

You've Got a Friend in Me: 3. Endings...and New Beginnings

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4; 1 Corinthians 13:11-13

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There are times when I look in the mirror, and I wonder what happened, because I can remember when I looked in the mirror and saw a much younger version of me. Or at least once a day, I will walk into our family room and notice the photos on our fireplace mantle - pictures of our daughters taken a long time ago. And I'd like to go back there. It all went so fast. In his book, *Necessary Endings*, Dr. Henry Cloud reminds us that endings are not only part of life, they are a requirement for living. We may not like them, but they are crucial – and followed by a new beginning.

Today, we continue our series by turning to Toy Story 3 and looking at life's transitions. Toy Story 1 was about Andy and his toys that come to life. In that movie, Andy was a young child. Then last week in Toy Story 2, Andy was a little older. Now, in Toy Story 3, Andy has grown up and is ready to go off to college. He doesn't need the toys anymore. This movie looks at what happens in the transitions as one thing ends and a new thing begins. With Andy leaving for college, his mom says it's time to decide what to do with the things in his room. She wants him to put his things in three piles – one pile is those things that will go to college, another is things that will be stored in the attic, and the third is things that will be thrown away. The question for the toys is, where will they end up? [Video #1]

It's the challenge that we all face in transitions. What will happen to us? Where will we end up? We don't know. Andy doesn't want to throw his toys away, but they don't know that. He puts Woody, the cowboy which has always been his favorite, in the box that will go to college and all the rest are put in a garbage bag for the attic. But Andy gets distracted and when his mom sees the garbage bag, she assumes it is trash and takes it to the curb for the garbage truck. The toys are terrified but manage to escape. And as they head back toward the house, they notice a box that will be donated to Sunnyside Child Care, and they climb inside. When they arrive at the Child Care, they think they've arrived in heaven. The children will love them and play with them and when the children outgrow the toys, new children will arrive. It's heaven! But what they don't realize is they've been donated to the two year old room and they are not two year old toys. [Video #2]

What they thought was heaven, turns out to be just the opposite and they want out. So they approach the toy that is in charge of all the other toys. It's "Lots-o-Hugs." If you remember Care Bears, he like that – and he smells like strawberries – only he has become a cruel tyrant who won't let them leave. If he can keep them in the two year old room, it will spare the other toys from being broken or torn apart. What we discover is a character that was once kind and caring has become the embodiment of evil and the question is "How did that happen?" How can a person go from kind and caring to mean and hurtful? And here's the answer. [Video 3]

We are born in the image of God, and yet we struggle with our own brokenness. Something happens to us. A week ago last Thursday, there was a march from Parker's Lake to Plymouth City Hall where there was a protest in support of black persons in our community. One of the speakers was a twelve year old girl who described how she first became aware of her color when a friend told her they could no longer play together because her friend's mother did not want her daughter playing with a black girl. It was Nelson Mandela who said: **No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate.** We are not born with cruelty. It happens to us. And Lots-o-Hugs

experienced pain and abandonment and being replaced, and instead of letting go of that, he continued to feed it, becoming this mean character.

In our lifetime, all of us will experience pain. What will we do with that pain? Hang on to it and let it control us, and it will build this wall between us and others. This is Father's Day, and the truth is there are no perfect fathers. Your dad may be the best, but even the best dad is not perfect. Dads make mistakes, and maybe your dad never measured up to what you wanted or needed. Some dads were not kind and caring. Some dads were absent. What do we do with that? Either we choose to focus on our pain and disappointment or we let it go and forgive. Remember, forgiveness is not saying whatever happened is okay, but it is choosing not to hang on to the pain. It may not be healthy to remain in that relationship, but you can still let go of the pain. Because the person being hurt by not letting go is you. Jesus was constantly forgiving people, because people had a hard time believing they could be forgiven. He also taught that we have to be able to forgive if we hope to experience the freedom of being forgiven. It's in the prayer that bears his name: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." We ask for forgiveness to the same degree that we forgive others. And if not, we become like Lots-o.

Years ago, I was meeting with a family to plan their father's funeral. At one point, the oldest son in his 50s began to cry as he told how he never heard his dad say "I love you." It was a pain that he had carried throughout his life. Later we had a conversation about this, and I suggested he write a letter to his dad, sharing his pain and offering forgiveness so he could let it go. And he did. He placed the letter in his dad's casket, and on the day of the funeral, he buried his pain – and it changed his life.

