Life is an endless cycle of beginnings and endings; of comings and goings, of saying hello and saying goodbye. Either one without the other can leave life incomplete and unfinished with ragged edges and painful reminders.

There was an earlier time in my life when I hated saying goodbye, so I avoided it as best I could. Much like the old western hero who got up before daybreak, mounted his horse, and quietly rode out of town before anyone knew he was leaving, I too would often slip away before any of the hugging and kissing and tearful goodbyes could commence. I just found it easier and a lot less awkward to exit without fanfare of any kind. Some people told me they thought it was cowardly of me—like the girl I dated in high school and then left without even saying goodbye, or the people I’d worked with for eight years and then forbid to make any farewell speeches at a going-away party for me. It’s not that I didn’t like or appreciate the people in my life; it’s just that I found the sentimentality that accompanied most partings to be routinely awkward and almost always uncomfortable—so I just avoided saying goodbye whenever I could. The problem, of course, was that it left a number of personal accounts open that should have been closed, often resulting in late emotional fees and unwanted penalties.

Oh, I knew that all beginnings required endings, but some endings can be really painful. Perhaps that is why saying goodbye is so difficult for many of us and why many of us are not very good at saying it. Goodbyes represent an ending, a breaking away from someone or something often experienced as important to our own sense of wholeness, completeness, or fulfillment. And so we often shy away from saying goodbye, wanting rather to hold on to something that has actually come to an end.

We experienced this as a congregation a year ago this month when Pastor Greg retired as our senior minister. For many of us, that marked a difficult time of separation, and although we were not eager to say goodbye, we knew that it was necessary if we were to be able to say hello to anyone new. That transition has been skillfully facilitated by the ministry of Diane Hooge, who has helped prepare us to receive Jonathan Morgan as our new senior minister. But in the process, we have grown to trust and love her and now parting from her will have its own challenges. Saying goodbye to Diane and Ken on July 14 will once again require us to put into words the reality that something we’ve grown to cherish and value has again come to an end. And that’s hard, and it’s apt to be uncomfortable, and it would just be a whole lot easier to do what I once did—which is to simply fade away and skip the goodbyes.
I suspect that some of you may have tried doing that at one time or another, where, instead of saying goodbye, you said any number of other things like maybe, “Oh, that’s okay, I’ll see you again before you go,” or “This isn’t really goodbye, it’s just so-long for now,” or “Stop by whenever you’re back in town and we’ll have coffee, just like old times.” Even when we know that much of what we’re saying is not true, we often try to avoid the reality that none of us really wants to face, which is that we are parting from someone we care about and may never see again; that it’s the end of a chapter. Oh sure, there may be other chapters ahead, but not this one. This one is over, and we have to turn the page. George Eliot (pen name for Mary Anne Evans) was right when she said that “In every parting there is an image of death.”

I learned the meaning of that in 1989 when I received word that my father was dying. He had fallen ill earlier that year and was in and out of several hospitals in the Midwest where numerous tests were performed in an attempt to diagnose the cause of his illness. In the meantime, he continued to grow weaker and weaker and the doctor finally concluded that his body had simply worn out and was shutting down. So the family was summoned to his bedside that he might go over all of his affairs with us to make certain everything was in order. I was scheduled to be in Oregon the following day to perform the wedding of my youngest son who was living out here, and although I was prepared to cancel that trip and remain at his side, my father was insistent: “You need to be with Matt tomorrow,” he said. “I’ll still be here when you get back.”

So I flew to Oregon, performed the wedding, and returned as quickly as I could. But by the time I got back to South Dakota he had already slipped into a coma. Although he opened his eyes from time to time, there was no other movement or response. He died three days later in silence. There have been many times since then when I have invoked his spirit and have summoned his wisdom and strength to come to my aid. But what grieves me to this day is that we never got to say goodbye. Part of the grief associated with that is the realization that there was still so much I wanted to say to him. I wanted to tell him again how much I loved him and how grateful I was that he was my dad. I wanted to tell him how proud I was of him and of what he had accomplished in his life with only an eighth grade education. I wanted to tell him how much I would miss him and how much I really wanted him to postpone his departure and stick around. Oh, I know I had already told him most of that before, but not at the very end. At the very end I wasn’t even there to say goodbye, and it just felt so unfinished, so incomplete.

