

**Sermon, August 7, 2016**

Text: Luke 12:32-40; Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

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**Open Table and Open Doors**

One of the most profound theological statements I have heard came from my sister as I left for my freshman year of college. As my family dropped me off at Queens University of Charlotte, my sister gave me a framed note with a quote from *Peter Pan*. It read, “Never say good-bye, because good-bye means going away, and going away means forgetting.”

Since that day, this saying has remained in my head. It has helped me recognize the importance of moments shared in life. Most importantly, it has taught me to think twice about endings and good-byes, and their meaning/importance in my life (in our lives.)

Today, we find ourselves in a similar place. This summer, we have walked the road of faith together: sharing in fellowship, worshiping our God, studying scripture, and reflecting on life. In these moments, I have come to love each of you dearly. You have made profound impacts on my life that will be woven into the fabric of my life forever!

This theme of being woven together, and connected through common threads, has immersed and re-emerged in our Wednesday morning worship and lectionary study group. As I think about today, the ending of our formal time together comes to mind. I can truly say this place, and each of you, will forever be woven into the fabric of my life. Which brings me back to good-byes.

Our scripture from Hebrews sheds more light on this theme of endings in regard to faith. It reminds us that all creation was formed through the Word of God. Creation, all generations, has clung to that word for centuries. We too, Hebrews implies, have this same great faith. Following these words of encouragement, the author of Hebrews offers stories of persons with great faith.

These stories are not meant for us to look up to these individuals (Abraham and Sarah,) as their primary purpose is to function as a tool of remembrance.

Through our studies this summer of the psalms, epistles, and the Gospel of Luke, a key theme continues to emerge: remembering God's goodness allows us move forward with hope. The letter to the Hebrews is using the same formula. It encourages us, by commending our (the reader's) faith, and then offering us hope through remembering our ancestors.

These summer months have shown me firsthand the great faith of this community and the remarkable individuals that are apart of it. Despite limited financial resources, this community gives generously to those in need. With no current formal pastoral leadership, members of this congregation step up to pave the way forward. In the midst of busy schedules, each of you makes a commitment daily to take time to study scripture, pray, and meet with your mission group.

These are all acts of great faith. They prove (or as the author of Hebrews may say, "are evidence") of great faith. It is this faith in God's provisions that is at the heart of this church community.

Just as Abraham left this earth without seeing the fulfilled promises of God, the time has come for me to leave you. Yet, my departure is not a departure of God's presence and love. God is still in this place, just as God's Word has remained throughout time since the days of Abraham.

Most significantly, God's Word showed up in flesh through Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us the character of God—and as we have seen this summer, the core of that character is love. God loves us, and encourages us to love one another.

Nonetheless, our Gospel narrative is shifting. As Jesus nears the end of his earthly life, he shifts his teaching from how we should act amidst the ordinary days to the way forward during difficult days. He prepares his followers (us) for a time to come—a time that he will not be physically present on earth.

This is where chapter twelve of Luke's gospel picks up. Jesus sees the end coming more clearly, and he is anxious about how his followers will continue without him. So he shares the words that we find in our Gospel text today.

“Do not be afraid, little flock,” Jesus assures his disciples. After settling their fears or worries, he shares a parable with them that expresses the importance of preparedness, (or lack of preparedness.)

Last week, Tony Mecca delivered a beautiful sermon on what it means to sell all you have, and how this community has lived into that command fully. Jesus has taught his disciples that it is important to travel lightly—placing trust in God's hands, rather than accumulating material possessions. This week Jesus is at it again, suggesting that if we place our wealth and trust in God, our wallets will not wear out.

Although it has not been said to me through my time here this summer, I would venture to say that these verses from Luke are the motto of this community. This is because of the faith I have witnessed in each of you.

After easing the anxieties of his disciples, or flock, Jesus then speaks of what it means to have open doors. He uses the imagery of a table. A table such as the one Jesus has set for us today. It is at this table that: we share our story, that we remember together, that we give thanks for the many blessings of life, and that we hope for the future that is to come. However, as Jesus uses this table imagery, he is not only foreshadowing the meal we share today, but is conveying the importance of meals shared in community.

