

Saying A Good Good-Bye
By Larry Augsburg
Acts 20:17-38
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- I. Well, we've arrived today at a point that is always awkward in a relationship—the point of saying good-bye.
 - A. Saying good-bye is hard because the feelings generated when we say good-bye are uncomfortably like the feelings we have when someone dies.
 - 1. When we come to like a person they become a part of us.
 - 2. And when we have to say good-bye to them, there's a tearing that hurts.
 - 3. It's hard to know what to do with that hurt, so it's hard to say good-bye.
 - B. But a farewell can be considered a good good-bye if it is handled well.
 - 1. And that's what we want to do here today.
 - 2. We want to say a good good-bye that explains why the leaving is necessary and that gives us permission to feel the sadness we feel.
- II. Now the reason we're saying good-bye today is that we have come to an exit ramp.
 - A. We engineered this exit ramp into the road when we planned our journey two years ago.
 - 1. Sonnenberg needed a short term pastor to help it address some problems.
 - 2. And I had training in working on issues like that.
 - 3. So we agreed to travel together on the same road for awhile, knowing full well that it was to be a journey of short duration.
 - B. And as we now reach this exit ramp we can look back on and reflect on things we have achieved during this short journey together.
 - 1. We have named, identified, struggled with and, in some cases, resolved problems in Sonnenberg's congregational life.
 - 2. We have worked to understand the challenges that lie ahead of the congregation so that they can be better addressed.
 - 3. And you have called a new pastor.
 - C. What this says is that we're right on target. Things are working out just as we planned. And that plan includes the exit ramp of this farewell service today which we engineered into the road when we planned our journey back in 2007.
 - D. Now at this point we may want to question the wisdom of engineering this exit ramp into our highway because the journey has been good.
 - 1. Jeananne and I have enjoyed our time here.
 - 2. I have felt well-received and supported.
 - 3. And I hear many of you saying positive things about my time here.
 - E. Yet we have reached the exit, and we need to take different paths from this point.
 - F. And it would be helpful if we could experience a good good-bye.
- III. Now we find a model for a good good-bye in Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders that we read from Acts 20, and I want to follow this model in today's service.
 - A. Paul's model begins with a recognition of how important it is to say good-bye.
 - 1. The text tells us that *Paul sent to Ephesus from Miletus for the*

elders of the church because he wanted to say good-bye to them.

- a. Paul was hurrying to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost and didn't have the time to swing through Ephesus where he had been pastor for several years, so he sent for the Ephesian leaders to come to him.
 - b. This meant they had to travel about thirty miles, which was a major distance in those days of travel by foot.
 - (1) But this was the last time Paul was going to be in the area.
 - (2) And everyone knew that saying good-bye was important.
 - c. So even though it was a big effort for the Ephesians to say this good-bye, they didn't question whether it was worth doing.
2. And that's what we're doing here today—recognizing the importance of saying good-bye and doing it well.
- B. The first thing Paul does in his saying good-bye is to review his history with them.
1. He says, *You know how I lived the whole time I was with you.*
 - a. He talks about his bold proclamation of the good news of Jesus.
 - b. He talks about severe testing by the plots of the Jews.
 2. I find something quite different when I review my history here.
 - a. I made it my utmost task to help you find resolution to differences that were impeding your experience of quality church life.
 - b. And I attempted to outline the challenges that lay ahead and give you some resources for responding to those challenges.
 3. So, kind of paraphrasing Paul, I can say, "You know how I lived and how I applied myself the whole time I was with you."
- C. Then after reviewing how he served among them in the past, Paul turns in the other direction and reports on his plans for the future.
1. *And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.*
 2. Notice that he reveals plans only for himself and not for the Ephesians.
 - a. Paul has authority to plan only for himself since he is no longer the pastor at Ephesus.
 - b. Plans for the Ephesians are no longer up to him—new leaders will take charge in discerning God's will for this church.
 3. My plans are not nearly as dramatic as Paul's
 - a. I intend to continue to serve as a transitional pastor, working at health in the Body of Christ one congregation at a time.
 - b. And so I plan to turn my attention to the next church to which God calls me.

- D. Having reviewed his past and his future, Paul turns to the relationship he has with the Ephesians and makes a statement drawing that relationship to a close.
1. *Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.*
 2. I'm certainly not saying that here today. I do hope to see you again.
 3. But I am saying that my ministry role among you is complete.
 4. Today I surrender my authority among you as pastor.
 - a. Now this truth has some hard components.
 - b. A young woman I've gotten to know well wondered, if she gets engaged, would I do her wedding.
 - c. I had to tell her no and point her toward Mel Hathaway.
 - d. There are strong ethical standards about surrendering the pastoral role, and I intend to abide by them.
 5. When I should happen to see you in any setting after this, I will be your friend, but not your pastor.
 6. I am drawing to a close my role of addressing the issues of congregational life at Sonnenberg as of today.
 7. And the reason both Paul and I can surrender our roles as pastors is that God called other persons to assume leadership.
- E. And the next thing Paul does is to charge that new generation of leaders with their responsibility. He says, *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*
1. Just as Paul could surrender his responsibilities because there were other leaders whom he was charging with the task of shepherding, I can surrender my responsibilities because you have other leaders who are picking up the responsibilities of leadership here.
 - a. You have an excellent set of lay leaders.
 - b. You have called a new pastor who will join you in September.
 2. And I join with Paul in saying to them, *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*
- F. Having charged the new leaders with their responsibilities, Paul issues a warning.
1. *I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.*
 2. These savage wolves would be people who would distort the truth.
 3. The savage wolves about which I want to warn you are not so much people distorting the truth, as they are:
 - a. Differences and disagreements which can become stumbling

