

“A Good Goodbye”

A Sermon Delivered by Pastor Justin Schroeder, Young Adult Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on June 4th, 2006

I haven't always been good at goodbyes. As I shared in my final Soulful Sundown service last month, I wasn't really aware of this until a good friend, back in Colorado, said to me, "Hey Schroeder, you never really say goodbye to anyone. You just kind of sneak out of the room." "What do you mean?" I asked. "Well," he replied, "you say, 'See you later, or take care, or after a while, crocodile,' but you never say, 'goodbye.'"

"What?! Yes, I do!" But the more I thought about it, the more I knew he was right. It *is* easier to slip out, to sneak away, to say something other than goodbye, because goodbyes, even little goodbyes, are hard.

As the Rev. Elizabeth Lerner says, "Goodbyes acknowledge endings, and there is so much tied up in endings – attachment, loss, uncertainty, sorrow, loneliness, even fear." Perhaps it's easier to pretend a goodbye isn't happening, than to actually acknowledge something is ending. In some ways, it's no wonder goodbyes are hard. Other than funerals and memorial services, which are extreme goodbyes, our society doesn't give us many ritualized chances to say goodbye when we experience endings, even mundane endings, in our lives.

So this, today, is our ritualized chance to say goodbye to each other. And for a good goodbye, whether it is to children leaving for college, a relationship coming to an end, or a pet that is gone, it is crucial, as Rev. Lerner says, "...to be willing to say goodbye without *cutting out the caring* which makes goodbyes poignant and emotional."

Sometimes the emotions are almost too much, and we hardly know what to do with our caring. So we hide it. I think of my grandfather, my mom's father, who is not a particularly emotional man. In fact, he didn't really know how to do goodbye in words, but I

do remember that his eyes would always moisten over – even if he was talking about something that had nothing to do with goodbye. He may not have known how to express the caring, but at least he didn't cut it all out. Because if something or someone deserves a goodbye, it should be real, and the emotion that's there honors the relationship that's ending.

I am determined to say a “good goodbye,” with lots of caring, because I owe it to all of you, and to myself. We have been through so much together – especially this last month. And over the years, we have laughed, cried, worshipped, and worked together to nurture and change our little corner of the world. By saying a good goodbye, we honor all that we have been through.

I also want to say a good goodbye, because when I left Fort Collins, Colorado, five years ago, I didn't do a good job of saying goodbye, and it made leaving there and settling here very difficult. It became clear to me later that I needed to say “goodbye” to the “Fort Collins Justin.” I couldn't just say, “Take care,” or “See you later.” I had to say “goodbye” to that part of who I was, so that the “Tulsa Justin” could be born. It was not an easy process.

But saying goodbye to anything, whatever it might be, is a way to formally acknowledge the changes taking place. It takes courage, honesty, vulnerability, and clarity to say goodbye well. So today I will say a “good goodbye,” to honor what we've shared, what we're feeling, and what it has meant. And I will open space for the “St. Paul Justin” to be born, as well as for the many new “hellos” that will surely come in our lives.

When done well, hellos and goodbyes can be part of a deep spiritual practice. A good “hello,” when we've really been present and paid attention to what we've just encountered can reawaken us to the mystery and miracle all around us. A good goodbye, although hard and perhaps akin to a miniature death of some sort, can help us stop and see the whole of what we've experienced, lifting to the surface what's been important and meaningful, what has touched and changed us.

For me, despite the sadness of saying goodbye, it is gratitude that has been lifted to the surface. Gratitude for the humor, talent, and music of Rick Fortner and all of our choirs. Gratitude for Kathy Keith, for her strength and talents. Gratitude for Marlin, for believing in me. Gratitude for Panny McElroy, for believing in the vision of a Young Adult and Campus Ministry program. Gratitude for Juliana, my partner, for her patience, wisdom, and love. Gratitude for our entire staff. Gratitude for life itself. And gratitude, most of all, for you who *are* the church, and for all we've shared. You have let me into your lives. You have shared your dreams, sorrows and hopes with me. You have let me be your minister.

One of the things I have most enjoyed is sitting on this chancel and seeing all of you gather in the pews. Sunday after Sunday – many of you sitting in your favorite seats, regular as clock work – defending your territory! But deeper than that, when I sit on this chancel and preach from this pulpit, looking out at you, I also imagine all the other ministers that have sat on this chancel and preached from this pulpit. All the people who have sat in these pews. All the babies that have been dedicated. All the Coming of Age Credos shared, the couples married, the lives remembered, the prayers prayed. And I think of that mighty cloud of witnesses that are a part of our history and tradition.

It is in these memories, that I feel the very spirit of life, of the holy, of the divine. We are not alone in this sanctuary! We stand on the shoulders, and in the presence, of those who came before us. Great ancestors who fought for the freedom to believe as their conscience dictated. Who believed in humankind's potential for great goodness. Who believed that reason could be a part of one's faith. Who believed in creating heaven on earth, and who believed in the unity of a loving God.

There is something remarkable here at All Souls—a promise kept alive, a dream still being dreamt, a vision beckoning us forward. That spirit was alive like never before at our 85th Anniversary Celebration at the Brady Theatre. Three weeks later, that same spirit was

present as we gathered together to mourn the sudden loss of Sienna Lavanhar. And in the midst of that pain, we reaffirmed that love is indeed the spirit of this church and service is its law, and that our lives have meaning and purpose. Through it all, and especially in this process of saying goodbye, I feel an undying gratitude to have been a part of this tradition and church.

It makes me think we should practice saying goodbye more often – monthly, weekly, daily – to the things and people we love. Like in the children’s story, “Goodnight, Moon,” maybe when we go to bed, we should say goodnight and goodbye to everything in the room, everything we love, because there’s no rubber stamp guarantee of a new day, as we know all too well.

A heartfelt goodbye, for the day we’ve had, for the people we’ve known, for dear friends leaving, or for whatever it might be, gives us room to feel, to let go, to find in ourselves a new kind of wholeness, so we can greet the new day with a heartfelt hello. And when that new day comes – when the sun rises again, like a prayer answered, whether or not we prayed – and it is *indeed* a day that God has made – let us rejoice in it, and be glad.

Let us, as the poet, Philip Larkin, says, “Be kind, while there is still time.” And let us remember that when done well, hellos and goodbyes put us directly in touch with our own mortality, and the truth that all life is change. Holding on, letting go. Holding on, letting go.

As poet Mary Oliver says,

*To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
To love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life
depends on it; And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.*

Now is the time for bravery and courage, for naming what is happening. I am leaving. Our time together is ending and I will no longer be one of your ministers. So today, amidst the tears and laughter, I am asking you to let me go.

Not to forget me or to cut off the caring, but to set me free, to launch me, and Juliana. As you set me free, know that what we have shared over the past 5 years – my early fumbblings and fuddlings with Soulful Sundown, the weddings and worship, memorials and meetings, prayers and pastoral visits, all of it – burns brightly in my heart and will light up my future ministry in St. Paul.

At the same time, I let you go. I set you free, not forgetting or cutting off the caring, but opening up space so you can make room in your hearts for Debra Garfinkel and Tamara Lebak's arrival and all the gifts that they bring.

It is time to say goodbye, to acknowledge what we have shared, and all we have done. Remember that goodbye is a benediction of sorts, an act of blessing, which comes from the Latin and means, "saying a good thing." Goodbye means "God be with you." So this morning I say hello, goodbye, may God be with you. May that spirit of love, freedom, and healing be with you today, and in the days to come!

Amen.