Lots-o kept feeding the pain. In the movie, Woody escaped the Child Care Center but returns to rescue his friends. In the process of being rescued, they all end up falling into the trash dumpster and being taken to the trash station to be destroyed. Woody and the other toys desperately try to climb out of the trash that is moving toward the incinerator, but they reach a point where they realize they are going to die. Watch what happens. [Video 4] Ready to face the end together, they take each other's hands and find comfort in spite of what's ahead. We need each other. And we need something greater.

The greatest transition that every one of us will face is the transition from this life to the next. A week ago, one of our members called. She was with her dad in another part of the country. He had entered hospice care and was not expected to live more than a couple days. On Sunday afternoon, she was at his bedside along with other family members when she called. And others were connected by phone. She put me on speaker phone, and I read from John 14: *In my father's house are many rooms, If that were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you. And when I go, I will return and take you to myself so that where I am, you will be also.* And then I asked her to make the sign of the cross on her dad's forehead as I said: *You are marked with the sign of the cross and sealed as God's own forever. In the name of the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit, from God you came and unto God you will return.* And I asked everyone in the room to place a hand on their husband and father and I asked those on the phone to hold out their hands – and I prayed, thanking God for his life and commending him to God's eternal care. When my time comes, I hope my kids and even a few friends would be at my bedside to send me home. That's true friendship connected to each other and to God.

You'll have to watch the movie to see how the toys are rescued. One thing ends, but there is a new beginning. The toys make it back to Andy's house and climb into a box that will be put in the attic. But instead Andy decides to give that box of toys to a little girl named Bonnie who lives

around the corner. And as he gives the toys to Bonnie, we see another ending and a new beginning. That scene reminded me of the day we took our youngest daughter to college in Syracuse, New York. As we drove across New York state, I thought of all that we had experienced, from preschool to kindergarten to elementary school, middle school and finally high school graduation – all the birthday parties and the vacations we had taken together. And though I was happy for her to be going off to school, as I remembered all the endings, the tears began to flow. The years go by so quickly.

The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that's the reality of life. **There's a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens...** And what I've found is that even when I'm sad about an ending, there will be a new beginning. I was sad that Bethany was growing up, but if that hadn't happened I never would have experienced the joy of being a grandpa. And if we can remember that God is with us in the transitions of life, there is hope for what is yet to be. Paul describes this in his letter to the Corinthians. In the present moment what we see may be a dim reflection in a mirror. We don't understand everything today. There are plenty of questions about certain things that have happened and why God doesn't intervene, but Paul is saying the day will come when we will know everything. It will become clear, but in the meantime, there are three things we can count on— faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love. [Video #5]

When everything else changes, the one thing you can always count on is God's love. God is saying to you, You've Got a Friend in me.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of June 21, 2020

Weekly Prayer: God of all creation, the one God who remains with us on both sides of life, help us to remain faithful as we run the race that is before us. Guide us through each transition and to overcome each obstacle that we face. In every ending, may we see an opportunity for a new beginning, knowing that your gifts of faith, hope, and love will remain with us. Amen.

Monday, June 22

Scripture: Psalm 90:12; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; 1 Corinthians 13:11-13

Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart.

There's a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens:

a time for giving birth and a time for dying,
a time for planting and a time for uprooting what was planted,
a time for killing and a time for healing,
a time for tearing down and a time for building up,
a time for crying and a time for laughing,
a time for mourning and a time for dancing,
a time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones,
a time for embracing and a time for avoiding embraces,
a time for searching and a time for losing,
a time for keeping and a time for throwing away,
a time for tearing and a time for repairing,
a time for keeping silent and a time for speaking,
a time for loving and a time for hating,
a time for war and a time for peace.

When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, reason like a child, think like a child. But now that I have become a man, I've put an end to childish things. Now we see a reflection in a mirror; then we will see face-to-face. Now I know partially, but then I will know completely in the same way that I have been completely known. Now faith, hope, and love remain—these three things—and the greatest of these is love.

“So long, partner.” – Woody, saying farewell to Andy.

Observation: Part of the charm of the Toy Story films' fictional world is that the human characters grow up, but the toys do not. Woody will not outgrow Andy, but college-age Andy sees his toys differently than when he was little. Father's Day honors the bonds that unite good fathers with their children, but also reminds us that both fathers and children change as years roll by. The apostle Paul knew that, spiritually, it is a good thing to mature and “put an end to childish things.” But he also reminded his readers that “faith, hope and love remain.” These are God-given realities we can always count on.

