



SUNDAY SERMON

The Feast of Pentecost

Last Sunday as we gave thanks for the legacy of our patron saint Columba, we also learned that his conduct early in life was not always saintly. As a monk in Ireland, Columba could be willful and confrontational. He got into a dispute over a seemingly small matter that led to violence and war, and thousands died.

Remorse over his role in this conflict prompted Columba and his followers to go into exile, sailing for Scotland to spread the gospel. It was just as challenging for Columba in the sixth century as it is for us to discern when to set aside our own will and follow the purposes of God—when to prize our membership in God’s family over any other affiliation.

That challenge is at the heart of the two stories the church offers us this morning. No bible passage can tell us all we need to know about how to do the will of God and be embraced as God’s family. Today we hear of families whose encounters with God lead to teachings about obedience. They feature people who are anxious and a God who seems aloof. Yet both offer us reason to be hopeful that relationship with humanity is God’s deep desire.

In the book of Genesis God brings creation out of chaos, but God’s human family doesn’t get off to a very good start. In the garden with God, the unnamed man and woman, the forbidden fruit and the serpent, we learn that God’s is not the only voice claiming authority. Dissenting voices offer powerful challenges to our reliance on God’s word.

We know the story’s lesson: our freedom to make choices that go against God’s will can divide us from God and from one another, making chaos a recurring threat to creation. Still, the story is frustrating because freedom, which God rebukes us for misusing, is itself a divine gift. Here, God’s rules of engagement seem arbitrary, even manipulative.

This story can feel disconnected from how I experience God, and I’m almost ready to cast it aside. Yet returning to it this week I lingered over one moment that makes the story hard to dismiss. That’s the moment when God walks into the garden and speaks some of the first divine words uttered to humankind, posing the question, “where are you?” God, the creator of all, who would seem to have no unmet needs, apparently desires to be in relationship to the created world and to know that we share the same desire.

“Where are you?” I hear the question not merely as God’s call to know our whereabouts but as a divine longing for, dare I say, companions in the stewardship of creation. Even though this story suggests we are destined to fall short as God’s family, it confirms one precious truth that compels us to keep trying: God wants to be with us. And our relational God will continue to ask “where are you?” as we try to be the loving family God yearns for us to be. God’s question hovers over everything that follows in the bible. It hovers over every person’s life of faith.

Continued

DATE

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, June 10, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. David Griswold

VERSES

Genesis 3: 8-15; Mark 3:
19-35

Centuries after Hebrew Scripture records God's walk in the garden, Christians begin to experience God's walk in the ministry of Jesus. In Mark's gospel Jesus makes long walks throughout Galilee proclaiming the kingdom of a God of unconditional love. This seems like a radical departure from the God of Genesis, and with this new message Jesus is attracting attention. He has taught in the synagogue, cured the sick, driven out demons, dined with outcasts and sinners and recruited a group of willing yet unreliable disciples, while defying the people who challenge him for flouting the Sabbath rules.

Among a growing crowd of followers, Jesus has stirred excitement. Among wary religious leaders, Jesus has stirred suspicion. His fame is now so widespread that, returning home to take a break, Jesus cannot even eat a meal. It is not enough for his opponents to question Jesus' ideas—they try to undercut his message by suggesting he must be insane, or possessed by demonic powers.

It's not surprising, then, that when Jesus' family hears of his return, they go out to try to shield him from attention. Perhaps they are embarrassed, perhaps they fear for his safety. But it seems they want to interrupt his respite in order to head off a confrontation with a group of scribes--temple officials-- who have traveled from the center of religious authority, Jerusalem. But Jesus is ready for the scribes. He rejects their accusation that he is aligned with Satan, and turns the tables by accusing them of being on Satan's side against God.

As if this were not provocative enough, when Jesus is told that his immediate family is waiting to see him, he dismisses them with what seems like a flippant question, "who are my mother and my brothers?" Much more so than today, in Jesus' time family and faith were the central factors that shaped a person's identity. Families were close-knit, with several generations often living under the same roof, and you were known in the community by your family affiliation. Family loyalty ran strong. When your family called for you, you went to them.

The scribes, meanwhile, were respected as experts on how to live a Godly life according to Jewish law. Most towns had a local scribe. For a group of scribes to come all the way from Jerusalem shows that the temple establishment is worried that Jesus' teaching is catching on.

I wonder how it felt to stand in the crowd of onlookers as Jesus taunts the religious leaders and seems to ignore his family. These two revered institutions don't seem to dominate Jesus' worldview. We've seen Jesus heal lepers, cure the sick and welcome outcasts. We know he is a messenger from God. Maybe we'd like to keep following him to see where his ministry leads. But what might we have to give up? And what will life look like in the community Jesus has come to build?

Gazing at this scene as God might, we notice four groups of people—the crowd standing with excitement on the edge of the action; the scribes, walking away in anger back to Jerusalem; Jesus' family, waiting in confusion outside the place where he's staying; and inside, a group of Jesus' followers, perhaps weary or frightened and yet hopeful, sitting around him. God's first question to humankind still resonates: "where are you?" Which group do we feel comfortable in? How ready are we to walk with Jesus and join the family of the God he proclaims?

Fortunately, Jesus is not asking us to forsake our families and our religious roots. We can cherish our families and honor the cultures that shape us, while also living in solidarity with the family we embody as children of God. That seems to be what Jesus is getting at when he says "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3: 35). He doesn't spell out exactly what he means by "doing the will of God." His followers might be wondering, why can't he just tell us? But he's not going to hand out a manual of instructions. What he wants is for them—for us-- to notice who he is close to.

When Jesus "looks at those who sat around him" (3:34) and declares them to be his family, who do we see? We see a group of men and women who may have experienced brokenness, isolation and shame in their lives but have found with Jesus a community of acceptance and compassion. Jesus invites us to bring our

vulnerability into this circle of those who sit around him, to discover the hope of renewal that God promises to all. He wants to be with us—all of us. He invites us to see that doing the will of God requires not disciplined behavior but an open-hearted spirit grounded in the awareness of how much we depend on God and one another.

In Jesus' new community, God's question, "where are you?" is a call for us not only to turn to Jesus for strength and guidance when we feel lost, but to turn with Jesus to make God's love known in all places-- to live in tender awareness of our relationship to everything and everyone in creation. It is a call for us to join Jesus in building the new community he has come to establish, and to see that none of the members of God's family are left out.

Amen.