As I was growing up, eating dinner together as a family was always important. On the nights my dad worked late, we would go to eat with him at his store, bringing our family dinner into the company's break room. It was during these shared meals with my family that I felt loved, listened too, and knew what I had to say mattered. More importantly, what I learned most from these nightly meals together was the importance of being fully known. It quickly became apparent that my parents cared deeply for me, and the happenings of my day (granted I recognize this is a blessing in and of itself, as not all children have this opportunity.) In return, I cared about

their days. I wanted to know the highlights of their day, and I wanted to know the hardships as well.

By alluding to the imagery of a household dinner, Jesus is sharing that God cares, too. God cares about our highs and our lows. Or as we often say in youth circles: share your roses, thorns, and stems—a.k.a. the highs, lows, and areas that you have grown. It is not solely about loving, it is also about being fully-loved. A love that we receive from God alone.

Jesus is saying that there will be a shift in his ministry soon. He will die, and we will not know immediately what will be to come. But, what we do have, is a time at the table where we can remember with thanksgiving, and hope in anticipation. Today, we gather at this holy Eucharistic meal to remember with thanksgiving, and hope with anticipation for a brighter future.

Jesus asks that we come as we are to the table, yearning to be fully known—holding nothing back—in order that we may receive the fullness of God's graces towards us. Grace that is not earned, but given freely.

The Jesus that died for us, and rose for us, remains God's Word in this world today. He came to tell us that he does not only care about the sins we carry, he also cares for the community we form.

Jesus has taught us to love the outcast, to provide for the widow and orphan; now Jesus is teaching us to be ready. Keep our eyes open, Jesus reminds us, stay alert and be prepared, for you never know when the Master will return.

As I leave today, I too encourage you to holdfast to these promises of God. God is in our midst, and God is sending a special person to guide you along the journey of faith. So keep your lamps lit, keep your eyes open, always be prepared for the way in which God will show up, for you never know when the time will come, or through whom God will make God's self known.

Witnessing the trust this congregation has in God providing, not only being present in the daily happenings, providing the material needs, is astounding. Yet, each time

this community comes across difficult times—especially financial—God seems to send an angel with a gift. Remember these moments, I encourage you as Jesus would, for it is these moments that provide resounding hope for your future.

However, sometimes these presences are limited, and run out. Yet, Jesus says to his disciples, just because his time is near to an end— God’s love and words will never leave.

So as I debate if it is better to say “good-bye,” or “see you later,” I continue to reflect upon the quote my sister shared with me years ago, alongside the words Jesus reminds us this week. I am not sure that the two are different. Jesus is saying, I will leave you, but I will see you soon. Jesus, here in Luke, is fundamentally agreeing with the theologian, Peter Pan. He never tells his disciples good-bye. Instead he says, “ until I return.”

Yes, Peter Pan (and my sister) had a good point: that good-byes are never good. However, I have come to find that they are important. The times when we depart from those we love, or a change in a relationship occurs, sets the foundation for what is to come. Good-byes provide a firm foundation for new beginnings—new beginnings in which God is at work.

Today is an ending to our formal relationship as pastoral intern and congregation. However, it is not a final good-bye because I will always remember this community. As your life and witness of faith are forever imbedded within my heart, they will travel with me wherever God calls me, reminding me of the great love God has for each of us. Yet, today is a day that we say “until we meet again.”

I do not know where God will call you or me over the next year. But, I do know that God says, “Do not be afraid little flock, for I am with you always.” God is calling us forward into new life, into new beginnings. May we always be open, alert, and listening; eager to follow.

Like Abraham, Sarah, Jesus, and the disciples, we may not fully see the promise of God now, or in our lifetime (for that matter,) but we must cling to the promises

God has made. We must continue on the journey, on the path God has called into being and set before us.

May you always keep the faith God has instilled in you, welcoming all to your table, and through the door opened wide! May God in these acts continually appear through the expected, and the unexpected.

I love you dearly. Thank you for being a part of my journey and letting me be a part of yours! Jesus loves you deeply. No matter how far you wander, remember the good deeds he has done, so that you may always look forward with hopeful anticipation for what is to come!

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.