

Pilgrim Church of Duxbury  
Sweet Sorrow  
Ruth 1:8-18  
July 30, 2017  
Rev. Peggy O'Connor

Our sermon today is entitled "Sweet Sorrow". It is meant to highlight the mixed bag of emotions that we all feel at times of transition and change. And of course, today is just such a time, as today is Katie Houts last day here at Pilgrim Church. In the next few days she will move to Salt Lake City Utah with her family. So, today is the last day she will be a part of our worship, offering her considerable musical talents to enrich and enliven our service.

I chose this morning's well-known passage from the book of Ruth this morning because it is about a moment of huge transition...a moment that requires a number of goodbyes...a moment filled with conflicting emotions.

Naomi, who has lost her husband and both of her sons, her only children, has decided to leave Moab, the country she and her family moved to when Israel was besieged by draught decades earlier. Having heard that Israel is now prospering, she wants to go home. Her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, decide they will go with her. But Naomi says no...go back to your mothers' houses...remarry...have a good life. You were faithful to my sons and to me and so I pray that God will bless you. With that she kisses them and turns to go on...alone. But they protest...NO...we will go with you to your people.

Naomi repeats her plea for them to go home and Orpah, weeping, kisses her and goes. But Ruth does not go...she stays by Naomi's side. So, Naomi urges her to follow Orpah and go back home. But Ruth, refusing to leave her, utters the famous words, spoken at so many weddings: "Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried".

We are inspired and touched by these 38 words. We love Ruth's devotion and refusal to desert Naomi. We are almost disparaging of Orpah's leaving. But in reality, this passage is all about leaving. No matter what decision Orpah or Ruth make, it involves parting and leaving someone. Each woman has to either leave home and country or Naomi, the woman they have lived and worked with for a long time. They have grown to love her as a mother. In this respect, Naomi's instruction to go home to your mother is a reflection of the difficulty of the situation. For these women left their mothers long ago and no doubt have addressed Naomi as mother for as long. So, who was their mother at that moment? To choose one was to reject the other. The story highlights the almost impossible emotional juncture they all find themselves in as they stand in the road...to go or to stay...each involved starting a new life. This was a true fork in the road and only one path could be chosen. Both was not an option.

By and large, most of us do all we can to avoid such moments. We really do not want to come to such places...places that demand that we say goodbye to those we love no matter which way we turn. In such moments, all we see are the pain and loss that either choice will bring as both will require goodbyes. So, we avoid these times if we can.

The problem with saying goodbye is that it entails change, which we relate to uncertainty...both of which are things most of us hate. We prefer certainty or its illusion which is predictability. We depend on things staying pretty much the same day to day. We depend on the people around us to stay the same, not just day to day, but year to year and decade to decade. If you disagree then go home and call your children and family to say that you are not going to celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas this year but instead will be on a trip for both holidays. Or, announce that you want to change things up for both holidays...no green bean casserole and no Christmas tree. I guarantee that that you will get strong push back for either announcement.

We are creatures of habit and we don't like anyone to disturb our habits. So, we avoid rocking the boat and we do all we can to keep others from doing the same...all to avoid saying goodbye to the order of our lives...order and predictability we have come to expect...order and predictability that somehow we have come to believe we can control.

What we don't see is the upside to change...which is the byproduct of saying goodbye. We don't see the sweet side of sorrow. As you may have recognized, I took this title from Romeo and Juliet. In act 2 scene 2, Romeo bids Juliet goodnight and is leaving the stage when she calls him back to ask when she should send a messenger to him the next morning. He replies: by nine o'clock. She says: "I won't fail. From now until then seems like twenty years. I have forgotten why I called you back." Romeo vows to stay until she remembers. Juliet playfully worries he will have to stand there forever. Romeo vows to stay forever. Juliet, noting that dawn is breaking, says she wants to make him go but also wants to pull him back like a pet bird on a string. Romeo says: I wish I was your bird. To which Juliet replies: "My sweet, so do I. But I would kill you by petting you too much. Goodnight, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow that I'll say good night until tonight becomes tomorrow."

The start of Juliet's last line: "Parting is such sweet sorrow" is one of if not the most well-known line from all of Shakespeare's plays. By it, scholars tell us, Shakespeare was saying that while Romeo and Juliet's parting is sad it is also sweet because it helps them and us to anticipate the next time they will be together. But I would argue that equally true is that their memories also make the parting sweet sorrow for even if they never meet again, they will have those memories, which will be sad and yet sweet.

The fifth-grade students in Carlisle Mass took care of two Blanding's turtles this past school year. An endangered species that numbered 200 in a state park in Carlisle in the late 90's, their current count is 50. In an effort to increase their number, biologists are taking hatchlings and giving them to schools, like the one in Carlisle, to raise over their first winter. Fed and kept warm, the hatchlings grow from silver dollar size babies with soft shells to about seven or eight times their size and weight, with hard protective shells. No longer so vulnerable to predators, the Carlisle turtles were returned to their habitat in May. The kids went to watch as they entered the pond that would be their home for the first time. Interviewed after the release one boy said he had mixed feelings. He would miss the turtles. He loved to feed them and watch them grow. But he loved the idea that they were not free. He paused and said, I guess I feel melancholy. This is the Sweet Sorrow we feel today.

The anticipation of another time...unknown but hoped for...a time in the future when we shall meet again and feel the joy of reunion...as well as the treasure trove of memories which we wish we could relive in real time...this is what makes saying goodbye...sweet sorrow. Looked at this way, while we might still not look forward to such partings...we can at least find the silver lining to them.

Every goodbye is also a hello. Paulo Coelho, Brazilian songwriter and novelist says, "If you are brave enough to say goodbye, life will reward you with a new hello".

And so, I hope that today, we can all embrace both the sadness and the hope that today holds, finding the potential for positive outcomes to our parting with Katie Houts. It lies in the hope that she and her family, united in a new home where Katie does not have to be a part time single mom and her husband does not have to be a dad at a distance, find solace and peace. It lies in the hope that they thrive in their new surroundings and find fulfillment in new and wonderful ways. It lies in the knowledge that somewhere in Salt Lake City, there is a church waiting for Katie. They don't know it yet but they will when they meet her.

Hope also lies in the potential future for the church. While no one can replace Katie we know that someone will come to us who will share their skills, talents and ideas with us. Today we have no idea who they are...but we know they will come enrich our worship and church.

So, today, even as we bid Katie adieu, wishing her the very best we also remind ourselves and Katie not to worry about the disruption or uncertainty of this moment. We will embrace this moment...the sadness and the joy. Tomorrow will come and we will find the gifts it holds...but today...let us be fully present to one another...and be grateful for what we have had together.