



## ***Gather 'Round the Table: Clearing the Table***

*January 31, 2016 | Rev. Taylor Fuerst*

Church family, It was announced earlier this week that I will be leaving Westbury UMC and Houston in June of this year. My husband, Brad, is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Having served for 8 and a half years as the Lutheran Campus Pastor to Rice and University of Houston, Brad has now accepted a call to serve as the Pastor to the Lutheran Campus Ministry for the University of Texas at Austin. We are delighted for such clarity about Brad's call, but we are heartbroken that it means I will leave Westbury so soon.

You are the congregation that has loved me into being a Pastor, and my ministry going forward will always bear the mark of your influence on me. Together we have navigated times of joy and times of crisis, in your lives, in my family's life, and in the community. We have learned more about who we are, as individuals and as a congregation, and we have discerned even more how God is calling us to be people of faith in today's world. Now, I have deep trust that God is calling another Pastor to serve, and that God will surprise us again as the story of God's love and God's kingdom continue to unfold here.

While this week's news comes as a surprise and a shock, I want to remind you that this is only the beginning of a process. I still have nearly five more months to experience the joy and honor of being your pastor, so let's remember that today is not the day we say goodbye. There is much ministry to do; God is at work your lives and the lives of people in this community! Some of that ministry will involve preparations for you to welcome a new pastor. I have already begun meeting with our leaders to plan for a smooth transition, to take the next steps in our Capital and Building campaigns, and to sustain the momentum of our strategic goals and vision. We have a good long time for this transition, and you can trust that God has already raised up strong lay leadership to carry us through to a new season. A little later, you'll have a chance to hear from one of those leaders, Ike Watkins, who is chair of our Staff-Parish Relations Committee. Ike will speak about this transition and what you can expect in the months to come.

In the meantime, I plan to relish these last few months with you. Brad will begin his work in Austin on February 21st, and with his work in Houston complete, he and our children will be free to join us here at Westbury for worship each week. This will be a special treat for our family to be in the same church on Sundays, though I have warned Brad that some of you may have some choice words for him when he arrives. :)

Now, friends, we gather up this news along with all of the many things going on in each of our lives, we gather all of it up as we do every week and we take it to God's word, seeking wisdom, guidance, and God's presence in our midst.

Let's hear God's word through Paul from Second Corinthians 13, verses 11 through 13. I'll read it first in the Paraphrase called The Message, and then in the New Revised Standard Version:

*II Corinthians 13: <sup>11-13</sup> And that's about it, friends. Be cheerful. Keep things in good repair. Keep your spirits up. Think in harmony. Be agreeable. Do all that, and the God of love and peace will be with you for sure. Greet one another with a holy embrace. All the brothers and sisters here say hello.<sup>14</sup> The amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of God, the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you.*

And again from the NRSV:

*<sup>11</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. <sup>12</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. <sup>13</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*

*The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Last fall, as many of you know, I had the privilege of traveling to Scotland and England with a group of pastors, and exploring what Christian life and the church are like in a place more secular than our home here in the American South. And we began that journey by traveling to the Isle of Iona, of the western coast of Scotland. We flew to Glasgow, took a bus to Oban, then traveled by boat to the Isle of Mull, and then across the Isle of Mull on a bus, and finally another ferry to Iona. It's a tiny island, about 3 miles long and a mile-and-a-half wide. I've spoken of it before as a thin space, a place where the veil between heaven and earth is tissue-thin, where God's presence seems palpable in a way that is difficult to find in our ordinary lives and places.

But what I didn't tell you is that the Isle of Iona is home to the Iona Community, which is an ecumenical group of Christians dispersed all over the world, who together follow a rule of life and who run three centres on the Island where Christians come and go for a pilgrimage,

each for a week at a time throughout the year. A resident group of staff and volunteers live and worship in the Abbey, which was built in the 1200s. This group welcomes new people to their community each week. They live together, eat together, work together, pray and worship together at least twice each day. They form deep relationships with one another as they carry out this unique way of life, work, and worship. And then, at the end of each week, the long-term residents say goodbye to the visitors, and the ferry makes its way back across.

As I was there, it struck me to think that all of these folks come together a week at a time, for the sole purpose of building community--for one week...and then they walk away. It's not a mission trip where they come to build something that will last long after they are gone. It's not a retreat center or a conference center where they come to learn and carry with them some new knowledge or skills that will be useful to them back at home. They simply gather to know and be known; to love and be loved; to come together and let God's spirit ferment in their midst, and then to be sent back out into the world. To welcome...and then to walk away.

Now, put a bookmark there, and let me paint a second picture.