- blocks in your path to unity.
 - b. And a failure:
 - (1) To respond to the gradual but inexorable decline in numbers Sonnenberg has been experiencing.
 - (2) And to come to terms with the future.
 - c. These are the wolves that will have a devastating effect on the future of Sonnenberg unless you find a way to deal with them.
- G. Paul begins the final portion of his good good-bye by committing them to God.
 - 1. *Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*
 - 2. Knowing that he has done all he can in serving the church at Ephesus, Paul commits the Ephesians to the care of God.
 - 3. Having done all I can in serving Sonnenberg, I join with Paul in committing Sonnenberg MC *to God and to the word of his grace.*
- H. At this point, Paul prays for the Ephesians.
 - 1. *When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.*
 - 2. I can imagine this was an intense prayer—a prayer that largely dwelt on the well-being of the Ephesian church.
- I. Then, with the prayer as the final point in this liturgy of farewell, they allowed themselves to express their sadness.
 - 1. This is a critical point—it’s okay to be sad and to express it.
 - 2. *They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.*
 - 3. There’s been a lot of expression of sadness at my leaving already.
 - a. And there’ll probably be more of that today.
 - b. I don’t want any weeping and kissing—our culture doesn’t do that quite like Paul’s culture did.
 - c. But I’m a good receiver and giver of hugs.
 - 4. And if you’re not sad, that’s okay. You can shake my hand if you want or just use this farewell as an excuse to participate in a great fellowship meal.
- J. What made this so sad for the Ephesians was that they realized this was the last time they would ever see Paul.
 - 1. Now we’re trusting this is not the case among us.
 - 2. But I am saying, I will not be your pastoral leader anymore. You have others to do that.
- K. Then they released him and accepted his going.
 - 1. It says, *Then they accompanied him to the ship.*
 - 2. They didn’t cling to him and beg him to stay.
 - a. They expressed their sadness. They said their good-byes.
 - b. Then they watched him board the ship, and it was okay.
 - 3. At some point this afternoon Jeananne and I will board our Honda Civic

- and drive away, and that will be okay.
- L. My last point this morning is not found in the text.
 - 1. And that is that the Ephesians transferred their allegiance to new leadership.
 - a. Paul was gone. They would not see him anymore.
 - b. He had prepared for other leaders to assume responsibility.
 - c. And they had accepted those leaders.
 - 2. I'm sure they thought often about Paul and grieved his leaving, but they moved on under the new leadership because what they had come to was just an exit ramp, not a dead end.
 - 3. The road went on from there, under different leadership.
 - IV. Now what we've arrived at here at Sonnenberg is just an exit ramp.
 - A. I'll be taking the exit and you will continue on.
 - 1. There's a clear road ahead for you.
 - 2. You have a new pastor preparing to join you at an entrance ramp just down the road.
 - a. This is the goal we set for ourselves when we started in 2007.
 - b. And we have achieved it.
 - B. I wish you God speed as you move on into what God has next prepared for you.
 - C. I join with Paul in saying, *I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*
 - D. I'd like to close in prayer.
 - 1. I'm sure it won't match Paul's prayer for fervor and feeling.
 - 2. But it is just as genuine and full of hope for what God is going to be doing here in the coming years.
 - 3. Let's pray.
 - V. Lord, come and bless this congregation.
 - A. In the last two years they've explored the struggles of the past.
 - B. And they have also explored the challenges of the future.
 - 1. The challenge of children who grow and achieve and excel, but choose to settle down somewhere other than here.
 - 2. The challenge of finding another way to sustain their numbers.
 - 3. The challenge of facing all the changes sweeping over them.
 - 4. The challenge of being the faithful church of Jesus Christ in a future that looks very different from the familiar past.
 - 5. The challenge of being the united church of Jesus when they have some very foundational differences among them about what that means.
 - C. I ask you to sustain and strengthen this congregation for facing these challenges.
 - 1. Be with its new pastor, Mel Hathaway, as he prepares to come and accept the responsibility of leading the congregation into its future.
 - 2. Be with its lay leaders as they review ways in which they can lead the congregation from the mentality of a hotel to the mentality of a hospital.
 - 3. Be with the Pathfinders group as it explores new ways of attracting people

- to the fellowship.
4. Be with those who strive to bring a greater spiritual vitality.
- D. I pray that you will bring new vitality into the midst of this people.
1. May your Spirit gust and blow in a new and energizing way among them.
 2. May your word sizzle in a fresh and invigorating way in their ears.
 3. May daring applications profoundly attuned to the challenges of the future come to their minds and flow through their lives.
 4. May they find a way to experience unity among themselves even as they are very diverse in their opinions and preferences.
 5. May they find a way to serve both those who prefer the tried and traditional and those who prefer change and the contemporary.
 6. May they be a place of welcome and extraordinary love, drawing new persons into God's kingdom, nurturing them and growing them into full disciples and leading them to do work for your kingdom on the front lines of missions here in Wayne County, Ohio.
- E. I ask Lord for faithfulness, vibrancy, excitement and growth here at Sonnenberg.
1. Bring joy. Bring vitality.
 2. Bring life. Bring peace.
- F. I ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.