Application: The ancient Hebrews had a strong sense of how time's passage alters our experience in this world. Ecclesiastes 3 listed multiple seasons of life. Psalm 90:12 said, “Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart.” Our culture, on the other hand, tries to ignore our limits of time in an effort to keep us “forever young.” How can facing the truth that you do not have an unlimited supply of days change the way you live?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to use my limited supply of days well. Keep me growing in my capacity to love as you love, to love in a way that can last for all eternity. Amen.

Tuesday, June 23

Scripture: John 16:32-33

Look! A time is coming—and is here!—when each of you will be scattered to your own homes and you will leave me alone. I'm not really alone, for the Father is with me. I've said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world.”

Woody: You wait. Andy's gonna tuck us in the attic. It'll be safe and warm...

Buzz Lightyear: And we'll all be together.

Observation: Woody and the toys anticipated no problems when Andy went to college. Things didn't work out quite as they expected. According to John's gospel, on the night before Jesus went to the cross, Jesus told his followers, “In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world.” Jesus did not offer the false hope that his followers would always be safe. After all, the world they lived in was about to take his life on a cross! But Jesus did tell them to “be encouraged,” because he knew that he was conquering the world's painful impermanence.

Application: Many people in Jesus' day, and in ours, think (perhaps subconsciously) that being good or following Jesus should be a kind of insurance. Jesus didn't see it that way. How do you react to his honest words: “In the world you have distress”? How can you live into the flip side of his teaching—to “be encouraged” even in distress because he's overcome the world?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me, even when I can't fully know the why of whatever suffering I face, to know the who—you!—who is with me, and who sustains me and gives me hope. Amen.

Wednesday, June 24

Scripture: John 14:5-10

Thomas asked, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you have really known me, you will also know the Father. From now on you know him and have seen him.” Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us.” Jesus replied, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don’t speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works.

“Oh, I hate all this uncertainty.” – Rex, concerned about where the toys are heading.

Observation: Especially as things are changing in our lives, we all feel like Rex, the toy dinosaur. Jesus’ disciples felt uncertainty and fear when Jesus spoke of going away. Thomas had a gift for honest questions. He wouldn’t pretend to understand if he didn’t understand. He demanded to know the way, to know where Jesus was going. The answer was not a place, but a person. Jesus said he was going “to the Father” (John 14:12).

Application: Repeatedly in John’s gospel, Jesus said those who trust in him have eternal life—present tense (John 3:36, 5:24, 6:47 and 54). We can begin living the eternal quality of life that Jesus came to offer us now, not just at death. In what ways can you make God’s love and grace the home in which you live spiritually every day? How can making Jesus your spiritual home fill your life with what the apostle Paul called “the peace of God that exceeds all understanding” (Philippians 4:7)?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to stop hoping (whether a little or a lot) that I’m good enough to be part of your eternal kingdom. Teach me to rest in the certainty that accepting your love assures me of an eternal home with you. Amen.

Thursday, June 25

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19; Mark 2:14-17

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, show us mercy!” When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” As they left, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus replied, “Weren’t ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.”

As he continued along, he saw Levi, Alphaeus’ son, sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Levi got up and followed him. Jesus sat down to eat at Levi’s house. Many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples. Indeed, many of them had become his followers. When some of the legal experts from among the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, “Why is he eating with sinners and tax collectors?” When Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor, but sick people do. I didn’t come to call righteous people, but sinners.”

Chuckles the sad clown: I knew Lotso. He was a good toy....Me and him, we had the same kid: Daisy....Daisy loved us all. But Lotso...Lotso was special. They did everything together. Never seen a kid and toy more in love. One day we took a drive, hit a rest stop, had a little playtime. After lunch, Daisy fell asleep. She never came back. Lotso wouldn't give up. It took forever, but we finally made it back to Daisy's. But by then, it was too late. Something changed that day inside Lotso. Something snapped.

Observation: In Toy Story 3, we meet Lotso as the bad guy, a devious, despotic bear bossing the other day care center toys around. Then we learn more—when Daisy lost and replaced Lotso, that hurt. Jesus shocked good people by calling a tax collector (who worked for Herod Antipas and/or the Romans) to join him. Jesus healed ten lepers—men with visible skin diseases, shunned and outcast. Some were Israelites, at least one a Samaritan. Jesus ignored those barriers, and he healed them all. Jesus didn't despise hurt people like Lotso. He cared about trying to reach them!

