

“Saying Goodbye”

Sunday, June 5, 2011

By Rev. Elizabeth Denham Thompson

Scripture Reference: Acts: 1:1-14

Ascension Sunday

Movies are famous because of how they depict endings, and by what meaning is imparted in the last words exchanged or spoken.

Remember these?

- ☼ “Rosebud” – it is actually the first word of the movie *Citizen Kane* (1941), but is spoken on his deathbed. And the last line of the film? “Throw away that junk.”

Or remember ...

- ☼ “Here’s looking at you, kid.” (Casablanca, 1942), as Rick ends one relationship but then turns and says to another one ...
- ☼ “Louis, this looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” (Casablanca)

Then there’s Rhett Butler (*Gone With the Wind*, 1939)...

- ☼ “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”
- ☼ And Scarlett’s dysfunctional response? - “Tara!...Home. I'll go home, and I'll think of some way to get him back! After all, tomorrow is another day.”

Or what about the mundane, yet tender intergenerational responses:

- ☼ "Grandpa, maybe you could come over and read it again to me tomorrow."
- "As you wish." (*Princess Bride*, 1987)

Then there is the ending that acknowledges the changes in perspectives -

- ☼ “Oh, but anyway, Toto, we’re home! Home! And this is my room - and you’re all here! And I’m not gonna leave here ever, ever again because I love you all! - And oh, Auntie Em, there’s no place like home.” (*Wizard of Oz*, 1939)

Or the horrific realizations to close a scene that change the character forever such as the disclosure -

- ☼ “Luke, I am your father.” (*Empire Strikes Back*, 1980)

And we have the famous last words that are often used in the beginning as well to launch new adventures -

- ☼ "Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship *Enterprise*. Her ongoing mission, to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life-forms and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before." (Star Trek movies, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1986, 1991, 2009)

Finally, we have the scene that is almost parallel to today’s scripture passage, the character ascending into the clouds as one of the faithful followers looks up, and says,

- ☼ "Goodbye, Mary Poppins. Don't stay away too long." (*Mary Poppins*, 1964)

In today's scripture, Jesus bids his final goodbye to his disciples. It is not the first time he has said goodbye to them – after all he has left them to go off into the wilderness, or on the lake in a boat, or to grieve the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. He has left them to go pray, including in the garden of Gethsemane when he would have preferred to have company. And he has had the ultimate goodbye – death. They watched him die and grieved the loss of their friend and the dreams he inspired. But each time, including after death, he returned to them.

So I can understand why they still don't get it. Each time he has returned ... and quickly ... even after death. So when he tells them that this is final, that he is going away and won't be returning ... that only "the Father knows the time and circumstances", they just don't quite believe him. And this is borne out with how his followers react for the next generation or two or three or thirteen or several hundred generations later! Last week Eric in his sermon focused on that desire and its long tendrils that still affect us, most recently in Harold Camping's prediction that the rapture would come on May 21st, but now may be October 21st.

So rather than focus on the disciple's confusion about when he would return, I want to focus on two things: the process of endings or goodbyes, and what is the meaning of Jesus' last words to his friends in his final goodbye. How are we to understand them and respond to them today?

So first, how do we understand endings? In William Bridges' series of management books¹ on organizational transitions, he identifies three overlapping experiences or phases which are continuously occurring all the time. The 3 are Endings, Beginnings, and what he calls The Neutral Zone, which sandwiches between the other two. One is always growing into its full moon phase, while the others wax and wane depending on where we are in the transition process, but all 3 are always happening simultaneously.

