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We have been unpacking things in our new home in North Liberty. For a while, it seemed like the parade of boxes was unending, but things have started to slow up a bit. Things are starting to settle and take shape, and that is a good thing. It has been a cleansing process, as well, as far as throwing away things goes...so much unwanted stuff seems to accumulate in our dark corners, does it not? And it's a good thing indeed to bid a fond farewell to such worthless stuff.

But perhaps the most fascinating thing for me has been the things that are to go up on the walls. I have been pulling pictures from boxes and examining them in order to figure out where they belong. I have noticed a few things in the meantime. Some pictures are very old, some almost a hundred years old in fact...pictures of ancestors long since dead....and some of these are still in their old, original frames. Other old photos are in new frames, because the old ones broke somewhere along the line. Other photos are new...in new frames. Some frames are completely empty, new wedding gifts just waiting to be filled with some snapshot from time, faces and places to be captured and hung on the wall. This is a bizarre exercise, to behold the old hanging alongside the new, to see the old framed anew and the new frames hanging empty. And yet, however odd this collection might seem, they all somehow belong together on the same wall.

And so it is with us. We have been together a long time, since April 22, 2001. Together, we have collected old memories and experiences, we have gathered common snapshots of faces and places and times from long ago...we have departed loved ones, faces that we will not see again this side of heaven, faces engraved in our minds and frozen in time...we have our common old photos that go on that wall...hung in old frames, portraits from the past, moments forever frozen in time.

And we also have old photos that are in new frames...new ways of thinking about the past, new ways of interpreting all of our yesterdays. New ways of understanding old things...like the Bible...like family systems...like the church and history and art and music. New methods of appreciating precious things that have been handed down from generation from of old. Old pictures, in new frames.

We also have new pictures, in new frames. We have new faces, new families, new experiences, fresh memories that are not yet dusty. New babies, recent baptisms, fresh marriages. Recent graduates, brand new jobs, new teachers, a new school year, fresh classrooms waiting for the clamor of little voices, new cars, fresh grief, new alliances, new friendships...new beginnings, new ways of thinking about today and tomorrow.

All of these things are hung on the wall we call life. And this is the image I commend to you today. Framed things hung on the wall, your wall and my wall...the collage we call life. It doesn't blend perfectly, it doesn't match harmoniously, it is not symmetrical. It is messy and yet it is beautiful and it is life, life we have shared for over 13 years.

One of my favorite authors is Frederick Buechner, and he has an interesting way of describing the job of a preacher. He said the preacher's job is "to use words to somehow try to put a frame around those things that cannot be described." And that image fits here, too...that there are those empty picture frames on the wall, too...some of them are empty because they are simply waiting for time to fill them...or else they are empty because they frame certain truths that simply cannot be articulated. There

are truths in life, truths like today, that defy description....there is that unnamed emotion where grief and joy mix...there is laughter through tears...there is the collision between fear and confidence...there is that strange feeling you get when you meet someone you swear you've known your whole life...there is de ja vous...there is the love one can feel for a total stranger...there is that peculiar thing you feel when you consider the enormity of the universe, the confusion of faith, that odd place between wanting to have faith and simply not being able to...there is a whole wall full of empty frames that life will fill, all in due time.

I am not sure of the connection between this image and today's Gospel. Maybe there simply isn't one. But I am sure of the connection between this image and Jesus, and that is that he is the wall...holding all of these disparate things together...the past, the present and the days to come...all of the new photos and the old, the sad ones and the triumphant, the Alpha and the Omega. And I thank him, especially this day, for over 13 years' worth of framed photos you've given me and I've given you...

I thank him for the grace he's given us, sorely undeserved, for the times I've preached to you and you've preached to me, for the times I've ministered to you and the times you've ministered to me, for the times we've failed each other and the times we've rescued each other, for sins forgiven and embraces exchanged. Thank you for sharing with me a common faith in this Jesus who holds us together even when distance might now separate us. Thank you for being gracious to allow me to hang some pictures on your wall, pictures from the years we've shared together. And thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for the pictures you've given to me, old ones and new ones and empty frames, that I will always treasure whenever I think of you. Thirteen years. Thank God none of us looks even a smidge older...just better... and, dare I say, even more beautiful than yesterday.