

Message Delivered at Christ Church
June 19, 2011—Trinity Sunday; Father's Day
TEXTS: I Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Good morning, everybody. I hope you are well at the beginning of another most excellent day to serve the Lord!

As you heard in announcements, it's been a really rich weekend for Christ Church. We got about a hundred guests from AFRECS over in the GCC having breakfast and conversation right now talking about ministry with our friends in the Sudan. One of those guests is The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop of the United States who's leading worship at the second service this morning. There've been diplomats on the campus, and bishops, and other leaders in the Church. Lots happening this weekend...

Including...and this has nothing to do with AFRECS...a wedding yesterday afternoon! Two people named Liz Foster and Camm Tyler began their new life together yesterday. And it was completely beautiful and joyful; one of those moments worth relishing; and a gracious reminder of all the transitions in life worth celebrating.

Life is filled with transitions. Some of those celebratory transitions are "hello" kinds of transitions; some are more like "farewell;" some are a little bit of both. Some are relatively common and easily manageable. Others call for more effort. But inevitably, they happen; and they're good. They keep life fresh, and keep us on our toes.

In my own household, there have been lots of transitions this week. One transition was for our youngest son...who is sixteen...who went from the school year to summertime; a common enough development. That's an easy-enough transition we've made lots in our household over the years.

A transition for our middlest son...who is eighteen...was his graduation from high school—which was absolutely delightful. There was Senior Sunday last weekend; and we had a little party Tuesday night; and a really good graduation ceremony on Wednesday; a great sense of accomplishment, and hope, and joy for lots of people; one of those fat moments in life when you just grab on and celebrate.

For our eldest son, the transition was that he left on a journey. He's studying abroad this summer for a month; studying Arabic, which is a really good idea in these times. Helps boundaries to be crossed. But if you're going to study Arabic, you got to do that in a part of the world where people speak the language...which in his case is Beirut, Lebanon.

Now mostly, the governing authorities in our household have been relatively copacetic towards this plan. But wouldn't you agree...it's a little bit bigger than going to the beach for a weekend. So because I just couldn't help myself I went home early on Thursday ostensibly to help him finish packing...which he didn't need...but really to give him the final version of "the little speech" his mother and I have been giving him the last month; to give some "good advice": keep your passport with you; don't leave your wallet hanging out of your back pocket; let us know when you get there; don't go off by yourself. Nothing fancy; pretty basic; any of us could give it in our sleep.

He was very gracious to listen to the whole thing one more time, and let his parents do what parents do.

So when all this was finished, the three of us drove up to Dulles, and solved a couple pesky problems that come with travel more sophisticated than a flight to Atlanta. We were reading from a

travel guide about Lebanon on our way up, and it became a lot of fun to feel the excitement building...you know, the way we get when we're on the verge of an adventure.

So because God was good enough to slow his parents down and open them up, and because even when we are adults we desire blessing from our parents, there seemed something else for us to say before he left that was more important than "did you pack your toothbrush..." Study your Arabic, but meet lots of people; drink lots of coffee in the coffee shops; make new friends who are different from you; get a picture of what it means to be Lebanese; get a new vision of the world; and if you have a chance to go to a Palestinian Refugee Camp, go...because it's probably something you need to see.

We later gave him a hug; reminded him "no biting" as if he were four to make us all laugh a bit, and then a simple prayer of blessing to which we all said "amen."

...all to be reminded that there are transitions in life that are pregnant with possibilities, and moments when blessing is more powerful than more words of advice or instruction could ever be.

These are unusual readings today. In both cases, they are final words. What we heard from Matthew is Jesus' final words to the disciples. And this reading we heard today from II Corinthians are the Apostle Paul's final words to that congregation.

Now Paul had a deep affection for the Corinthians. With two people named Priscilla and Aquila Paul had helped that community to be born. Acts says that Paul stayed in Corinth a long time...eighteen months. The story is too rich to get into in just a few words, but I think he stayed there so long because Paul came to Corinth weary and defeated and lonely. In response, the Corinthian baby Christians loved on him...gave him a job, and gave him a home; and thereby, found a sure place in Paul's heart.

