

“I Will not Leave You Orphaned”

This sermon was preached on the Sixth Sunday of Easter at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church in Riverside which was also the occasion of the baptism of Maycee Laine Gillund, daughter of Robert and Susan Gillund, and the granddaughter of Terry and Margaret Gillund and the late George and Elaine Pagurko. The texts were I Peter 3:13-22 and John 14:15-21

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart; / wean it from earth, Through all its pulses move; / stoop to my weakness, strength to me impart, / and make me love you as I ought to love (ELW 800).

For several long chapters in John’s Gospel (John 14-17), as Jesus is saying goodbye to his friends and followers, the word that prevails is “love.” “If you love me you will keep my commandments... .” “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you... .” “Whoever does not love me does not keep my words... .” “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

For Jesus, love is not a happy emotion of fluttering hearts, as we’ve been taught to think of love, and as we soak in it on February 14th. For Jesus, love is a courageous act of devotion offered for the benefit of others, even and especially those whom we consider to be our enemies and adversaries. “You’ve heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven... .” (Matthew 5:43, 44).

When Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement was abused by assaults of racial injustice and even hatred, King said in a famous sermon that “the church would respond by out-loving its enemies, out-suffering the perpetrators of violence, out-loving those who would show hate.”

“But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed,” First Peter assures us, “Don’t fear what they fear, and don’t be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord... For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil” (I Peter 3:14, 15).

A much earlier Martin Luther defined original sin as “the self being all curved in on itself”—the self suffocating upon itself and consuming itself. Today, some might call this condition narcissism. You may recall that, in Greek mythology, Narcissus was a hunter who was renowned for his great beauty and who proudly disdained those who tried to love him. The god Nemesis noticed that Narcissus had become engulfed in himself, suffocating himself. So Nemesis led him to a pool where Narcissus saw his reflection and fell in love with it, not realizing that it was merely an image. Unable to leave the beauty of his own reflection in the mirror, Narcissus died at the pool.

A self that is all turned in on itself is a soul that is dying in the midst of life. So Luther argued that salvation must be a change which turns a person from self to God and humanity. This is a change of the heart’s direction that begins at baptism, then becomes a daily drowning of the consuming self and a daily rising with the living Christ in a life that is lived in freedom—freedom not for the self but freedom for serving others.

The ride through this baptismal birth canal toward life is a long, watery channel that leads to freedom and life. The ride is not a smooth one. To live and to love as Jesus calls us to live and to love does not happen without the presence of his Spirit at our side to lead and guide us through choppy and stormy waters—“the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you” (John 14:17). This is the Spirit who forever and persistently calls, gathers, enlightens, and creates a people, a people among whom Maycee Laine is born today into the body of Christ, the church.

So Jesus promises Maycee and us, “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you” (John 14:18). This promise comes to us who so often feel abandoned, deserted and alone, wondering if there is anyone who will be near us, fearing that we really are all alone in this world. Here, where we are gathered around Word and Sacraments, we are promised the eternal, loving presence of the Spirit of the Father and Son, walking along with us at our side, the Spirit who forever creates “the community of the beloved,” the same Spirit who has brought life, love and joy to Sue and Bob, their families and friends,

and to this congregation who are the beloved of Jesus. So Paul writes in Galatians that “the only thing that counts for anything is faith working through love...” (Galatians 5:6). This is “faith *active* in love,” as the motto of this congregation bespeaks, because love is first of all an action of faith and not an emotion.

For me, it bears repeating what the ancient philosopher Aristotle taught, which is that human beings are made to live in communities (humans are “political animals”). For Aristotle, the solitary individual who lives, thinks and acts alone is something less than a human being is meant to be. The immoral person, he said, is a person without friends, because only friends can make us moral. And they make us moral by telling us the truth about ourselves, that truth no one else cares enough about us to say.

“Only friends know how to hurt us in the right way,” Aristotle taught, “and truth, by its nature, is often painful. Pity the person without friends,” he said, “that is a dangerous person who has no one to tell him anything.”

“This is the Spirit of truth.”

“No longer do I call you servants,” Jesus said to those at table with him on the night of his betrayal. “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends...” (John 15:15). “What a friend we have in Jesus,” Jesus who cares enough to tell the truth about us, now and again and again.

When we are gathered in the company of the church as we are gathered today, we are in the company of true friends, friends who must sometimes speak truth to one another—painful truth in a spirit of love (Ephesians 4:15). Here are friends who, by the power of the Spirit of truth, care enough about our Lord and each other that we are willing at times to hurt each other in just the right way because we believe that the Spirit of truth “abides with us... and that he is in us” (John 14:17).

A while back, I came across a citation of an article, the content of which seemed rather strange to me. The writer claimed that “The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home.” Of course, we know that mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But when things get tough on the mountain, when fear settles into the hearts of the climbers, when discouragement begins to overtake even the bravest, many a climber is ready to say, “I’ve had enough. I’m going home.”

The life of faith can be like that. Doubts settle in. We get tired, maybe even exhausted. Despair overwhelms. The trip doesn’t seem worth the cost. Following Jesus on this mountain climb to the cross and resurrection seems insane. Jesus knows that there will be tough times for his family. So he has tied us together in baptism: “I am the vine, and you are the branches” (John 15:5). We are tied together by the Spirit so that we can love and trust our Lord Jesus, and love and trust one another—to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith; to encourage us when we’re ready to give up; to be at our side and to have our backs—always and forever.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live” (John 14:18, 19).

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart; / wean it from earth, through all its pulses move; / stoop to my weakness, strength to me impart, / and make me love you as I ought to love.—djl