

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 7.19.20, 2 Timothy 1:12, Psalm 23:6

In my clergy groups there are two opinions about final sermons. One opinion is that on your final Sunday, in your final service, the sermon should address that, not ignore it, or pretend it isn't happening, that the sermon should be a chance to say goodbye.

The other is that's possibly too emotional for a sermon, and makes the service about you, the pastor, rather than the congregation, the Lord Jesus, the word of God, and so instead you should treat it like any other Sunday, interpreting a message from the Lord for our lives.

But, given that it is my final Sunday with you, and that I'm the one doing the preaching, I get to decide, and I've decided: both. I choose both. Because I want to say goodbye to you, and acknowledge that this is happening, but also I know that you didn't come here just to hear a goodbye, and that like every Sunday that you've been here, long before I arrived, and long after I leave, you are here to listen for God's word to you today. This is my last Sunday with you, but also you have much more going on in your lives than my leaving, and the word of the Lord stands forever, through every change and shift and season, and so I will say goodbye, but also hopefully will leave you with something more than that.

Part of my goodbye is to tell you the final thing in my series of things I want to make sure I've said to you before I go. I've told you that God loves you, that God cares about you, that you are allowed to rest, that you are allowed to doubt, and that God is with you in whatever difficulties you face. Today, I want you to know that you are with God, now and forever.

Throughout my whole time here, I have prayed for you, about you, and with you. I have thought about you more than you know, collectively and individually.

That's part of why pastors are so tiring when we get together, because basically all we think and talk about are our churches and their people, and frankly, it's a little hard to shut that conversation off, if you want to, say, talk about anything else. I am no exception, I've spent nearly five years thinking about, talking about, planning for, visioning for, praying about and praying for you. And that last part's the most important, because as much as I want to be capable and use the gifts God gave me, I am just one person, an extremely imperfect person, and if you were only in my hands, that would not be a great place to be, no matter how good my intentions and my skills. So, it should come as some comfort to you that as often as I've talked about you and thought about you, that I have prayed about you, that is, I have made sure you were not just in my imperfect hands, and instead I have entrusted you, as our passage says, to the Lord. And, I'm not really lifting you over and over again into God's hands, but I'm human and limited, and so that's often how it feels when we pray, that we entrust everything and everyone to God, over and over again. And I have, over and over again, entrusted you, committed you, to the Lord. So you are with the Lord, now and forever. You are entrusted to God, I have committed you to God, and so you are in the very best hands. I just wanted you to know.

And that was true, always, my whole time here, but probably matters more, as I leave. My leaving doesn't change that at all. You are entrusted to God, it's done, and God is able to guard that which I have committed, for all time. Before, and now, and always, you are with the Lord, you are in God's hands, you are committed and entrusted to the one who will guard you always. That's true no matter who is at this pulpit.

But, I'm not the only one who has done this. Some of you have been in the church a long time, and some of you were raised in families of Christian faith, and so you have long been aware that you were in God's hands, you have had parents and family members, elders and friends in your church who entrusted you to God,

who committed you and your life and your purpose to God. And I know, because you are a praying church, that you do that for each other. I have seen you pray for each other in our services here, I have heard your prayer requests on behalf of each other, I know that you entrust each other to God, you commit each other into the the guardianship of the Lord.

Even more comforting is the knowledge that Jesus did this, too. Last week we heard a passage from John 17 where Jesus prays, and the focus of that prayer is his disciples in front of him, but also he prays for those who will believe through them, for the generations of faithful Christians who came from the seeds they planted. That is, he prays for us. So, we are entrusted to God's hand, committed to God's care, through the prayer and petition of Jesus Christ. So absolutely nothing is keeping us from being with God.

Our passage today says "I know the one in whom I have put my trust". We know in whom we have trusted, in whom we have believed. And if you know Jesus at all, then you know that Jesus prayed and placed us squarely in God's hands. We know Jesus did that, and so we are with God always, we are loved by God, cared for by God, we are in God's hands through rest and doubt, in whatever we are facing, we are with God, now and forever.

Sometimes we think about returning to the Lord when we die, and that's true and comforting, but it's not only a promise for the future. 2 Timothy says I am sure that he is able to guard until that day, that is the guarding is going on now, and always. Our psalm says surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And THEN it hopes that we will dwell in God's house forevermore. It's a now-and-always promise, a desire to be with God now and always, in God's goodness and mercy and guarding all the days of our lives and to dwell in god's house forevermore. And what I'm telling you is that's not just an aspiration or a dream or an unfulfilled desire. I want you to know, that I, and people in this

church, and people in your life, and the Lord Jesus himself, have entrusted you to God, and so it is true. You are with God now and forevermore. Goodness and mercy all the days of your life, entrusted and guarded until that day, and then dwelling in God's house forevermore. I wanted you to know that.

And there's no earning it, no approval required. You don't have to make up for it, and pay for it. I, and others, and most importantly, Jesus Christ, have entrusted you, committed you to God, so you are already there, in the everlasting arms, all the days of our lives, and forevermore.

All we have to do, if we're going to DO anything, is what this scripture says at the very beginning, I know the one in whom I have put my trust. If you want to feel this more securely, if you want to know it more surely, then it's worth any time you spend knowing the Lord better. It's worth any time you spend in this place, or in worship, it's worth any time you spend with other Christians who challenge you and help you and pray for you. It's worth any time you spend studying scripture and learning and re-learning, no matter how long you've been a believer, or how long you have believed certain things or certain ways. The better you know Jesus, the better you know the Lord God, the better you know the Holy Spirit, the better you know the body of Christ here on earth, the more you know the one to whom you have been entrusted, the more sure you will be, the confident you will be that this promise is true: you are with God, now and forever. Knowing the Lord better will only make it more true, more sure for you.

And that knowledge, that promise, I hope it inspires you to keep lifting each other to the Lord. It doesn't mean we toss up our hands in defeat and surrender, it doesn't mean we stop doing anything ourselves, and I'm not gonna add an extra sermon in here about that, we are too smart to believe it's one or the other. We know that action and work and discipleship is required of us, too. This promise just means that we don't do it alone. We just don't do it on our own. We don't take on

the role of God and guardian, when we know there is someone who is such a better one, someone to whom we can commit and entrust all things, all people, someone who is good and merciful, someone to whom we have been entrusted, and we know so well.

You do not have to do this life alone. You do not have to go through any of it alone. God loves you, cares about you, is with you through rest and doubt and difficulties, and you have been entrusted to God, now, and forevermore. I have done that, for you, and so have countless others, and you do it for each other, and the Lord Jesus has entrusted and committed you to God. We do not do anything alone. We do all things under the care and guarding of a God who loves us, a God who cares about us, a God who allows for rest and doubt, a God who is with us in difficulty and trial, who is with us now, and forevermore.

Even as I leave you, and as I leave you committed and entrusted to the hands of God, I will continue to pray for you. I pray that you will live and grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. I pray that you will keep gathering together in whatever ways the church evolves. I pray that you will keep entrusting each other to the Lord. I pray that you will show each other love and care, that you will rest, that you will wrestle with your own doubts and stand by each other in their doubts, I pray that you will be spared most difficulties, but when you are not, that you will know God's presence and each other's presence, and I pray that you will live in the presence of God now and forevermore. I pray that you will know this today: you are committed and entrusted to God, right now, and always, you are in the very best hands. I pray that we will all live that way, all the days of our lives, and when those days are over, and the separation of time and geography has ended, I pray that we will all dwell together in God's house, forevermore. Amen.