

## EYES ON THE PRIZE: HELLO, GOODBYE, ALPHA, OMEGA

Pentecost Sunday, Year C: May 27, 2007

How well do we say our ‘hellos’ and ‘goodbyes’ here?

There’s a Korean word for hello which, if I understand it correctly, also means goodbye – *An-nyong-has-say-o*. Hello, Goodbye. But I’d rather make our hellos last a little longer than that!

*An-nyong-ha-shim-ni-da*. Hello, **Shalom**, Goodbye. I also need to throw in a little *Con-som-na-ya-da* (thank you).

I need to say thank you, since I was privileged to have been one of the UCC Pacific NW Conference pastors and lay people who, several years ago, were ever-so warmly received as guests of the Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea. You were ever-so-gracious to us; we ate like royalty and received multiple gifts, including the beautiful many-colored tapestry I often place here. Our generous Korean hosts also gave each one of us a keepsake to remind us of our international ecumenical partnership – a keepsake in the form of a beautiful crystal plaque. Engraved on it is the official symbol of the Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea, as well as our own United Church of Christ official symbol, the cross with crown and orb, surrounded by the words we just stood up for, from the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John: that they may all be one. These words became our official UCC motto 50 years ago this year in Cleveland, Ohio, when our uniting church was first organized, signifying the hope of our UCC forebears that Christians, people of faith everywhere might unite as one. (Lin Takahashi was among those who were present there then.) This same motto is also a fitting Bible passage for the long-separated families of a divided Korea, where a passionate hope for reunification exists to this day – that they (that is, all Koreans, North and South) may all be one again.

Have we as a church in America, as a congregation here in Seattle yet learned how to extend God’s welcoming hello nearly as graciously? It’s every Christian’s calling to follow through with our hellos, to sustain our welcome. Without follow-through, our hellos are shallow and short-lived. Our official Sunday greeters here at Broadview are great at what they do; we just need more of them, that’s all, because sometimes while they are busy saying hello to one person, another stealthily slips in and back out, barely noticed. Experts say that a little focused, warm attention, however brief, needs to happen in the first thirty seconds or so upon arrival, during that crucial time when first impressions get established; eye contact needs to be made when exchanging the peace; interest in the person cultivated during fellowship time; names and contact info are needed; and then when they come back, if there’s to be any hope at all of resulting years of Christian friendship, we have to notice that they’re back, and increasingly get to know and appreciate them for who they uniquely are as children of God. Let’s keep learning how to better say the kind of hellos that last.

Of course, we also need to know how to say appropriate kinds of goodbyes. I don’t tend to like overly-long goodbyes, but I do remember as a kid at Jr. High church camp, how

we practiced saying our goodbyes well before the end of the week with florid splashes of visible emotion and physical affection. Some had barely begun to get acquainted before saying – and hugging – and kissing – our fond goodbyes! And though melodramatic, we may have been rehearsing significant life scripts.

It seems Jesus barely said hello to the world before having to say his goodbyes to it. His so-called “high priestly prayer” was a part of an early, rather long goodbye. I’ve often wished Jesus’ gospel hellos were as detailed as his gospel goodbyes. And yet our own hello does not have to be a long, complicated one either. It just has to be a focused and timely one, a hello that has integrity, that takes hold. It has to take hold, because life is short. We are mortal. We too easily miss life’s best ‘hello’ opportunities. And those we love, or those we might have come to love, are not with us forever, and goodbyes seem to last longer than hellos. These are important matters, these beginnings, and these endings.

The author of the book of Revelation saw Jesus as the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, the whole “A to Z in our language about God.” (Gallup) And in-between A and Z, between hello and goodbye, if our eyes are on the prize, we’re holding on, we’re sustaining a Christ-centered, interactive way of living together. This Christ-centered way of living is a profoundly open way. “The gospel is all about openness and openings”. In Revelation, the gates of the heavenly city are always...What? They’re always open! In Acts, earthquakes open up prison walls. God opens up God’s own heart to us, and as Jesus puts it, we become “perfectly one” with God! Now that’s openness! And we hear these repeated invitations – come to God. “The Spirit and the bride say, “Come! Let all who are thirsty come! Let anyone who wishes come! Come, Lord Jesus, and the grace of the Lord Jesus will be with all the saints!” So...How are we to say our hellos? Openly. Attentively. Without hesitation or limitation.

