

## **Message for October 30, 2022**

### **John 3:14-17**

One of my favourite TV shows is the American version of “The Office”, and as I thought about what to say here this morning I thought of one episode in particular. It is the one entitled “Goodbye Michael”. Michael was the manager of a sales office and he had fallen in love with a woman named Holly. She had moved out of state to Colorado and Michael had decided to join her there.

It was the day before his last day in the office and Michael obviously had mixed feelings. On the one hand it was his idea to leave, and he was looking forward to his new life with Holly. On the other hand, he was leaving both the job and the people whom he loved. The women in the office were busy planning his goodbye party scheduled for the next day and as they did so, Michael wandered around and made a point of speaking to all of the employees. No one took any note of this except for one salesman, Jim. Quietly Jim asked Michael if he was going to be back the next day. Michael’s answer was to say ‘no’, and that he was flying out that evening; the prospect of his last day there and saying goodbye to everyone was just too painful for him.

I must admit that in a way, this appealed to me. Rather than a ‘last’ service, I would have simply led the worship services last Sunday as I normally do, greeted at the door, and then that would have been it with no one any the wiser. To have done that of course would have been unfair to everyone including myself and so here I am. But what am I supposed to say to you on this, my last Sunday as your minister after thirty-three years?

As I thought about this during the past three months, I kept coming back to one of my favourite stories. It is based on a sermon that was first preached back in the Middle Ages, though I have substantially changed it. I hope and pray that it captures what the gospel, and my ministry with you have been all about. I call it “The Farmer who went to Heaven”.

Once upon a time there was a farmer named Pierre. Pierre lived a long life, and then he died. The good news was that when he died there wasn’t a devil waiting to carry him off to hell; the not-so-good news though was that there

wasn't an angel waiting to carry him up to heaven either. Off in the distance he saw an angel carrying a ransomed soul off to paradise and so he decided to follow them.

When Pierre arrived at the gates of heaven, he discovered that they were shut and locked. He knocked on the gates and after a moment St. Peter came and opened them.

"Who are you and what do you want?", Peter asked.

"My name is Pierre and I want to come in.", Pierre replied.

"Well, you can't because heaven is not for people the likes of you. Now go away and leave us alone!"

"But what are you doing here?", Pierre asked.

"What do you mean, 'what am I doing here'? I am St. Peter!"

"I know who you are", said Pierre. "I know that you were the right-hand man of Jesus and the rock upon which Christ said that he would build his church. You were a great missionary too and you even died for the faith when you were crucified upside down in Rome. I also know though that you were the one who, on that first Good Friday, bragged about how you would never desert Jesus in his time of need. After Jesus' arrest though, you denied knowing him not once, not twice, but three times! I have never denied knowing Jesus and so I have as much right to be in heaven as you do, so let me in!"

Well, Peter was so embarrassed at being reminded about how he had behaved on that first Good Friday that he slammed the door shut and went off to tell his good friend, St. Thomas, about this farmer at the gate demanding entrance. Thomas listened to Peter and then told him that he would deal with this farmer who wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Going down to the gate and opening it, Thomas said:

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"My name is Pierre and I want to come in."

"Well, you can't" came the reply, "heaven isn't for people the likes of you. Now go away and leave us alone!"

"But what are you doing here?", Pierre asked.

“What do you mean, ‘what am I doing here’, I am St. Thomas!”

“I know who you are”, Pierre replied. “I also know that you were a faithful disciple and that some people say that you even went all the way to India to preach the good news of the gospel. I also know though that you didn’t believe it when you were first told that Christ had been raised from the dead. In fact you even said that you wouldn’t believe it unless Jesus made a special resurrection appearance just for you. Well, Jesus has never made a special appearance to me, but I still believe in him. I have as much right to be in heaven as you do, so let me in!”

Well, Thomas was so embarrassed at being reminded how he had acted on that first Easter Sunday, that he slammed the gate shut. He went off and told his good friend St. Paul about the farmer at the gate who wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. “I’ll take care of him”, Paul responded, and off he went. Opening the door, he demanded to know who Pierre was and what he wanted.

