



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MAY 25, 2014
THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

You Will Live Also
Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. For many of us it is the official beginning of summer when pools open, picnics happen, the beach beckons, and the fun begins. We all look forward to times of relaxation and recreation in the summer and that is good. I plan to indulge in summer as much as I can.

We all know, of course, that the reason for Memorial Day is not to enjoy a day off from work and a day at the beach. It is to honor those men and women who have given their lives in service to our country. The tradition was begun as early as 1866 when grieving communities began decorating the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers with flowers, thus becoming known as Decoration Day. Gradually the practice spread throughout the country and included soldiers from all wars. In 1971, Memorial Day became an official holiday to honor all who of the servicemen and women have died serving our country.

Every member of every branch of the military takes an oath to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” Their focus is upon us and our nation’s welfare, however, many of them serve beyond our borders. They do not, however, serve to conquer other nations. They do not set out to transgress another nation’s borders. They are not seeking to unduly extend the influence of our country. By and large, the men and women who serve our nation seek to promote and preserve freedom and democracy throughout the world. When necessary, they defend others who cannot defend themselves. They work to halt tyranny, oppression, and abuse. They attempt to bring peace to the world.

We know that not all wars in which our country has been engaged have been justified. We know that not all military personnel serve nobly. We know that not every action taken in the name of our country is the right one. Nevertheless, our stated purpose is clear and good and we are grateful for the men and women who serve on our behalf, often at their own peril. Tomorrow we will set aside the time to remember the ones who have given their lives for the sake of freedom.

It is the kind of sacrifice we understand for it is the same willingness to give of self for the sake of others that Jesus himself demonstrated so many years ago. Not because he had to but because he wanted to, not because it was his inescapable destiny but because it was his unequivocal choice, not because it was satisfaction for some cosmic imbalance on the scales of justice but because it was the most compelling act of love possible, Jesus died for us. And, in what I think is an even more self-sacrificial act, the One who had heaven for a home came back to life among us to demonstrate the full life that we can have making Easter a new birth for us all.

In the wisdom and piety of the fourth century, the Church Fathers established the Christian Calendar and a cycle of scripture readings whereby we might learn and remember the One who gave the ultimate sacrifice for us. For most of the weeks following Easter until Pentecost fifty days later, we recall the post-resurrection encounters Jesus had with the disciples. After four or five weeks, however, you run out of those stories. So the Church Fathers reached back into Jesus' teachings for material to remember him by. Fortunately the Gospel of John records that lengthy passage of teaching and prayers which Jesus offered during his last supper with the disciples. So today we read the Gospel lesson from the fourteenth chapter—one of my favorites—and hear familiar words of promise:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is 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.

“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. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”
John 14:15-21

The One who came to offer us ultimate freedom, who came to conquer sin and death, who came to end all oppression, who gave his life so that we would all have eternal life, offered a very simple instruction: If you love me, do what I have taught you. He sounds a lot like Mom, doesn't he? How many of us growing up heard the words, “If you loved me, you would do what I

ask.”? It is one of those creative techniques called “guilt” that parents use from time to time to get us to do what they want! But Jesus stated it a bit differently, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” His injunction does not presume that we might not love him; rather, he states plainly that the evidence of our love will be in the living out of his teachings. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” It is not an oath we take, but it is a mandate of action, clear and simple.

In support of their love, Jesus offered several promises to his soon-to-be-on-their-own disciples. He promised that he would send the Spirit of truth who would be their Advocate, one who would stand beside them for guidance in doing the right thing at all times.

It is not always easy to do the right thing. We do not always find ourselves on the correct side of an argument. Many challenging situations in life are complicated and murky and the truth is not clearly revealed. God’s Spirit is with us to help us in those perplexing times and to give us courage to do what we know to be right. The Spirit lives with us in order to bring to mind Jesus’ teachings which, if we follow them, will demonstrate our love for him.

Jesus also told his group of disciples (which now includes us) that he would not abandon them. His choice of terms is telling. One translation I like has Jesus saying, “I will not leave you desolate” (RSV). If you have ever felt desolate, you know how lonely and terrifying a situation it can be. Another, probably more accurate, sense of Jesus’ intention is found in the words, “I will not leave you orphaned” (NRSV). In other words, “I am not going to abandon you even though physically I will not be with you as I am now. I will be with you in the Spirit until I return. You will never be alone.”