The Hagen family was a military family. They knew what it was to move, and to move, and to move again. Perhaps some of you grew up this way. It was rare that they stayed in one place for even as long as two years. I met them in Brad's and my first year of marriage, when we lived in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he served as the vicar of St. James Lutheran Church. Vicars are seminary interns, and they only remain in their appointment for one year, so I had wondered how well we would really get to know people. How much would folks care to invest in us, knowing we weren't going to be there for the long term, like the pastor who had been there for nearly 10 years. Father James Martin notes in his writing on friendship that the danger is that because people will move, or leave, or even die, you are tempted not to give your heart to people. But this is not what I saw in the Hagen family. In fact, I saw the exact opposite. For the Hagen family, the likelihood of a short stay, the imminent possibility of saying goodbye did not make them shy away from relationships, or keep to themselves; instead, it created an even greater urgency for those relationships. They sunk themselves into life in Fayetteville; they jumped in quickly, and they taught us to do the same thing. They have repeated this pattern everywhere they've lived, diving deep into friendship and community life

in so many places that the map is pock-marked with the Hagen's presence. And now all of those relationships form a web of mutual blessing, stretching all across the country, and even the world.

We are talking this month about hospitality. About what it means to welcome others, to welcome strangers into not just our homes, but our lives, and our church. But today I am asking, what is the connection of hospitality and saying goodbye? What does it mean to bid farewell to a person, a friend, a season, a life? And how do we do that in a way that imitates, or reveals, the hospitality of Christ?

Paul had bid farewell to the Corinthians some time ago. He arrived on their doorstep, proclaiming the news of salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ and offering to baptize, to initiate any Corinthian who would come into this death and new life in Christ. As you can imagine, the relationship was deep. Paul is the one who taught them to love in Christ's name. Together they worked to form Christian community, to build a group of people who would be bound together by the blood of Christ and the water of baptism--out of them was birthed something entirely new--before they were no people, and now they were God's people. It was, quite literally, life-changing work.

By the time Paul wrote the words we read today, he had long since left that community and moved on to start another. He had written them multiple letters, we think at least five letters he wrote to the Corinthians (so if we had all those letters we'd not only have 2 Corinthians, but 3 Corinthians and 4 Corinthians, and 5 Corinthians...but anyway, I digress), so Paul wrote them lots of letters, and he had been back to visit them at least once since his departure. In this letter, Paul is still trying to encourage the Corinthians to hold fast to the faith he has taught them and shown them; he reminds them of his teaching and he reveals his anger that they have let other false teachers and false apostles take hold of their community. But then he ends the letter with the verses we heard today--first he gives them some final directions on how they are to live together, how they are to do life: Be cheerful, put things in good repair, agree with one another, live in peace. And then he concludes it with one of the earliest formulations of the trinity: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

It is in these words that I believe we find the key to saying goodbye in Christian faith. Now, keep in mind that at the time of his writing, the church was nearly 300 years from officially claiming a doctrine of the trinity. And yet, in this blessing, Paul reminds them that the community, the friendship, the love that they share finds its first roots in God. It is the Trinitarian God who has created and sustained the church. God has been the water that has caused them to grow, and the glue that has held them together. Even in the midst of conflict, Paul trusts God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to heal division, to set things aright. And finally, Paul looks to this three-in-one God to bless their lives to come; the Love of God, the Grace of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are non-negotiable. They are the steady overflow of God's life into our lives--like a bowl, or a font, perhaps, steadily overflowing with water running over its sides, grace and love and communion are poured out from God into our lives. It is the glue that binds us together, that creates unity among us. We might prefer to withdraw and protect ourselves, when we know that we will eventually lose those we love through the changes of life, and eventually through death. But in this trinitarian God we are free to jump in with both feet--not to be hardened or protect ourselves from change, but to allow Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to bind us together, to dissolve our boundaries and to unify us, so that somehow we are swept up into God's life, where we are one as Father, Son, and Spirit are one.

But the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the Communion of the Holy Spirit are also blessings that travel--they are constant, but they go with us and with those we love. And because of the constancy of God's love, grace, and communion with us, we are free to receive and to send one another on to new adventures, knowing that God will continue to be with us. And if we have shared in this communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then we find that unity remains, even as we part ways. We have a share in one another's lives, a communion that remains, no matter how far, even when the distance is death.

Tom Long writes that the whole of one's life is an investment in God's future. He says that "Maturity in faith is both the willingness to grasp our vocation when the call comes and then the willingness to let it go and trust the providence of God." In the end, if we are guided by

our faith, then all of our comings and goings are rooted in the promise of this trinitarian God. To say goodbye, to part with a blessing, is to welcome the future. And because God has secured the future, we are freed from fearing it, and so God enables us to welcome it with arms wide open, God enables us to be hospitable to that which is unknown, and to trust God in the midst of it. As Christians, we part with a sense of expectancy--if God was capable of this, if God has done this, then what might God do next? Who might God send into my life, into your life, next? How might this blessing, this unity we have shared and received from one another and from God come to fruition in the next season, in the coming days?

Now indulge me, and hear one more story. It is the story of a church. It's a beautiful church, where love and grace flow freely among people as diverse as the city around it. It's a church where all are welcomed--the old and feeble, the young and vociferous, those who have always believed and those who have always struggled to believe, those who speak many languages and those who understand only by the Spirit's language, those who are here to study, those who are here to serve, those who don't quite know why they are here, the laity, and a long string of pastors. All are welcomed and quickly find their place in this koinonia, this fellowship of the Spirit. And all who leave this church, every Sunday, depart with a blessing, taking a piece of this community with them out into the world, delivering to others what they have found here: the Grace, Love, and Fellowship of God. Let it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

**Amen.**

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