“My name is Pierre and I want to come in.”

“Well, you can’t”, came the impatient reply. “Heaven is not for people the likes of you. Now go away and leave us alone!”

“But what are you doing here?”, Pierre asked.

“What do you mean, ‘what am I doing here?’ I am St. Paul!”

“I know who you are. You are the great missionary who traveled all over preaching the good news of the gospel. You are also the one who wrote many of the letters in the New Testament. It is even said that you were martyred for the faith, but I also know that you are the one who hated Christ and his followers at first. You are the one who urged the mob to kill St. Stephen, the first of the holy martyrs. You were also on the way to Damascus to persecute the followers of Jesus there. The only thing that stopped you was being blinded by the light. I have never persecuted anyone, and Christ didn’t have to make a special appearance to me so that I might have faith and believe in him. I have as much right to be in heaven as you do, so let me in!”

Well, St. Paul was so embarrassed at being reminded about his earlier days that he slammed the door shut. He met with Peter and Thomas, and the three of them decided to go and tell God about the farmer at the gate who would not take ‘no’ for an answer. God listened to them and then said that he would

talk to Pierre. God then went down, opened the gate, and asked Pierre who he was and what he wanted.

“My name is Pierre” came the humble reply, “and I would like to come in.”

“But why should I let you in?” God asked, “All you are doing is making a ruckus and upsetting the saints.”

“Ah, Lord God”, said Pierre. “I know that nothing in myself makes me worthy of inheriting the life everlasting. I tried to love you with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. I tried to love my neighbours as myself. As you well know though, I often failed. When I did, I confessed and tried to put things right but even so ... I know that nothing in myself makes me worthy of the resurrection life. But I do have faith and believe in your one and only Son, who lived, was crucified, raised, and even now is praying for me. I believe that you sent your Son into the world, not to condemn the world but rather to save it through him. And so, for the sake of your Son, crucified and raised for even such as I, may I please come in?”

And the Lord God looked at him, and then he smiled, and his smile lit up the entire universe. “Well said; I sent my Son into the world, not to condemn the world but to save it, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Enter into the joy of your master.” And with that heaven’s mighty gates swung open wide. The bells pealed, the organs roared, the trumpets blared and yes, the bagpipes skirled (for what would heaven be without bagpipes?), and in went Pierre.

Now of course this is just a story but I hope that it captures some of what my ministry here during the past thirty-three years has been all about: faith, forgiveness, hope, new beginnings and love. So ends my sermon, and there is only one thing left to say, and that is not goodbye.

It was during the dark days of the pandemic, and in a speech the Queen famously said these words of hope and promise, “We shall meet again.” In the days after her death, these words took on even more significance because they capture the hope and promise of our Christian faith. We don’t know when and we don’t know how, but we do know that one day we shall all meet again. For us, the disciples of Jesus, there is no final goodbye. And there is no greater

reminder of this than the sacrament that we will now celebrate. In the words of the last verse in this morning's last praise:

Feast after feast thus comes and passes by,  
Yet, passing, points to that glad feast above,  
Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy,  
The Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love.

And so it does.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this day of endings and beginnings.

At this time of transition, we confess to our mixed feelings as our church family enters another stage in that wonderful, mysterious journey that we call life.

With the retirement of our minister, we give you thanks for the good of these years past and the good memories we have. We thank you for all the members of our church family who have, and still do serve you faithfully in so many different ways.

We confess to you that we feel some trepidation as we journey into the unknown future with the changes to come. We pray for your blessing upon us, and on the Interim-Moderator whomever that person will be. We pray for your blessing as well on the Session members, Managers and all the other people and groups that make our church family so special.

Help us to remember that as we continue our journey of faith, you are always present. With this in mind, help us to remember who and what we are, your Son's disciples, called to follow and minister at this time and place. Confident in your love and forgiveness, may we do our best for the glory of your name.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen

