

SERMON - PLYMOUTH CHURCH
John 14:23 – 29 “Holding On; Letting Go”
September 28, 2008 20th Sunday after Pentecost
(my last Sunday at Plymouth Congregational UCC)

I believe this is true for every person: there are times in life when we find ourselves standing between one thing and another. Between life as it has been on one side - and life as it will be on the other. You find yourself wanting to run back and hold on to what was - yet know in your heart that you must let go of what was and go forward into the future . . . into what will be.

When you were a child, one day you were playing out in the back yard with your friends. Laughing. Running. Jumping. Doing all the fun things you loved to do.

And the very next day, there you were - heading off to kindergarten, leaving behind everything you knew and loved. Everything that was familiar and comfortable. Your room. Your toys. Your mom and dad. Everything!

Hesitantly, reluctantly, you opened that big, heavy school door, and tried hard not to let the big kids see the tears in your eyes. You tried hard to be brave.

And for one long moment, you were tempted to run back home and hold on tight to everything you knew, and never let it go. But, as you made your way into your class room, another kid asked you to sit by her. And you were on your way! “Wow! I’m in school, and this is way cool!” Scary and cool - all in the same breath!

It doesn’t matter whether you’re five years old - leaving home for kindergarten; or you’re 18 - heading off for college; or you’re 55 - facing an empty nest; or you’re 83 - pacing the floor, trying to decide whether to sell the house and move into a retirement home.

No matter our age, we all find ourselves standing on the threshold of the future, looking back over one shoulder - at the place where we’ve been.

Aching inside at the thought of leaving it all behind. Yet, at the same time, looking forward to the place where we're going, all excited and revved up to get there.

It is a precious time - that in-between time - when we are letting go of what has been and, at the same moment, looking for the future to become real.

It's also a difficult time - that in-between time - with the past on one side and the future on the other. It can feel like a crazy, mixed-up time. Sure of your decision one moment. Unsure and filled with doubts the next. Wanting to go back. Wanting to go forward. It's as if you belong everywhere, yet nowhere. To the past and to the future. Letting go of the one while grabbing hold of the other.

We've all been there.

In today's Gospel lesson, John helps us understand. He helps us see that Jesus and his disciples walked in our shoes. They know what we are going through when the future looms large. Their story is our story. Our story is their story.

Jesus knew what the future held. He'd known it for some time. Soon, very soon, he would be leaving his disciples. Again and again, over and over, he had tried to tell them, "I will be leaving you," but they just didn't get it! They did not (or would not) hear the words Jesus was saying to them.

Their journey with Jesus was about to come to an end. That's what he told them. But they did not understand. Sure, they knew the words. But the words didn't sink in. How could he leave them? How could they go on without him? He was their leader. His leaving them was not part of their plan.

But leave them, he must. And leave them, he would. Jesus knew that. So he gathered them up, those 12 men, and led them right up to the door of the future - to show them what lay on the other side.

He couldn't wait for them to understand what was about to happen. He had to go.

So he gathered them in an upper room in Jerusalem, and said to them, “I will not leave you orphaned. I will come to you. The Advocate, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit whom God will send in my name, will come to you, and will teach you everything, and will remind you of all that I have said to you. My peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Whenever I read that passage from John, I find myself wondering: what was going on inside the heads and hearts of the disciples when Jesus spoke those words to them? Surely, one of them must have felt his heart leap up into his throat. Surely, one of them must have turned to the wall to wipe away his tears. Surely, one of them must have screamed silently into the night, “No, Jesus! This isn’t what we had planned.”

We’ve all done it - made our plans, mapped out our entire future. I’ve heard David Ruhe say more than once, “You want to give God a good laugh? Tell God your plans.”

No matter our age, we’ve all done it. Made our plans. Mapped out our future: Going to kindergarten; getting married; finding a job; starting a family; traveling all over Palestine with Jesus. But WHAM! We turn around and find a door open in front of us that we’d swear was not there before.

I know about such a door. I’m standing on its threshold. When I first came among you on February 1, 1999, I had my future all mapped out. I planned to stay right here into my ripe old age. So, how can I even think of leaving you at age 65? I’m still just a girl. (OK, an “old girl!”)

It’s just in the last year that I’ve finally learned most of your names, and now I’m just starting to know who is cousin or sister-in-law or son-in-law to whom. Who courted who before you married or made a life commitment.

So how can I even think of leaving? I love it here. I’ve come to love you. You’ve come to love me. How can I leave?

With my friend, Betty Mayrose, as my model for aging (she was still substitute teaching at age 89), I thought that in another 10 or 15, maybe 20 years when I’m 85, I’d announce, “Well folks, I think I’m going to retire.” And you’d say, “Good for you, Pat.” (Or you might say, “It’s about time!”)

Then you'd give me a gold watch. We'd have a party with cake and ice cream - the old folks sitting at tables, the kids running around playing. The whole nine yards. We'd hug and kiss. Laugh a little. Cry a little. And then, I'd be on my way.

You know, just when you're going along with your life all planned out; or just when you find yourself stuck in the middle of an impossible situation; or just when you feel like you are totally, desperately, hopelessly alone; or just when you want to turn around and run from that open door in front of you - you look down and see your foot is already on the threshold, and something is beckoning you to the other side.

Friends, the door through which I step tomorrow is just such a door for me. And like the school door for kindergarteners, it's a bit scary, yet in the same breath, it really is pretty cool.

So I leave you tomorrow, filled with memories and love and thanksgiving for each one of you. You have accepted me into your lives from the very beginning, and I have never felt more at home. My head is filled with pictures and images and memories of you.

We have been moved to tears when I baptized your babies; pronounced you husband and wife; buried your loved ones; sat by your hospital bed, praying with and for you.

We have wiped tears of joy from our eyes as we listened to the Matins and children's choirs singing their hearts out. We have been moved to tears as we listened to the Chancel Choir lift us to the gates of Heaven. We have wiped tears of gratitude from our eyes as we witnessed our eighth graders make their confirmation vows, knowing full well that we are their parents and grandparents in faith.

The Deacons and I wiped tears of laughter from our eyes when I stepped into an open grave - clear up to my hip - in the memory garden, and couldn't get out until Michael Richter pulled me out.

We have stood side by side in prayer on Maundy Thursday, sharing a little piece of bread and tiny cup of juice, as we remembered where it was Jesus was going on Friday. And we have stood side by side, singing the

“Hallelujah Chorus” on Easter morning, as we remembered Jesus’ promise of resurrection.

My dear friends, my list of images and memories of you is long and lovely.

So on this day, my last day among you as your Minister of Pastoral Care, I take you with me in my heart, and I am all the better because of you. I pray God’s continued love and grace and peace for each of you. And for Plymouth Church, I pray that together, you will continue the faithful work that was begun so long ago by those who went before us.

We come, and we go - both ministers and lay people - but the Church of Jesus Christ stands! Because of the Church universal, and Plymouth Church in particular, we are custodians of the faith handed down to us through the centuries. And because we are inheritors of the faith, we are called by God to pass it on to those who will lead us into the future.

Finally, my dear Plymouth family, hard as it is to say goodbye to one another, I remind myself and all of you, that as people of faith, in the final analysis, this sermon (& every sermon) is not about me. And it’s not about you. It is about God, who gives us life, who gave to us a savior in Jesus Christ, and who is the very center of our faith and of our life.

Yesterday. Today. And tomorrow! Thanks be to God. Amen.