come next.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims that “those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up on wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

But living in the times between, in those times between one phase of our lives and the next, between one job and another.....between the time when the first child has married and the last has yet to enter school.....between the death or divorce of one relationship and the birth of another.....between rounds of chemotherapy or radiation.....between the period when we have to say goodbye to someone we love.....a spouse, a mentor, a friend.....and have yet to say welcome to another.....these times can be difficult if we don’t know how to wait, or if we don’t have the energy or even the interest to live in that space.

I believe that God calls us to remember that the times in between.....those time when we are meant to wait..... are meant to be active times.....not passive.....times in which we are meant to work at the task at hand of loving God with all our hearts, souls, strength and minds and loving our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 20:27).....we are called to live now in the way God intends for us.....as lovers of God and our neighbors.....rather than wait for what’s coming next on our journey.

We are called to keep connected to God and to each other.....in prayer, in worship and in fellowship. We are called to welcome the stranger in our midst, to feed the poor and to reach out to those in our community and beyond who are suffering. We are called to celebrate the Good News of God in Christ and to be included in the witness to the living gospel.

We are called to be Christ’s disciple in our lives, in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our communities, in our world, here and now. And as I wade ever deeper into my ministry as a priest, I am more and more convinced that the Kingdom of God is here and now and that it is our deep calling to be Christ’s hands and heart in the world.....to come alive in his holy name!

The theologian Howard Thurman has written: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go out and do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

How you do say goodbye?

This has been a season of incredible loss for this parish family. Many of you have lost a spouse, a sibling, a parent, a friend, or a colleague to the throes of death.....and you are bereft. Others have lost a way of life through the trauma of illness or a devastating diagnosis.....while others have been downsized at the firm.....losing a way of life that was comfortable and safe. Others have been through the valley of the shadow through separation or divorce.....still others through addiction or domestic violence. Some of you may scoff at living in that in between time.....it's just too difficult and it takes too much energy. Some of you may have lost your faith and trust in a loving God.....and have no voice or stomach for prayer.....even a lament to God. If that is so, I would like to share a story with you! We have recently had a health crisis in my own family and it was an agonizing time for all of us.....from the diagnosis through the surgical procedures, through the horrible waiting.....to the sleepless nights and the uncertain days.....we lived in that in between time and it was so, so difficult. I discovered during that time that I had no voice to pray.....had absolutely nothing to say to the God who loves me beyond measure and time.....I was too paralyzed to reach out.....and made my shameful confession to Frances Murchison, one of the many archangels in this parish. Her response, "Don't worry about it, honey.....we've got you covered.....when you can't pray, the community prays in your name." With thanks to Frances and to all of you who are willing enough and generous enough to pray in the name of any of us in this parish who are going through the valley of the shadow.....I tell you now, we are grateful.....and we ask that you keep praying until we find our own voices.....our own way to reach out to Jesus, who was generous enough and loving enough and, let's face it, brave enough to pray for us as his last act of ministry, compassion, healing.. We understand that when Jesus prayed to God to "protect" his followers, he wasn't asking God to exempt us from our difficulties or make us immune to suffering.....I believe his prayer was a promise to be with us in our own suffering and to give us the will and courage to persevere. And he would know better than anyone that you have to go through the cross to find your way to Easter morning.

And so, my friends, on this Seventh Sunday of Easter, as we stand between our observance of the Ascension of our Savior Jesus Christ to God's right hand and the Day of Pentecost, when we will receive God's gift of the Holy Spirit, we as holy members of God's family can gladly claim solidarity with the original disciples and may rest in the certainty that as Jesus prays for them, he also intercedes for us.....thanks be to God and Alleluia! Amen.