

I. Intro:

A. Believe it or not, I didn't cherry pick this Scripture passage for Velma's last Sunday with us ...

1. If you noticed that there are some clear parallels between this biblical situation of Jesus about to leave His little "congregation" and Velma about to leave her congregation, you would be right ...
 - a) And we will explore some of those parallels shortly for us today,
 - b) But let me quickly clarify for the record: I'm stopping just short of equating Velma's departure with Jesus' departure!
2. In reality I didn't go searching for some Bible text that seems to mirror our situation today.
 - a) This is actually one of the texts in the Revised Common Lectionary for this Sunday in the Easter season!
 - b) In case you don't recognize it, this passage is part of a longer section of the Gospel of John, often called the "farewell discourse" of Jesus
3. It appears as one extended speech by Jesus, essentially preparing his disciples for his departure from them
 - a) It starts in chapter 13 at the end of the Last Supper, when Jesus has just had that momentous Passover Meal, along with foot washing, in the Upper Room with his disciples
 - b) So chapters 14 to 16 are essentially a farewell sermon from Jesus, interspersed with a few questions from his disciples trying to clarify what he means

B. And speaking of clarifications, here's one more from me at the front end:

1. Since Jesus preached a farewell sermon in the presence of his faith community, we offered for Velma to preach and make this her own "farewell discourse" as well ...
2. She declined ... so here I am!

II. I mentioned some parallels between these 2 contexts: the pending departure of Jesus in John 14, and the departure of Velma as pastor here in about a week

A. The first parallel is rather obvious & literal: You have 2 well-loved leaders of faith communities, on the occasion of their last time gathered all together as a group, before the leader goes away

B. But after that superficial similarity, besides the great historical and cultural chasm between the Bible then and us now, I quickly see a difference in the 2 settings: Today we have the advantage of a little more lead time for adjusting to this departure

1. We here at Waterford Mennonite Church heard Velma announce her departure almost 6 months ago
2. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus's disciples heard this announcement of his departure starting at the Last Supper
 - a) Judas Iscariot had just fled into the night after Jesus mysteriously told him, "Do quickly what you're going to do."
 - b) In that 1st setting, this announcement by Jesus was shockingly fresh ... They had maybe 10 or 15 minutes to take it in and adjust to the news that he was leaving them.
 - c) We have had months to prepare ourselves for this day

III. A second parallel is the mixed message in these departures ... that there is actually both a leaving and a coming again.

A. This mixed message comes straight from the mouth of Jesus:

1. At the very beginning of this farewell discourse, in 13:33 Jesus says he's leaving (*read 13:33*)
 - a) But then he sees and hears a lot of pain and confusion from the disciples about this "leaving thing" ... They ask him:
 - (1) Where are you going?
 - (2) Why can't I follow you now?
 - (3) How can we know the way, if we don't know where you're going?
 - b) Maybe in response to their questions and their hurt, Jesus tries to soften the blow a little in 14:18 (*read it*)
2. I wouldn't blame them for muttering to each other: "He's leaving! But wait, he's coming again? Is it both of those things?"
3. They might even wonder, "Why leave in the first place if you're going to come back? And how long will it be in between those two?"

B. It's the 26th of May 2019: a big day to the staff who've worked closely with Velma, and to the seniors who've heard and felt Jesus through her

1. As momentous as this day feels to the church now, this day too will pass.

a) This transition in a few months or years will lose its overshadowing power. Why?

(1) Because we humans are more adaptable than we think ...

(2) Because a new day rising keeps bringing more growth opportunities for us ...

(3) And mostly because God is good, and I trust God will provide for our church's needs in the coming months and years

b) We have come to such thresholds before, and God has not let us down!

2. Almost exactly 7 years ago, a beloved pastor in Tina Schlabach said her goodbyes here, after nearly 9 years of pastoring.

a) I heard some adults who had grown attached to her muttering, "What are we going to do without Tina?"

b) Yet our church board and 2 search committees worked hard to redefine our ministry needs, sift through some excellent applicants, and in September 2012 have not 1 but 2 candidating weekends for new pastors

(1) Out of that anxious year of transition came a bundle of dark-haired energy cleverly disguised as Pastor Cindy Voth

(2) Also from that transition came a spunky gray-haired Pastor of Senior Ministries named Velma Swartz.

c) Somehow, by the grace of God Almighty, those 2 have wormed their way into the hearts of many a church-goer at Waterford

d) I think I've heard at least one senior adult here say recently, "What will we do without Velma?" Is God good to us, or what?

3. Now think back with me to a few years before that: Over the course of the year 2004 I imagine that there was more than a little anxiety about Waterford's direction

a) I'll remind you that Pastor Joe Miller announced his resignation that year in March, he left in the summer, and the late Bill Breckbill did some interim pastoring

b) All this was while a search committee was hard at work in the background over several months, in contact with a young pastor in Kansas, to come for a candidating weekend in September.

(1) I know for sure that a search committee and this whole congregation and a young family in McPherson KS were all praying for God's guidance and wisdom.

(2) What I DON'T know is whose anxiety was higher that weekend?

(a) Was it a large multi-staff congregation considering a pastor who had no previous experience as a supervisor or in leading a larger church?

(b) Or was it that 40-year-old pastor wondering what on earth possessed him to uproot his family, move across the country and attempt to lead a church full of well-educated professionals, mission executives and retired pastors?

c) Somehow, by the grace of God Almighty, here we are 15 years later! God answered our prayers for all of these leavings and comings

IV. There's yet another parallel I see between these farewell contexts, but this one might have you questioning my sanity: As in my sermon title, the commonality is that the people being left behind should rejoice in the departure! Say what?!