Many profound hellos get said in the book of Acts. Today’s featured story from Acts 16 starts out being a story about an exploited female fortune-teller. When I was in Korea, wondering around a bit on downtown Seoul’s busy sidewalks, I noticed exotic-looking little tents set up to accommodate fortune tellers. You walk in. You pay your money. A stranger takes your hand, reads your palm, and you walk back out, perhaps in some way briefly comforted. There are similar places here in Seattle, down along Aurora Avenue. People always and everywhere have gotten drawn to the possibility of predicting their own future. Hello, fortuneteller, goodbye, fortune teller, and maybe, just maybe, for a small fee, in a few short minutes, I’ll know that my whole life’s gonna change for the better.

Unfortunately, we don’t know if the slave girl fortune teller in today’s story dropped everything and became a disciple after Paul prayed away the slave-keeping, moneymaking spirit inside her. We don’t know what happens to each and every person the early Apostles greet along the way, any more than we can track all those who, at one time or another, enter this sanctuary. What we do know is that when Paul stopped allowing this young girl to be merchandise, a sellable commodity instead of a person, the whole place went bananas. Profit-making slave-owners, anti-Semitic mobs, corrupt judges all. Without proper defense or right of appeal, the girl’s liberators are themselves

stripped, tortured, imprisoned. One can't help but think of the places so many have been getting tortured of late: Guantanamo, Abu Grave. So many today, like Paul and Silas, are bound in jail, stripped naked, and put out of sight, out of mind in the highest security cells available. No pictures were taken of how the early disciples got treated either; no access to lawyers or journalists. It was just hello, Paul and Silas, you're cutting into our profit margin, we don't like you one bit, may you rot in this cell forever, goodbye.

And we don't know what happened to the slave girl. We do, thankfully, learn from the story what happened to the imprisoned Apostles, and to the jailer. An earthquake, we are told, takes place, but what shakes as much or more than the ground is the jailer's old certainty about his role. His question of 'What must I do?' is met by Paul and Silas with new life-transforming clarity. So "the jailer (throws) all his eggs into one basket (right then and there) and brings his whole family into the family of the baptized. It is an immediate and complete rejection of the old life. ...And there's great joy in that household. There's also a release from fear, the fear of failure that would have caused (an enslaved kind of person) to attempt to take his own life." (Amanda Wright). The change all happens quite suddenly. The hello is quick, but apparently lasting and solid. "Do not harm yourself. We are all here. Mr. Jailer, we're all here with you, we won't desert you to your fear." After that, how could he ever be a jailor again? From that time forward, even if he himself gets jailed, he knows himself to be free. It's what I want to believe came true for the fortuneteller slave girl too.

"Slavery (you see) begins to end, not when the slave owner decides it is profitable to end it, but when the slave is liberated in his or her own mind, when the spirit of cowering goes away", when Rosa Park decides not just to do something, but to sit there at the front of the bus! (Gallop) "Don't harm yourself; we're not going anywhere. We are all here, at your service in the gospel. We won't leave until we've delivered you from your own imprisonment, since it's you, the keepers who are the captives, you who try to lock the good news into the innermost prison calls. But the imprisoned gospel hands the keys to the jailor to liberate himself." The slave girl becomes a person, and stops being sellable merchandise. The prison walls collapse. And the doors of the heavenly city always remain open. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Thanks be to God that difficult goodbyes in life get balanced either in time or in eternity, by profound hellos. Life will always be chock full of alphas and omegas, but in-between A and Z, between hello and goodbye, let us hold on to the profoundly-open way of Jesus. And keep saying Hello; hello! *An-nyong-ha-shim-ni-da*...and Amen.