

GOING AWAY PRESENTS

John 17:20-26

What going away presents have you received or given that still warm your heart and make you smile? Maybe you moved a long way away. Or maybe you left a job and company and coworkers with whom you were particularly close. Or maybe you left a school and friends and teachers.

When I left St. Paul's Church where I served in Woodbury, Connecticut for almost 21 years I was given a beautiful and symbolic picture of the church made by an artist friend and parish member. It shows the church building bathed in afternoon sunlight and at the same time pictures the night sky with stars and moon above. He entitled it *Epiphany*. The picture hangs in our living room and helps remind us of the deep connections we have to that community and our many friends there. We were also given a book containing cards and memories, thoughts, well wishes and reflections from parish members. For our part we commissioned a memorial brick for the patio in front of the church inscribed "with love to our parish family, the Wheeler's."

Three weeks ago we said "goodbye" to Mother Julia and gave her similar presents – a priest communion kit to carry the blessed sacrament to the sick and home-bound, and lots of cards, well wishes, poems, songs and memories for her memory box. I hope that they will be a treasure for her to remember us by. I know for my part every time we carry the beautiful streamers in procession I'll think of her.

In that final liturgy we prayed together:

Holy God, through your grace, you have bound us together in this particular time and place as priest and people to serve as Christ's Body in the world. We give you humble thanks for the life and ministry which we have shared together.

Today's Gospel lesson is taken from Jesus' farewell to his disciples at the Last Supper. It is the end of a long goodbye that goes on for several chapters. Jesus would no longer be with them as the physical person they had known. He would die for them, rise from the grave and then ascend to the Father to be in all times and places. No longer would he be physically present only in one place at one time. Soon he would be spiritually present in all places and all times. But all the disciples understood at the time was that Jesus was leaving them. So Jesus had to prepare them.

Jesus gave the disciples a departing gift to remember him by. His gift was his prayer that they would be one. He prayed that he – his life, his teaching, his living presence, his truth, and his love – would be in them and they would likewise abide in him. He prayed that he would continue to connect them to the Father. And he prayed that the rich life he shared with his Father in heaven would be so real, so potent, so alive in them that they would love one another. Their love for each other would be a beacon shining in darkness so that people might see and discover that love for themselves.

A light switch works by either cutting off or conducting the flow of electricity from the power source to the light. Jesus prayed for the disciples that the switch would permanently be on. The Father's love is the power source and Jesus is the conductor of that electricity. Jesus connected the disciples to God. Through Jesus the power of God's love flowed to the disciples connecting them to God and each other in love. Jesus prayed that their light would always be switched on and that the world would witness that light. Of course when Jesus prayed for the disciples he was also praying for us.

Jesus is concerned with how his disciples will carry out his mission to the world. *"As you Father, are in me and I am in you,"* Jesus prayed, *"may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* Again he prayed *"that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."* The way Jesus' life continues in them is crucial to Jesus' mission in the world. Jesus prayed that through their love, their unity, their connection both with him and each other that the world will see and know God.

What does the world see when they look at Jesus' disciples today? In today's Gospel Jesus tells us that the quality of our relationships is key. Will our relationships be transparent? Will the world witness the love of Christ in them? Or will those relationships be cloudy and opaque showing only our selfishness and separation from one another and God?

Of all the reasons for not believing in Christ, the all too often shallowness and mean-spiritedness of his followers is the most compelling. Whenever people see Christians judging one another, fighting among themselves, being hypocrites they cannot see through to Jesus Christ.

On the other hand we should not underestimate how our love for God, how our love and care and support of one another, and how our love for those in need reveals to the world the living presence of Jesus Christ. When people see the church working together for good they see Christ. When people see us at worship they get a glimpse of Christ. When people hear us singing to the glory of God they get a glimpse of Christ. When people see the beautiful witness of our Christian symbols honored and cherished – such as the Tiffany window of Jesus' transfiguration or the newly refurbished life of Christ window they get a glimpse into the life of Christ.

Jesus made us part of his family. We belong to Him and He belongs to us. Through Jesus we belong to one another. Jesus invited us to be one – one with Him and one with one another. That was his parting gift, his going away present his prayer that in Him we might be one. And I believe he continues to pray that same prayer.

Look at each other. Are you willing to be one with these people in Christ? Jesus prayed that the switch to the power source of His love would constantly remain on. His electricity grounds us in the Father's love. As we abide in His love and let His love flow through us his light will shine in a darkened world. His light will shine particularly through the ways we love one another and unite in His love. That is Jesus' parting gift.