

Sermon May 25, 2014 "Paternity-Identity-God" John 14:15-21 Acts 17:22-31

Whenever I read today's lesson from Acts 17, I find myself thinking that the people of Athens way back in the first century AD were not so different from us today. They had all sorts of statues that they considered to be gods, gods that they thought they had to serve in order to achieve a halfway liveable life. They had gods of war and weather and wine and crops, and they believed that they had to appease all these various gods in order to keep disaster from befalling them. To cover every base, they even had an altar to honor "an unknown god," just in case they had left one out!

The apostle Paul tried to set them straight: they did not need to cower before statues made by human hands! Instead, they were invited to personally know and serve the Maker of human hands and the entire world, the One who was even then giving each of them life and "being."

Paul was trying to get the people to understand that the life offered by God through Jesus Christ could be theirs, too. He wanted them to hear for themselves the promise Jesus gave to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.... I will not leave you desolate (orphans); I will come to you...He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me..." (from John 14:15-21)

A pastor once confided to another that he had been counseling a lot of "orphans" lately. Not the kind with no parents, living in institutions, but members of his congregation who were going through life as though they had no Heavenly Father. These "faith orphans" seemed to believe that God really didn't care much about them any more. They did not feel God's presence in their lives. They felt desolate in terms of their faith. (Source of this idea uncertain, heard years ago)

Probably each one of us has felt this way at some time in our lives: cut off from God, or never touched by God, or somehow overlooked by or uninteresting to God. Too often we find ourselves deriving our security (or sense of insecurity) from our checkbook balances. We find it easier to hoard our possessions than we do to share them. We live with considerable anxiety, afraid of illness, accidents, terrorism, national security, family breakdowns, storms, layoffs.

Much in life causes us to ask big questions and fumble for answers. How can parents mistreat their children? Why do people become so angry so easily? Why so many devastating forest fires, tornadoes, and floods? What about all those kidnapped girls in Nigeria? And the still-missing airplane? And how can some of the people working in the VA system have been so deceptive and uncaring about how long Veterans were having to wait to receive care? In our own lives, there have been times and situations when we have probably cried: Why, God? Why didn't you help? Why do my prayers seem so ineffective? Sometimes it feels as though we are spiritual orphans, as though God has taken a vacation or at least a long time-out.

By the time Gospel-writer John wrote his Gospel, much time had passed and many in the early church were starting to wonder if they'd missed out. Persecutions persisted, disagreements broke out among Christians, and it was often easier to feel Jesus' absence than it was to know that he was really present.

Jesus surely knew that those of us who are “later Christians” would sometimes feel this way, so shortly before he died he gave his final teachings to those closest to him, which can be found in John’s Gospel, chapters 13 through 16. Jesus first instructed his followers to love each other as he had loved them. He told them to keep his commandments (Love God, love neighbor, love one another), and then he promised them that they would not be left orphans when he was no longer physically around. Instead, they would become part of the mysterious inner bond of love and power flowing through God the Father and God the Son through the work of the Spirit, the “Advocate,” the Comforter.

“Keep my commandments,” Jesus said. Perhaps this could be rephrased as, “Make sure that your life has the same priorities my life has had.... Be sure to love instead of hate; to forgive instead of holding grudges; to pray for your enemies; to trust God so much that you are willing to lay down your own life for the sake of someone else.” The Holy Spirit will make this possible.

One of the Affirmations of Faith we often share as our Call to Worship, declares: “God is with us, we are not alone.” (From The United Church of Canada’s Statement of Faith). Jesus Christ would whisper to each of us, “This is for YOU. This promise is yours. I am with you, even to the very end of time.” (See Matthew 28:20).

I want to share a story told as true by preacher/professor Fred Craddock. He and his wife, Nettie, were vacationing in the Smoky Mountains and having dinner in a restaurant one evening when they ended up having a neat experience.

In Craddock’s words: “Early in the meal an elderly man approached our table and said, “Good evening.” I said, “Good evening.” He said, “Are you on vacation?” I said, “Yes,” but under my breath I was saying, *It’s really none of your business.*

“Where are you from,” he asked. “We’re from Oklahoma.”

“What do you do in Oklahoma?”

Under my breath but almost audible, I was saying, *Leave us alone. We’re on vacation, and we don’t know who you are.* I said, “I’m a Christian minister.”

He said, “What church?” I said, “The Christian Church.”

He paused a moment and said, “I owe a great deal to a minister of the Christian church,” and he pulled out a chair and sat down.

I said, “Yes, have a seat.” I tried to make it seem like I sincerely meant it, but I didn’t. Who is this person?

The man said, “I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed. The reproach that fell on her, of course, also fell on me. When I went into town with my mother, I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and I ate my lunch alone.

“In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don’t know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome since I was, as folks put it, a bastard. So I would go just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I would move out because I was afraid that someone would say, ‘What’s a boy like you doing in a church?’

“One Sunday some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I cut my eyes around and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine, and seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was. A moment later he said, ‘Well, boy, you’re a child of...’ and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, ‘Boy, you’re a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy.’ Then he clapped me on the back and said, ‘Now, you go claim your inheritance.’ I left the church building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life.”

I was so moved by the story I had to ask him, “What’s your name?” He said, “Ben Hooper.” I recalled, though vaguely, my own father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor a man who had been born a bastard, Ben Hooper. (*Craddock Stories*, pp. 156-7)

End of story, but really not, because each of us as God’s children has the responsibility to helping other people come to see that they, also, are claimed as beloved children by God.

Here we are in church, surrounded by a complicated, fast-paced, judgmental world that too often tells us we’re not good enough and challenges our identities and forces questions in our spirits. We are frail and often uncertain in our faith; we do not have all the answers to the suffering we see, the wrongs we witness or commit, or the blessings we enjoy. But we DO have a promise: the very God who made us claims us as God’s very own children. The God who knows every good and bad thought we’ve ever had is right here with us and wants to work through us today, in this world, so that his message of hope, love and forgiveness can flow through us to somebody else.

If we will dare to be obedient to Jesus Christ by doing our best to trust God, by reaching out to help others, by forgiving those who hurt or scare us, and by spending some quiet time every day listening for what God wants of us, we are promised that we will recognize that God really is with us and find our lives to be profoundly blessed and directed by God’s Spirit.

Then we will discover that we are anything but orphans. No matter where we are, regardless the challenges, losses, depression, joblessness or other hardships we may face, God claims us as God’s very own, and God dwells in us and with us. The God in whom we live and move and have our being is with us, offering us hope and giving work to do. Thank God! Amen.