So when we are going through a time of transition, we have to first acknowledge what is Ending – to grieve what is being lost and/or celebrate what is finishing. We may be relieved that it is ending or have regrets about what didn't happen. Few endings are pure or simple and this complexity affects our acceptance, especially if we didn't choose it and it is being forced upon us

like when Luke Skywalker hears that Darth Vader is his father. Even if the ending is of our choosing, or is appropriate by our standards, such as graduation or ending a job that no longer suits us - such as Mary Poppins' realization that her work with the Banks Family is completed, we may feel betrayed that our nostalgia for what was, rests alongside our anticipation for what is to come. In our realization we may cut-off like Rhett Butler or we may turn, like Scarlett O'Hara, to our desire to return home because we insanely think maybe it will be different next time.

But if something is ending then by necessity it means that simultaneously something else is beginning – a new season of the year, a new relationship, or a new status as widowed, partnered or divorced. The new status may be a new job title or it may be the title “unemployed” or retired. It may be the category of cancer patient or cancer survivor, or maybe even cancer thriver. There are possibilities on the horizon. So like Rick in *Casablanca*, we can turn from the relationship we lost to the new one forming. But as with endings, the beginnings are almost never pure or simple. Instead they, too, are complex and are layered with levels of joy and fear, wonder and angst.

And sandwiched in between these two experiences of endings and beginnings, is the experience Bridges calls The Neutral Zone. Neutral because there is no judgment attached to it, but it is far from being a calm or serene zone. For it is here that chaos happens as what was (i.e. the ending) is unraveling and the structure and routine that anchored us (whether we liked it or not) is being destroyed. As with Dorothy who is caught up by a tornado and has to survive the ordeals of Oz, we face the unknown without guarantee of finding our way home. We often yearn to return to what we have known, or even unconsciously attempt to recreate it, even if we say we didn't like it, because we at least know what to expect in those circumstances. We know how to operate and behave and survive. And if it was something that we did like, where we felt appreciated or supported or successful, the stronger we want to hold on to it and the higher our anxiety grows at the thought of leaving it behind.

But Bridges goes on to say that the neutral zone is also the place where creativity and new opportunities and freedom to move in different ways are born. Because the old way cannot hold,

new vision and new energy draw us into a new future. To be able to move into the beginning that is forming however, we must be able to live in the anxiety that is a key element in the primordial soup of unknowingness. We have to be open to serendipitous undertakings creating adaptive and flexible new structures that will steady us and support us in the beginning that is taking shape around and within us. So finally Dorothy embraces the new understanding of what is “home.”

In one of his later, and much more personal works called *The Way of Transition*ⁱⁱ, Bridges writes about his personal experience with his wife’s illness and death that was especially bitter because they had finally worked through the ramifications of her having had an affair, and were growing stronger in their marriage. Although a major transition was occurring, he writes poignantly about the multitude of mini (M-I-N-I) transitions that occurred daily. He and his wife began to appreciate the moment-by-moment mundane activities knowing this may be the last time it may happen. He reflects that it is how we learn to navigate the mini-transitions in our lives that prepares us for how we navigate the larger, major transitions in life. And so, as with *Princess Bride*, the response, “As you wish” is a daily mundane, but transformational response to the little things that ultimately lead to transformation in big ways.

With this as a background, we now return to the ascension scene, where we know this really IS Jesus’ last goodbye with his disciples. And he is giving final instructions, final words, final promises to them so that they will be able to move through the ending, through the neutral zone, and await with hope the beginning that is coming. It is not a bitter, private misunderstood word like Citizen Kane’s “rosebud.” Instead Jesus is giving public instructions for the rest of time, although they – and we - can’t always comprehend it. Like the various movie endings, Jesus’ final words tell a story in and of themselves.

As with the changing crews, captains, even actual ships of Starship Enterprise, Jesus’ last words call us to a mission that is both an ending statement AND a call for what is coming ahead, and the mission is for all who sign up, not just for the original disciples. Jesus’ last words are really a declarative statement ... “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” These words are often used as the basis in traditional theology as the

command for evangelism. Yes, the 10-letter “E” word that progressive Christians shudder at when mentioned! But really, this is our own way of getting stuck in old paradigms and refusing to move into the neutral zone that transforms us and calls us to new ways of being in the world.