A. In today's circumstance, that translates roughly to: *"If you loved Velma, you'd rejoice that she's going away"*

1. Wait. Did I just tell you to rejoice that Velma is leaving? "Dude, we're feeling sad here, and you're telling us to rejoice?"

2. I think that troubling conclusion is pretty much what the disciples of Jesus would have first thought when they heard their Lord's words to them in 14:28 (*read 14:28b*)

a) It's bad enough Jesus tells them they should rejoice that he's going away! But he also has the nerve to manipulate their feelings for him by using that conditional phrase, "If you loved me, you would ..."

b) So Time Out – Were you listening to Jesus' words? Here's some relationships advice, especially for marriages: Don't try this at home!

(1) It almost never ends well if you tell your spouse what they would do IF they loved you, implying they don't actually love you!

(2) Here's a communication clue I learned in college and in seminary: Use "I messages" that are not conditional, like saying "I really feel loved by you when you ..."

3. So let me go back to what on the surface appears to be the direct application of John 14:28 for our occasion today: *"If you loved Velma, you'd rejoice that she's going away"*

4. Hmm ... now it's clarification time again:

a) I am not saying to you that we should rejoice to be rid of Velma! Nor do I personally feel that way

b) Furthermore, I do not believe that Jesus expected his disciples to just disregard their sense of loss at his departure. Of course they wouldn't naturally be glad that he was leaving them!

B. The key words from Jesus come just after he makes that ridiculous statement. He says, "... for the Father is greater than I"

1. (repeat) Be glad that I'm going to the Father because the Father is greater than I ... In other words ...

a) Jesus is basically saying, "I'm going somewhere even better than this place ... I'm following a calling even more important than being here with you guys

b) My time here with you has been enough. I have a higher more rewarding mission now ... Don't hold me back."

2. Jesus was pushing his disciples to step back for the balcony view ... to see the bigger mission that he was on, and to rejoice that he would be following that call and doing his Father's will. What could be better and more fulfilling than that?

C. In a similar way for Velma, we are called today to rejoice that she's following God's path for her:

1. Rejoice that she's open to the spiritual voices in her head ... open to the physical voices of her body ... the emotional voices in her heart ...

a) Voices that have been saying, "It's time to lay aside this hard work of pastoral ministry & step into the next stage of life beyond the demands of paid work."

b) Voices saying "Velma, you are a beloved child of God, and Waterford called you into this ministry, but you are not the ministry!"

c) The fullness of life that God has in mind for Velma personally, started long before she became a pastor here ...

d) and as much as she has gained and grown into a deep pastoral identity in these past six years, the fulfillment of that abundant life into her future does NOT depend on pastoring here!

2. The same is true on the congregational side of our relationship with Velma, for those of us NOT going away

a) Jesus knew that the church as the visible growing sign of God's kingdom could not flourish as long as he stayed on earth. It would stay stuck ... be dependent on him personally

b) You could say that the kingdom of God was bigger than even Jesus himself, and Jesus knew it!

3. The precious pastoral ministry Velma has been faithfully carrying out among us is not really her ministry ... It's God's!
4. Visiting, validating and drawing on the gifts of those saints among us 70 & older is work God calls Waterford Mennonite Church to, whether Velma is here or not!

D. In the past 6 and half years Velma has graciously accompanied many aging Waterford members to navigate difficult transitions ...

1. Transitions like retirement ...like moving out of your home ... like losing sight, hearing, mobility or memory ... and even death itself.
2. She has helped many of us do the excruciating human work of letting go
3. Now it's our turn to return the favor as her spiritual brothers and sisters.
 - a) We get to lovingly and mutually walk with her in that hard work of letting go.
 - b) Let us be clear: She is not the only one letting go today.
4. If we insist that Velma can't leave us, then we are loving ourselves but not truly loving her!

V. Conclusion

A. Seeing some of the parallels between the farewell happening today and Jesus' own farewell with His disciples, I decided to rework the main ideas of v27 & 28 to speak into our needs today

1. Here is a very loose paraphrase of John 14: 27 & 28, taking some editorial liberties to fit our farewell situation
2. As I share this, please imagine these words being spoken directly to Waterford Mennonite Church by John the Gospel writer, as if he were alive with us today.
 - a) I ask you to first pause to get in touch with whatever you're feeling as we say goodbye to Velma as a pastor
 - (1) What are your hopes? What fears are you carrying? What do you need from God in this transition on our pastoral team?
 - (2) As you receive these words, keep assuming we are all still under the lordship of Jesus Christ
 - b) I'll put this message up on the screen, but if you can, I invite you to receive these words w/ eyes closed, as a personal message to the church

Texts: John 14: 18-19, 22-29

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Jesus leaves his peace with you.
Jesus gives his peace to you.
But he does not give to you as the world gives.
Don't let your hearts be troubled,
And don't let them be afraid.

You heard Velma say to you, "I'm going away,
and I'm coming back to Waterford again."
If you loved Velma, you would rejoice that she's going away
to follow God's calling for her ...
because God's calling is greater than Velma!
God's calling is greater than you!

B. Beloved of Waterford, as sad as a farewell announcement felt to Jesus' disciples, He also gave them some great news:

1. the best news Jesus gave his disciples on that post-Easter day, was to announce the coming of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit
2. That Advocate took Jesus' place as God's presence with us on earth, and that Advocate reminds us of the teachings of Jesus

C. That same good news still holds for us here today as we experience the bittersweet of a pastor retiring

1. Good news: God's presence remains with us thru the Holy Spirit, just as much after Velma's departure as during her time with us!
2. Our ministries with senior adults will not be orphaned when Velma leaves because they are God's ministries in the first place!
3. Let's take heart in these words of Jesus, which apply very well to us today: *Don't let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid! Because I live, you also will live. Amen*