When I was about ten years old, the Boy Scouts in my hometown were invited to participate in a training exercise for our local rescue squad. Although I was not yet old enough to be in Scouts, my Scoutmaster father allowed me to tag along since both of my older brothers were in on the fun.

One spring day after school let out, everyone assembled a mile or two outside of town where a secondary road crossed a railroad track. Off to the side of the road in a field was an overturned fifty-something Chevy sedan. And scattered around the field in various positions, about fifty Scouts were “doctored up” as if they had been injured when a train hit the car. How fifty teenage boys were supposed to have been in that one car, I will never

understand, but it has probably been attempted a time or two! My father was given a toe tag with “DOA” written on it, which I learned meant “dead on arrival.” That designation alone shook me up a bit.

I was not at all certain what was going to happen. I knew that ambulances would arrive, medics would triage the various injuries, and then take us all to the hospital where the ER staff would also test their emergency skills. For some reason, however, I feared that I would be stuck in some remote room and forgotten, especially since I also had one of those DOA tags on my toe.

I remember my father telling one of the rescue squad workers who was a friend that I was a bit afraid and to let me ride along in the ambulance that took him to the hospital so that I would not be alone. The result was that I rode up front with lights flashing and sirens blaring. It was quite a ride for a dead man. And I did not get tossed into a basement room and forgotten!

The point is that my father knew that even pretending death can be scary and he did not want me to be alone and frightened. He did not abandon me but stayed right with me until the drill was over. Jesus does the same for us although our life experiences are not mere training exercises. God in Christ remains with us through the Spirit so that we are never alone.

The Apostle Paul pressed this point when he spoke to the philosophers and religious debaters in Athens. Noting that among all of the altars to various and sundry gods there was one to an “unknown god,” he pointed out who the one and only God is. He mentions that all humans are created by God so that we might “grope for him and find him—though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). When God came to us in the person of Christ it was to be Immanuel, God with us. That purpose has never changed.

The ultimate promise Jesus offered to his disciples—and to us—comes when he is with us and guiding us: “because I live, you will live also.” Certainly he was alluding to the gift of eternal life and the promise that life will not end when we take our last breath here. But Jesus was also telling us that we do not have to wait to enjoy eternal life. It begins here and now and extends beyond the grave to the enjoyment of God’s full presence for eternity.

“You will live also.” What better promise could anyone receive than the assurance that life will continue? When we send soldiers to another country to support people who are being attacked or oppressed, we are offering them

an opportunity for a better life. We offer a life free from tyranny, abuse, and oppression. That life, however, is a temporal life and history proves that conditions may worsen again. The spiritual life we are offered, however, is eternal and will never change though the circumstances around us may. The assurance that we will live in the Spirit of Christ enables us to find our way through whatever life throws at us.

Tomorrow we will remember the people who have given their lives so that our lives and the lives of people around the world can be better. Yet, today and every day we live in celebration of the One who gave his life to demonstrate his love for us and came back to life so that we, too, might live forever. He lives so that we might live and, in living, might follow his commandments, chief among them to love one another.

You will live also because Jesus lives and dwells in you through the Holy Spirit. You will live so that you might love one another with truth and justice. You will live so that you might demonstrate to the world that God in Christ loves us all and will never abandon us. You will live so that you may love. Thanks be to God!

May 25, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is the giver of every good and perfect gift, on this day we have set aside to celebrate our freedom and to remember the men and women who have given their lives to secure it, we pray, O Lord, that we would also remember the One who gave his life for our eternal freedom as children of God. Help us to recognize that freedom is a great gift and a right which carries with it tremendous responsibility. May we cherish our own freedom, even as we seek to secure it for people throughout the world and to defend it for future generations. May we know the assurance that our liberty is not only that we might speak and worship as we see fit, but also freedom from the bondage of sin and liberty to serve you and others.

Even as we offer gratitude for your blessings to us, O God, help us to remember those in our world for whom captivity and suffering are daily realities. We pray for those who live with pain and grief. Help them to know your healing and comfort. We pray for those whose lives are consumed with violence and war. Help them to know the peace that only you can give. We pray for those who live each day in darkness or loneliness. Help them to know your hope and light. We pray for those whose needs are so great that we feel helpless to meet them. Help them to know the abundance of your blessings and the assurance of your presence with them. Grant to us the courage to reach out beyond these walls to a world that is hurting. Give us the vision to look beyond color or class or status to love all humanity, to be messengers of your grace to all who are bound by fetters of injustice and hopelessness, as we seek to follow the example of our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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