But we can’t be both here and there at the same time. We can’t be with all the people we care about because all those people are not in the same place at the same time that we are. We can’t lay hold of what is ahead without in some way letting go of what is past. We can’t begin to write a new chapter without declaring the old one finished and turning the page.
Elijah knew that. Elijah knew the time had come for him to say goodbye, and that’s why he said to his younger companion, “Elisha, stay here, for the Lord is sending me on ahead alone.” But Elisha said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you!” Twice more Elijah tried to tell him that the time for parting had come and twice more Elisha tried to avoid it. “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not depart from you!” Elijah was trying to say goodbye but Elisha wasn’t having any of it and was doing everything he could to avoid it. But in the end, it was not for Elisha to determine. For while they were still speaking, “a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” and Elisha saw him no more. Then Elisha tore his clothes as a sign of his grief, picked up the mantle Elijah had left behind for him, and got on with his life. For in the end, parting is inevitable—whether we’re prepared to say goodbye or not.

The Bible is full of partings, which are often quite different from the ones we frequently muddle our way through. There was Moses, who led his people out of slavery in Egypt and wandered with them in the wilderness for forty years. When they finally reached the edge of the Promised Land, so close that he could see it, he gathered the people together to say goodbye. He talked directly about his leaving, without avoidance, without false promise, because he said that the most unavoidable reality—the reality of God—would go with them, and the only promises that Moses related were the changeless promises of God. Their journey was not yet complete. Their dreams still lay in fragments at their feet. But Moses told them that even though they were still homeless, “the eternal God is your dwelling place.” We must part, he said. We can no longer cling to one another, and yet “underneath are the everlasting arms.” For Moses, parting was a time to remind and be reminded of the eternal presence and promises of God.

Then, too, there was Jesus, who did not avoid the pain of parting by merely slipping away. The final third of John’s gospel is a rendition of Jesus’ final words to his disciples. The 17th chapter is even called “The Farewell Discourse of Jesus.” The disciples didn’t want to hear all that Jesus had to say, and Jesus realized that parting was not the time for easy assurances and false promises. So instead, he turned to the assurance of God’s continued presence in their lives and the promise that even in parting we are gathered up together in the peace and love of God.

And then, of course, there was Paul, who through all his travels from church to church had a lot of practice in saying goodbye. Each time he left a particular church community and each time he closed a letter, he offered parting words which reflected his awareness that they might be his last words of farewell. In his final letter to the church in Corinth, he concluded his instructions with these words: “Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (II Corinthians 13:11-13)

Over and over again in Scripture we read of people who, in parting, remind one another of the promises of God, promises that are never fulfilled in any one generation but through the faithfulness of every generation. According to the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, it matters not how commendable our faith may be since God has provided something better so that we would not, apart from those who are yet to come, receive the fullness of God’s promises.
So in what other way can we part? How else can we leave one another and those we love except to entrust them into the care of God? How else can we look at the things we have not had time or ability to say or do—all the broken fragments of our relationships—unless we ask God to gather them up and somehow make them whole, to complete whatever we were not able to complete, and to heal whatever we were not able to heal? That is, after all, what the word goodbye means—it means “God be with you.” What else can we say to one another at parting—be it for an hour, a day, or for eternity—that does not otherwise simply wither and fall at our feet as soon as it is said? And so we say:

  God be with you, because I can no longer be with you.
  God be with you, because if God is with you and God is with me, then somehow we are still together.
  God be with you, because though our lives are not much more than a collection of fragments—some with jagged edges—God promises to make them complete and to make us whole as well—all in God’s own good time.

Amen.