



## “None of You Will Ever See My Face Again”

Acts 20:17-38

October 8, 2006

Someone wise once said that life is just a series of hellos and goodbyes, and anyone who has mastered the art of saying hello and goodbye has mastered much of life. Of the two, goodbyes are definitely harder. What is the toughest goodbye you have ever had to say? For me, leaving Whitney for her first year of college was a tough goodbye. And for me, the eight months from last fall through this spring were tough as I did more than two dozen funerals. On Wednesday night October 18, Beth Jenkins and I will talk about one of the toughest kinds of goodbyes, when there is a loss associated with pregnancy and delivery, when you have to say goodbye after you’ve just said hello.

Goodbyes are also a frequent part of mission work. This spring I was in the Middle East talking with missionaries one evening. I was there to be of encouragement to them, so I had researched what unique stresses missionaries face. I presented to them what I had learned, and then I said, “Now you know what I know. Tell me what I don’t know.” So they told me: one of the toughest parts of their life and work is the goodbyes they have to say. In that high stress environment, you become very close to your colleagues in a short period of time. But then missionaries receive new assignments, and people move, and you have to say goodbye.

This morning we come to the time in the Book of Acts when Paul had to say goodbye to a group of colleagues in ministry that were very close to him: Acts 20:17-25 (read).

When Paul began the church in Ephesus, he became very close very fast with his new friends there. They had gone through the joy of powerful revivals together. They had gone together through the terror of riots against the new believers. For three years they grew together, cried together, prayed together. In some places in Paul’s letters, you get the feeling that he was a hard-bitten man. But you also get the feeling that something about him that attracted new friends easily. He could be irascible and crusty, but he also cared deeply about relationships. In his own tough way, Paul was a people person.

Paul was returning from his mission in Europe to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. On the way, he stopped to make a final farewell to his friends in Ephesus. Thoughtful readers wonder why Paul didn’t go all the way into town, but stopped over 30 miles away in Miletus and asked the elders to meet him there. I think I know. When a pastor visits any town he once served, it’s impossible to see everyone you would like to see. How do you choose whom to visit from among the many that you have become so close to? So Paul did not go into Ephesus. He asked for the elders to meet him on the beach of Miletus.

It was a gut-wrenching reunion. Paul had no idea what would happen to him in Jerusalem, but if his close calls in most other towns was any guide, trouble waited for him there, too. The city that crucified Jesus was not kind to followers of Jesus. He told his Ephesian friends, “none of you will ever see my face again.”

Then he kneeled down on the beach. His friends kneeled down into the sand with him. They all cried and gave Paul one bear hug after another. “None of you will ever see my face again. This is goodbye.”

Paul was good at making new friends. He was good at hellos. And Paul was good with goodbyes. He made the most of this goodbye. He made his goodbye into an opportunity to give the new leaders of that church one more lesson in leadership in the way of Christ. This was his last chance to give them what they needed to continue the mission Paul had started there. So what would his last word be?

If you had a chance to pass on one final lesson, maybe even one final word, what would that be? During the war in Vietnam, an Air Force pilot was shot down. He had written a letter to his son in case he was shot down, and that letter was delivered. Basically, the letter passed on just one word to the pilot’s son: “Son, the word is INTEGRITY.”

INTEGRITY is the sum of what Paul told his friends when he told them good bye. Integrity in the use of power. Integrity in the proclamation of God’s purpose. Integrity in the use of possessions. INTEGRITY. It means honesty, truthfulness. It means matching your word with your deed.

#### LEADERSHIP: INTEGRITY IN THE USE OF POWER

Paul encouraged the new leaders of the Ephesus church to have integrity in the use of power. He gave himself as an example:

*You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me ... (Acts 20:18-19)*

Paul did not lead from on high with privilege and status. Paul lived among his people. He did not spare himself from their suffering. His sufferings were the hard evidence of what was in his heart. *(Robert W. Wall, New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary on Acts, p. 282)* Paul did not use his personal power to lift himself up, or to force others to do his bidding. Paul used his power to stand by his people, to shepherd the flock of God.

