

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Generation to Generation”
Lamentations 3:55-57; John 14:12-31
Sixth Sunday after Easter
May 9, 2010

Today’s New Testament lesson fits into the literary category which is called a “Farewell Discourse.” The genre is well-documented in the ancient Mediterranean world. We encounter it elsewhere in the Bible. Jacob has a farewell discourse in Genesis in which he summons all his sons and says, “Gather around. I am going to tell you what is going to happen to you in the days to come.” Joshua has one. David does too. Moses really had one, for the entire book of Deuteronomy is cast as his farewell speech to the Israelites. (1)

In this New Testament lesson, we can suppose that the gospel writer collected various sayings from Jesus’ life and ministry and shaped them into the form of a Farewell Discourse which would serve as encouragement to the next generation of Christian believers. These words have been passed down from generation to generation telling us just as surely as they did in John’s own day the gracious truth that we don’t need to be afraid because we will never be abandoned. Jesus, through his Holy Spirit, is always with us.

On most Thursday nights, you will find me spending a few minutes with some of Davidson College Presbyterian’s most dedicated volunteers, the chancel choir. I share a brief word with them about the upcoming service before praying with and for them as they prepare to lead us in worship on Sunday. Last Thursday, I began by stating the obvious, “Next Sunday is Mother’s Day.” And for some weird and unknown reason, I added, “Not that Mother’s Day is a liturgical holiday.” A chuckle rippled around the room as one person asked with a twinkle in his eye, “Are you sure about that?”

Mother’s Day may not be a day noted on the Christian liturgical calendar, but any American preacher who ignores it does so at his or her peril. Take it from someone who tried it...once!

No, Mother’s Day is not a liturgical holy day, but I have come to believe that the Spirit can use the occasions of secular holidays to challenge us toward deeper faithfulness as Christian disciples.

Did your ear catch the familial language in today’s Gospel lesson, a lesson which, by the way, is the Gospel lesson for this, the 6th Sunday of Easter (the actual liturgical day!)?

Father.

Son.

I will not leave you orphaned.

We will come to them and make our home with them.

On Mother's Day, it is no surprise to hear familial language such as this, phrases like "I will not leave you orphaned" and "we will make our home with them," words that call to mind family relationships. One way to go in a sermon on this text might be to talk about families as the place where we come to experience love and learn to trust...what a blessing it is learn such lessons within one's family and what a huge and God-given responsibility, one that we affirm in the sacrament of baptism, it is for parents and grandparents to pass the lesson of love and trust on to our biological and adopted children and grandchildren.

It is true that families are the place where we experience love and learn to trust.

But the other thing that is also true about families is that they are often where we learn what it is like to be afraid, to be afraid of being abandoned.

We all have our own stories to tell of how this may be true for us. Some of the stories are searing ones where a parent literally abandoned you. Perhaps you came home from school one day and your mom said, "Dad has moved out." Or maybe it was your mom; she may have been physically present in all the ways that mothers are supposed to be, but emotionally absent from the household. Perhaps one of your parents died. Perhaps they were distracted, fatigued, depressed. Looking back, there were reasons for this, you tell yourself...but where it left you was "motherless," "fatherless," left to your own devices to find your way in the world.

Some of you have hard stories like this to tell, but even those of us who have never doubted for a moment the love of our mothers and our fathers and who have always known that we could go to them whatever might be happening in our lives with absolutely no fear of rejection have our own stories to tell.

Mine involves sitting on the curb outside the Roy McCullough School of Dance. Class would be over at 5. I'd remove my ballet shoes and put them in my pink ballerina tote bag. 5:05. "Mama's probably at the grocery store, and sometimes there is a long line," I would tell myself. 5:07 "Maybe she got caught in traffic." 5:08. "She's had a wreck." 5:09. "She's in the emergency room, and nobody knows that I'm here." 5:10. "She's dead, and who is going to take care of me from now on?"

And the thing is, while there is a certain humor in this, and it makes you really, really grateful for the cell phones and text messaging that is available to us these days, it is also true that what twisted my stomach with fear back when I was a pony-tailed third-grader sitting on the curb with my ballerina tote bag beside me with the thought that if I just trained my eyes down Woodrow Street and prayed hard enough, I could conjure up that blue Plymouth and, more importantly, my mother, is the same feeling that twists my stomach now at the age of 57 when I'm facing something really hard or really frightening or really painful.

When Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned," he is speaking to that stomach-twisting fear, whatever the cause of the fear might be. When he says, "we will come and make our home in [you,]" he is scooping us into the divine lap and holding us close and promising us that it will always be so, and it will be especially so when things are really hard and really frightening and

really painful. And when he says, “if you love me, you will keep my commandments,” and “Because I live, you will live also,” he takes the good news a step further and instructs the next generation of Christian disciples, that is, the Christian church, even into our own day, that Christ’s own Spirit will dwell within us and empower us to be the community that becomes Jesus’ own divine lap that embraces scared and hurting people and passes the peace of Christ on to them as a contribution toward that day when they will become strong again.

I have a friend who will tell you that a church literally saved her life. She was a young mom at the time with young children at home, living with an alcoholic and, at times, abusive husband. She will tell you about how people in her church helped her care for her kids and didn’t judge her. She will tell you about the day that she called her pastor to apologize for storming out of his office and slamming the door, and he said to her, “You don’t need to apologize. That’s the healthiest thing that I’ve seen you do.” She will tell you about how her church, a generation of believers who had never seen Jesus in a physical sense, but a community in which his Spirit was very much alive so that they became the body of Christ, embraced her in her fear and hurt and made her strong again.

My friend’s church was not DCPC. But it might have been. If the walls and the rooms of this place could talk, they would tell stories similar to this, stories of ways that this congregation through all the generations since 1837 has embraced people in the midst of the challenges which life can thrust at you, and, drawing on the strong power of the Holy Spirit, made them strong again.

Most assuredly this happened last Sunday when the youth of DCPC led us in worship. During the afternoon, I was with some DCPC grown-ups, and one of them told me how the sermon had given her a gift...the gift of suggesting that she adopt the practice of looking at life each day and asking “Where have I seen God today?”

And someone who lives many miles from Davidson, North Carolina...he is a regular listener of the WDAV broadcast and he lives in New England...took the time to send an email to the youth, via Shelli.

To all the Youth Who Breathed Life Into Youth Sunday, May 2, 2010:

As far as I can remember, I have never "seen" a service which so completely enabled so many young people to create such a profound experience for their church as you all did today. And I have participated in a lot of services in my 87 years! You thought about it. And then you thought again, and again, and the result was a real gift to your church. I'm sure that everyone will remember it for a long time. And how glad I am that you had us all sing "Joy to the World". Did I say we all sang? I sure did. I'm part of the radio congregation, and we sing right along with the rest of you. It was such a perfect choice to follow a great hymn I had never heard before "At the Font We start Our Journey."

I know a lot of people will be praying for you seniors while you are in the next stage of your journey, the college years. I know that this experience of re-living the resurrection will help you more than you can imagine. Good luck!

I don’t know if the gospel writer or Jesus himself ever imagined that the familial language, “I will not leave you orphaned” or the comforting “Peace I leave with you; my peace I

give to you...Let not your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” would be passed down from his generation to ours in precisely this way...with a younger generation of Christians being nurtured by older generations and then the younger generation passing it back to their elders in a reciprocal discipleship which mirrors Jesus’ own ministry.

I don’t know if the gospel writer or Jesus himself imagined that it would be so, but I believe that they would be delighted. And I believe that they would also remind us in the strongest possible way that it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that Christ’s ministry of comfort and healing and teaching continues from generation to generation to generation...through financial gifts, both our ongoing pledges from year to year and our program of planned giving which is called, you will remember, “Generation to Generation,” through prayer, through encouraging one another, through the gifts of our time and our talents.

No, Mother’s Day is not a liturgical holiday, but perhaps there is no better day than this one to spend some time prayerfully considering how you might use your time, your talent, and your financial resources so the good news of the gospel—the good news that no one needs to be afraid because Jesus, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, is with us still—will continue to be proclaimed and lived at Davidson College Presbyterian Church from generation to generation to generation.

1. Gail O’Day, “John,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 737.