Nevertheless, his relationship with the Corinthians was complicated. They were a sophisticated people, but had trouble with one another. They argued among themselves a lot...about little things and big things. The wealthy people in the community weren't particularly generous, and sometimes they took advantage of the poor people in the community. In one case, they allowed a level of sexual immorality which, in the words of Paul, would make even the pagans blush. Their worship was more likely to cause division than unity.

Paul wrote more to the Corinthians than he did to any other church, teaching them to live in grace, and love, and true fellowship. And the beauty of it all is how thought they were so messy he just kept loving them. He stayed with them; never let go; kept writing letters; kept teaching; kept encouraging. He loved them deeply, all the time.

But eventually, you got to end the letter. So here's how he does that:

There are final instructions; some final words of advice...all of which have to do with relationships and all of which make sense when you consider how the Corinthians had chosen to live. "Put things in order," Paul writes. A better translation is "mend your ways." "Listen to my appeal." "Agree with one another," a more accurate understanding of which is "find a common mind." "Live in peace," and "greet one another with a holy kiss."

But at some point, all that has to stop. You reach a point where there's no more advice to give; no more words of wisdom that will make a difference; and the only thing left to do is bless. So he offers this last word: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

Now that's a famous line in scripture worth memorizing; so well-known, it almost sounds like a throwaway to us. But stay with me for a moment here, because we're going to do some Bible...

Paul finishes every letter with a blessing. It's just the way he finished his letters. But this blessing that ends II Corinthians is unusual. You see, the blessings at the end of all the other letters go

something like this: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” Period. That’s how he finishes I Corinthians; and almost word for word, that’s the final blessing in his other letters.

This one is noticeably different, and I think that’s on purpose. It’s richer, and thicker, and it’s what we would call Trinitarian, and this is the only place Paul ends with this Trinitarian blessing. There’s grace, and there’s love, and there’s communion...all gifts we are given, not things we earn, that make it so that we can be with each other well. And there’s God the Son, and God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit. Not said exactly that way, but that’s what he means. And he finishes this way, I would suggest, because possibly the only way for all his teaching on right fellowship to the people of God to make sense is to remind the Corinthians that God—in God’s very self--exists in right fellowship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Relationships are sometimes easy; but not always. There are comings and goings; expectations met and disappointments sustained; sometimes people agree, and sometimes they don’t. That’s life lived together.

But choose to be a member of a church, and there are things we do. We worship with passion, giving the Lord our all when we’re together. We pray ardently, and dedicate ourselves to life-long learning of the Way. We serve joyfully and give with ridiculous generosity...two actions we know powerfully. We demonstrate hospitality with radical abandon, and open ourselves to AFRECS and Peter-Paul Camp, and CARITAS, and 350 VBS kids and the visitor in our midst right now.

And we seek meaningful and true fellowship. Be a people, and walk this walk together; be in relationship among us and beyond us not just because it feels good, but because it manifests a truth about the Christian understanding of God, put forward by the Apostle today; and, obviously enough, put forward by Jesus today, as well. We believe God is certainly one; that there is only one God. But we also believe that God, in God’s very being, has chosen to exist as relationship, itself...an eternal, dynamic, self-giving relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We call it the Trinity, and it is for us a core belief. There’s no analogy that really articulates this belief very well. It’s difficult to get our minds around how God can be both one and three. Over the years, too many people have gotten into arguments too violent about how to understand a truth meant to bring us together. But we hold onto this truth and declare it as a reminder that the life intended for us is not one of division or isolation, but one of mended ways, common mind, and kisses of peace.

And so we read in worship the last few words of one farewell that finally eschews more words of advice for a blessing that reminds us that if God’s nature is to be connected, may we be connected. And another farewell that reminds us to call others into this fellowship that gives life and makes life worth living; and that always...no matter what; no matter where we are; no matter in this life or beyond this life...the Lord is with us always.

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. We got another day to be faithful, and serve. Another day of grace, and love, and communion. And if you’re looking for an assignment for this day or this week, try this: Memorize this short blessing...”the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Memorize it, and then maybe share it; and maybe relish the gift of blessing, and the reminder of how as God exists together we, too, are given the vision and privilege of that exact same life.