When you and I have a little bit of power, how do we use it? When we have a bit of money, or a bit of status, or a bit of influence, do we use it to protect ourselves from

the suffering that other people endure, or do we use our power to involve ourselves in the sufferings around us? People watch us Christians. They watch us especially in how we use our power. If we choose to use our power to serve, then we witness for the name of Christ which we bear. When Paul told his friends goodbye, he called those new leaders to use their power with integrity.

#### LEADERSHIP: INTEGRITY IN PROCLAMATION

Second, Paul called his friends to have integrity in the proclamation of God's purpose. Here is the example Paul gave:

*I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus. (Acts 20:20-21)*

And later Paul repeated:

*I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. (Acts 20:27)*

Paul preached the whole purpose of God: repentance, faith, trust. Paul's proclamation was a healthy balance of both bad news and good news. He was honest about sin and the need to turn away from it. But Paul was also honest about grace, the gift of God that lifts us up from sin. .

When we proclaim the gospel, is our message a healthy balance of the whole purpose of God? Sometimes our message is stuck on sin. We major on sin so much that we grind our listeners into the ground. But that gives no one hope. Other times our message downplays the reality of sin so much that it is totally unrealistic for the real world.

But Paul preached the whole purpose of God: a balanced and complete and healthy message of repentance, faith, and trust. Paul preached with integrity. And he wanted his new leaders in Ephesus to do the same. When you and I present the whole purpose of God, let's be honest about the bad news in the world and its selfishness and sin. But let's not stop there, but also point to the hope of God's grace that lifts us above sin. That is a healthy and balanced gospel. That is declaring the whole purpose of God. That is proclamation with integrity.

#### LEADERSHIP: INTEGRITY WITH POSSESSIONS

As you read Paul's goodbye, you see that he passed on much more wisdom about leadership and integrity to his friends, but today we'll limit ourselves to three p's: integrity in power, integrity in proclamation, and one more, integrity in possessions. A Christian leader has integrity in how she or he handles possessions. Once more, Paul points to his own example:

*I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*" (Acts 20:33-35)

Paul knew that possessions would be a snare to the new leaders of the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was a very materialistic city (what city isn't?), dedicated to separating tourists from their money, preoccupied with the cycle of production and consumption. It's hard not to get caught up in that race for the good life.

Paul's own example was that he never asked his people for anything, but supported himself. Possessions simply were not on his agenda. His only agenda was the kingdom of God. And in that kingdom, in the words of his Lord, it's happier to give than to get. (This is one beatitude of Jesus that we would never have known had not Paul quoted it here.) Paul lived simply. Paul shared what he had. He was a living parable of freedom from possessions. He was a living example of submission to Christ.

Today, our cities are just as much in thrall to wealth and luxury as Ephesus ever was. On the other hand there is one redeeming side of our society today: people today cannot stand hypocrisy. That combination makes for an interesting attitude toward the church today. Popular opinion loves money, but it hates a church that loves money. As much as our land likes the good life, our population will not tolerate Christians that put money first.

Once again, the word is integrity. The public watches Christians and churches to see whether we have integrity in the way we use power. The public watches us to see whether we have integrity in our proclamation. But the public *really* watches us to see whether we have integrity in our use of possessions. If people see that we are more about getting than we are about giving, then the people will have no use for us. But if people see that we'd rather give than receive, then that gets their undivided attention.

That was Paul's final lesson to the new leaders of the church in Ephesus when he told them goodbye. He got on the boat and his friends watched him sail away, Paul's face getting smaller and smaller and fading away. But Paul knew that they would go back to Ephesus, where a curious city would watch *them* very closely. And if those new leaders showed integrity in how they handled their power, and integrity in how they proclaimed their message, and integrity in how they handled possessions, then that city would pay attention to the Christian witness of those new leaders.

When you and I go from here, people will be watching us. They will watch how we handle our power. They will watch how we handle our message. They will watch how we handle possessions. After they watch us, will they want to see our face again?

-- Douglas E. Murray