In the 1950’s and 60’s, a Southern Baptist minister read the scriptures, including these words and decided to launch a new paradigm of how this is acted out in the world. Clarence Jordan took it upon himself to create a racially integrated living community in rural Georgia at the height of segregation in the south. Koinonia Farms brought a new perspective on what it meant to be witnesses to the Kingdom of God on earth – here and now. Jordan’s sudden death in October of 1969 did not end this witness, as Koinonia Farms became the birthplace for Habitat for Humanity as its founders, Millard & Linda Fuller, lived at Koinonia the year before Jordan’s death. And Jordan’s rendition of the New Testament, *The Cotton Patch Gospel*, still provides fresh ways of hearing the good news.

Apparently Jordan’s favorite topic, as Fuller later recalled, was what Jordan called “the God Movement”. Jordan said that Americans weren’t familiar with ‘kingdoms’ ... but people in this country are familiar with the concept of a movement, such as the women’s liberation movement, the civil rights movement, and so forth. Jordan said God had a movement underway and that God wanted people to be a part of it (from *Cotton Patch Gospel: Luke & Acts*,)ⁱⁱⁱ

Tony Campolo was also influenced by Jordan and in the foreword to the *Luke-Acts Cotton Patch Gospel*, Campolo remembers Jordan speaking about evangelism and the good news.

For (Jordan), evangelism involves proclaiming what God is doing in society right now to bring about justice, liberation, and economic well-being for the oppressed. Jordan {and thus Jesus} called people to participate in this revolutionary transformation of the world. The kingdom of God (is a “God movement” and) is breaking loose in human history; a new social order is being created; and we all are invited to share in what is happening. God, he said, is changing the world that is, into the world that ought to be, and we are invited to live out this good news by becoming involved in breaking down the barriers of racism, sexism, and social class. Evangelism, he contended, requires that we declare the gospel in both word and deed as we join God in working to eliminate poverty, prevent

unjust discrimination, and stand against political tyranny. Evangelism calls us to create the church through which God's will is done here, on earth, as it is in heaven." iv

Yes, each of us is involved daily in our own personal, individual moments of transition and transformation. Some are small and some are major. Some are easier and some are harder, and they are always multi-layered and complex.

And yes, our church is involved in our own corporate, organizational moments of transition and transformation. Again, some are small and some are major. Some we have chosen and some have come in painful ways. How we move through these transitions, including the ones being presented today in the form of budgets, etc. in the called meeting, will affect how we continue to create a new life together.

But overarching all of these are the last words of Jesus that invite us, nay command us, to join the God Movement that is working in the world. Our individual and corporate times of transition are embedded in and flavored by the God Movement that is afoot. Our youth, who today have their own meeting to prepare them for the August mission trip to Venezuela, are living out this embedded experience. Today's movie one-liner is that we are called to transform ourselves, our church, our community, our world into the world that "ought to be." We are called to be transformed in our brokenness, in our clinging to the past, in our forays into the neutral zone, in our endings, so that we can transition into the beginnings that await us.

In the silence that follows, take time to reflect on what transitions are currently in process for you, for our church, for our larger community. What is ending? What beginning awaits us? What fears and joys are being encountered in the Neutral Zone? Whether individual, corporate or world-wide, ask the Holy Spirit to come alongside and accompany us as we enter and live into the creative chaos that is the birthplace of beginnings. You are invited to join the God Movement of transformation.

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- ⁱ Bridges, William. *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. 1991. Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes (25th Anniversary Edition). 2004. Da Capo Press.
- ⁱⁱ Bridges, William. *The Way of Transition: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*. 2001. Perseus Publishing.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jordan, Clarence. *Cotton Patch Gospel: Luke & Acts*. 2004. Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., Introduction by Millard Fuller, p. xiv
- ^{iv} Ibid, Foreword by Tony Campolo, p. viii