Application: Jesus cleansed ten lepers. When the Samaritan returned to say, “thank you,” Jesus used a stronger word that can even mean “saved,” saying, “Your faith has saved you” (verse 19). The other nine were merely cleansed. If ingratitude is more deadly than leprosy, they were in worse shape than before. Only one came back and was made whole. What blocks gratitude in your life? What helps you remember to thank God every day?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for caring about humans who carry hurts (all of us). Help me find, with human help if necessary, your healing for my hurts, so that I do not keep passing them along. Amen.

Friday, June 26

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; 1 Peter 5:5-6, 10-11

Look at your situation when you were called, brothers and sisters! By ordinary human standards not many were wise, not many were powerful, not many were from the upper class. But God chose what the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considers weak to shame the strong. And God chose what the world considers low-class and low-life—what is considered to be nothing—to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing. So no human being can brag in God's presence. It is because of God that you are in Christ Jesus. He became wisdom from God for us. This means that he made us righteous and holy, and he delivered us. This is consistent with what was written: *The one who brags should brag in the Lord!*

In the same way, I urge you who are younger: accept the authority of the elders. And everyone, clothe yourselves with humility toward each other. God stands against the proud, but he gives favor to the humble. Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day.

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, the one who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you. To him be power forever and always. Amen.

Lotso: Ain't one kid ever loved a toy, really.

Woody: Wait! What about Daisy?...You used to do everything with her?

Lotso: Yeah. Then she threw us out.

Woody: She lost you....You lied to Big Baby, and you've been lying ever since. (Tosses heart with "Daisy" written on it.)

Big Baby: Mama?!

Lotso: What? You want your mommy back? She never loved you! Don't be such a baby!" (He crushes the reminder of Daisy's love. Big Baby picks Lotso up and throws him into the dumpster.)

Observation: Sadly, Lotso hardened his heart against love's message, and kept on hurting other toys. It led to an unhappy ending for him. This doesn't just happen in Disney movies. Early Christian believers often faced Roman government persecution, division in families and economic hardship. Yet the apostles Paul and Peter wrote confidently that good ultimately defeats evil. The Roman Empire (along with Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin and many other tyrants) are gone. The family of humble, ordinary people who follow Jesus is still here.

Application: In what way(s) is it a compliment, not a putdown, that God calls ordinary people, not just people who are superstars? Paul himself graduated from his day's top rabbinic school. Why did he stress, not those human credentials, but God's choice of "what the world considers foolish...weak" (see verse 29)? How easy or hard is it for you to see that, no matter your human credentials or accomplishments, you are one of the ordinary people through whom God works?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it's easy for human eyes to miss. But ever since you walked out of the tomb on Easter, you've been calling us to see that your way is the winning way. Make me a part of your winning spiritual team. Amen.

Saturday, June 27

Scripture: John 17:6-11, 20-24

"I have revealed your name to the people you gave me from this world. They were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. This is because I gave them the words that you gave me, and they received them. They truly understood that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I'm praying for them. I'm not praying for the world but for those you gave me, because they are yours. Everything that is mine is yours and everything that is yours is mine; I have been glorified in them. I'm no longer in the world, but they are in the world, even as I'm coming to you. Holy Father, watch over them in your name, the name you gave me, that they will be one just as we are one.

"I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. I've given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. I'm in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me. "Father, I want those you gave me to be with me where I am. Then they can see my glory, which you gave me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

Andy, giving the toys to Bonnie: Now, you gotta promise to take good care of these guys. They mean, a lot to me.

Observation: *Toy Story 3* showed that even when Andy's time with his toys was over, his love and care for them wasn't. That was even more true of the way Jesus related to his followers. On the night before he went to the cross, he focused most of his prayer on asking God to guard his

disciples as they faced a hostile world. He didn't limit his concern to the group around him that evening. Jesus was confident his kingdom would defeat the world's hatred, and in time reach you.

Application: How does your heart respond when you realize that Jesus prayed for you? Twice (verse 11, verses 20-23) Jesus prayed that his followers be one. He didn't pray for unity based on human niceness, but on an eternal reality he invited all to join: "I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (verse 21). What issues or practices create the most division in your heart between you and other believers? How can God help you to live more fully into the unity Jesus prayed for? In verse 14, Jesus said, a bit surprisingly, that his followers "don't belong to this world" any more than he did. In what ways are you most focused on this world? In what areas of life do you most sense your energy and focus shifting to God's Kingdom, both in God's mission in this world and in the hope of eternity beyond this world that God offers?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for praying for me on that dark, ominous night when the cross loomed ahead of you. Fill my heart with the transforming sense of how much you love and care for me. Amen.