

# Train Station

**“In every goodbye is the anticipation of hello.”  
I Corinthians 15:20-22, 52-55**

*Sixth in the series, Xtreme Love: lessons from the Methodist heart*

Rev. John H. Hice  
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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

## At the Station

I started graduate school in the middle of the year after I ate an Easter dinner with Laura and my family, packed up the car and drove west from Dearborn to Chicago. The car broke down along the way, so it fell dark before I got to the lonely stretch on the far west side of the State. I wasn't ever certain whether the car would make it all the way and so I drove slowly, worried a lot, and felt quite alone most of the way. A cold breeze blew off Lake Michigan when I stopped in the parking lot and started hauling my belongings up the stairs to the fourth floor of the dorm where the directions said that I would find my room. Up and down the stairs – I didn't know about the elevator tucked away in the back of the building yet – I made my way to the empty room where a note from my roommate awaited me. He was going to be in Cleveland for the next week because he was meeting with his Conference's Board of Ordained Ministry.

Very alone.

Until on one of my trips, at the top of the stairs, I met Warren, another first year student who was from Western Oklahoma and lived down the hall. He stopped me and asked all the introductory questions as well as what my plans were for the next day: an invitation. A friend. My first friend. And Warren became one of my better friends with whom it was likely I would kick around and argue theology. Warren was one of the guys who stood in our wedding when Laura and I were married. He was a good friend.

A few years later Laura and I were living in Kalamazoo where I was serving full-time in a student appointment. Warren was in his last year of school and was planning to go back to Oklahoma or somewhere else that would be far away. He took the train and spent the weekend with us and then on Sunday I drove him back to the train station. It would be one of the last times I saw him.

I said, “Well I guess it's ‘goodbye’ again.” Then he looked at me the way he usually did when he was about to make some profound theological remark and he said, “John.

Isn't life a series of hellos and goodbyes? And within every *goodbye* there is the anticipation of *hello*."

Within every goodbye is the anticipation of hello. At least, isn't that what you hope? That's what you hope when you pack the bags and get in the car and back down the driveway, waving parents or children getting smaller in the distance. That's what you hope when you see them leave and you know the roads are covered with a glaze of ice. That's what you hope when you travel cross-country to be with the friend who just got the diagnosis and then it's time for you to leave and you wonder, will there be a hello ever again?

Within every *goodbye* is the anticipation of *hello*. Then, of course a part of me doesn't want to say it and, knowing the words are coming there's probably a part of you that doesn't want me to say it, but it seems to me it needs to be said. When the loved one dies or someday when you feel like life on this earth is fading, the anticipation of hello in the midst of the goodbye might well be the one last hope you have to hang onto. Will I one day see her again? If I close my eyes and let go a final breath, will I open them again to see those who have gone on before me, and some other world we have long called, Heaven? Will I be with God and Jesus? Will that final goodbye be interrupted by a fresh, new and ultimate hello? A last hope, no doubt, but not only the last: maybe it can be an abiding hope that manages to keep you going day-by-day whether you're 25 or 95.

### Calling

Then, what is it that could make such a hope something more than a wishful thought?

There is a passage in the Gospel of John that pictures Jesus in the Upper Room with his disciples. It's the night he's to be betrayed and give himself up; all the powers of a world of power and domination and death are closing in on him and his friends. But he says to them, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also."

Then, even though there are some questions, those who know him best are inclined to believe him because they have already seen him at work in this life. They've watched him as he poured his life into caring for people, feeding the multitudes, curing the sick, hanging out with those who were told that they would be the last people in the

world who could expect God to ever give the time of day with them. But there he was, making a place for them in his life just as he had made a place for his friends. His whole life had been convincing. He had lived out this promise that they could belong to God and with God.

You might be able to say the message his friends continued to spread into the world in several ways, but any way you put it, it says that God's love for you is forever. It's not a love that pours it on for a moment, nor is it something that is put off for a later time. It is now and it gives you a place with God now and always and it's so sure, so steadfast that not even death can take it away.

In fact, death might appear to be an end. The promise is so strong that instead death becomes something like the train station: an occasion for a temporary parting, the beginning of another journey, an event where the goodbye is laden with the anticipated hello. And just like Jesus was with you your whole life long, God will be on the train.

"So all will be made alive in Christ...then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: Death has been swallowed up in victory." This might have been from the hand of the writer of this letter, but I believe that it was from the heart of God.

I believe that God's grace is something that is complete. It touches every part of our lives and doesn't leave any part untouched. You begin your life with God's prevenient grace already holding you, given before you were able to do anything for yourself, accepting you, loving you, and preparing you for a life of faith. You got older and did what everybody tends to do: you pushed God away and probably made your life miserable when you did; but God was there by the gift of justifying grace, shaking you awake to the danger you were in with and giving you faith to believe and belong. Converting grace helps you turn your around actual living and sanctifying grace helps you to grow to be more like Jesus and go on toward perfection. Then when everything is said and done there will be God's saving grace, fulfilling all God's promises for you. That's the way the lesson's put when it comes from the Methodist heart.<sup>1</sup>

In Jesus you have been claimed. In the end, you shall be saved. Nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>2</sup> Then, if God's promise is eternal life, love that has no end, the homecoming of Heaven as it were, doesn't it make a difference in the way you live your life? What can a life be like if it is lived secure in ultimate hope? What could it mean for the character of your compassion, the effort you make to contribute to the world? What difference does it make to be convinced that God loves you and will keep you *forever*?

## **In the Boat**

My son, James, and I went on a canoe trip a few years ago. We put the canoe in on the South Branch of the AuSable River at Roscommon and in three days and two nights made our way to the expansive Mio Pond. It stormed through our last night on the river. It continued to storm in the morning so I didn't get out of the tent until I had a plan on how I could pitch the cook fly and start a stove to make my coffee. That done, and a break in the weather, we quickly broke camp and put in for the final leg of the trip. The only problem was that as soon as we set off down stream, I heard more thunder from a storm that was bound to chase us to Mio.

We reached the pond with the storm closing in. The wind started picking up and now on wide, open water I started seeing white caps and considered the danger we might be in with a canoe filled with camping equipment and the effort it would take to keep ourselves from being blown capsized by a strong cross wind. I tried to steer as well as I could to keep the stern windward, right to our backs. But with the storm so near the wind direction kept changing. And it quickly got stronger as I saw the dam and our portage come into view up ahead. It was with great effort that we made it to the wall of the dam where I could steer us alongside it and we could grab the ladder.

Once below the dam and passing under the bridge, more thunder clapped; but we rounded the bend and beached the canoe where Laura's father would meet us. We fixed the canoe to the car roof and climbed inside the warm, dry car; I breathed a sigh of relief.

"That had me worried," I confessed. "For a while I didn't know if we were going to make it without getting swamped."

James was in the front seat. I heard him reply. "Really? I wasn't worried at all," he said.

Laura's father asked, "Why not?"

He said, "O, I just figured it was going to be ok because Dad was in the boat."

I thought to myself, "Yeah, didn't I wish I had *my* dad in the boat?"

Life, itself, can get scary enough, especially when the storms come and toss you around. But I want to tell you that God is in the boat. God is on the train. And it's a promise of our faith that within the goodbye...hello is certain.

## References

- [1] The progression and description of the "graces" of God comes from lessons taught by Dr. Charles Rogers in lectures at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois between 1975 and 1977.
- [2] Romans 8:39.