

## "Unfinished Business of the Often Uncomfortable In-between"

+7 Easter B +

Acts 1:15-17; 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

May 17, 2015

This is the Day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. The text for this morning's message is the Gospel for this day particularly these words: "I pray for them...I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one...As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian executed just before the end of World War II wrote these words about the separation we experience when someone we love dies: "Nothing can fill the gap when we are away from those we love and it would be wrong to try and find anything (to fill it). We must simply hold out and win through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time, it is a great consolation, since leaving the gap unfilled preserves the bond between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; He does not fill it, but keeps it empty so that our communion with another may be kept alive, even at the cost of pain."

In these last weeks our Easter lessons have led us to examine the death and resurrection of the Author of Life, Jesus Christ. His death purchased our salvation. His resurrection is our secure, our certain promise that we who know Him by faith, who receive the righteousness He alone could earn, will also rise from death to eternal life eternal just as He did. That is the promise of baptism that little Lauren Kennedy will receive today – dying to sin in the washing waters and rising to newness of life – held by the love of God, nurtured through the Holy Spirit who enables Jesus to dwell in her little heart by the gift of faith. Yes – today we see a miracle – a gift of faith that God alone can grant. This past Friday we had the funeral for 98 year old Edna Reasoner who was baptized at a Lutheran Preaching station out in the country near Como Lake. I printed the name of her godmother, Anna Loberg (Anna was unable to attend the funeral, I would assume she has been in the glories of heaven for some time now). This is what Edna's confirmation book said about godparents:

By responding in my place to the words spoken in baptism they assumed a measure of responsibility for my spiritual welfare. That is why they are called sponsors, godfather, godmother. I shall always be indebted to them for this Christian kindness and personal interest."

In truth it is the entire congregation, Lauren's parents, grandparents, aunts uncles, cousins and all of us who are to remember her in prayer from this day, to model the faith for her, to pray that God's will for her life will be carried out in love and service to others.

That ties in so perfectly with the Gospel lesson for this 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – just 3 days after the Ascension of our Lord where in this prayer we hear Jesus say "good-bye" to His disciples. His "good-bye" anchored not merely in understandable human emotion, but in fervent prayer to His Father for protecting care not to "take us out of the world," but to protect us from evil while we are still here. John recorded those words as they were spoken and apparently overheard, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, arrested, condemned and put to death. Jesus spoke them, however, not in view of His cross and death (which the Scriptures tell us He considered, not an end, but an interruption of His life and work) but rather in view of His ascension, His home going, that necessitated His leaving His disciples - His own "good-bye for a while," as they (and we) have laid before us the "Unfinished Business of the Often Uncomfortable In-between."

That's a whopper of a title for any sermon but it contains two pieces of truth that have been the church's reality since Jesus led His disciples out to the Mount of Olives, blessed them, and was taken from their sight ascending to heaven.

The "unfinished business" part is something we all understand on some level. It is as elementary and common as the "to do" list that most of us never get to the bottom of without having to add on some more. And as much as all of us like all our loose ends tied up, when it appears we have, we start to feel kind of useless. We actually need "unfinished business."

Jesus did not leave His disciples useless, He left them a mission. He sent them (us, too!) into the world with the "unfinished business" of taking the Good news into every dark corner of human experience to every nation and people in the world. Somewhere I read the observation that Jesus never traveled more than about 50 miles from His home in His 33 years in this world once His family returned from Egypt when he was still a very young boy. And yet, Jesus expected the news of what He had said and what He had done, to spread **around the world**, a task the early church eagerly embraced as God poured out His Spirit on Pentecost, 10 days after the Ascension.

It is still happening today. It happens when missionaries go to places whose names we can't even pronounce, let alone, locate on a map. But its not just missionaries who have this work to do! The lost and lonely world is right outside those doors where 19+ languages are spoken

within a mile of this church. You can see it in the faces and the lives of the people you meet every day, the people who live in your home, perhaps – you can see their need for Jesus. When I first came to Jehovah a member of the Outreach Board said, “My only concern is outreach – to know and reach out to the people who need Christ. That has to be the center of everything we do here at Jehovah.” I couldn’t agree more. There is nothing that we do in this place that doesn’t have the underlying goal of Making Christ Known. We are, all of us, “sent disciples” – sent out into the world to bring Christ, to be Christ, to others and to share the Gospel with them. We come here to be nurtured in the Word, strengthened by the Sacraments – fed at the Lord’s Table. We come here, to this place, to worship, to praise, to find comfort in the fellowship of believers. That’s why we call every place we worship a “sanctuary,” a holy place, a place of refuge. A place to come bloodied, beaten up and discouraged by the brokenness we face out there. This is our sanctuary - a place where we come to be healed and cared for and loved. And this is a place to leave - to go back out with the unfinished business of spreading the grace of God in a graceless world, beginning with the circle of relationships that already surrounds each of us.

Jesus knew it would make us uncomfortable. That’s why He didn’t give His followers a commencement address, telling us to take on the world, the way most graduates hear it every June. He gave us a family prayer, The Lord’s Prayer, that is one of the final unifying actions Christians of all kinds are able to agree upon, and through the Apostle John we have this High Priestly prayer and the command to love one another to sustain us in the “often uncomfortable in-between.” This Gospel tells us to Expect to be Uncomfortable, because “the way” for which we have been chosen is uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable, I would contend, because there is a gap that we feel – a certain longing to be with Jesus, to step beyond the awfulness of death that surrounds us, that permeates all of creation, and to stand in God’s presence.

Yes, we long to be with Jesus, but there is still work to do. We can only imagine what the glory of heaven will be but we can know for certain that we are surrounded by people going to a Christ-less eternity – people we can reach with the Gospel. The Author of Life has called us to take His life, eternal life, out into the world. Will you answer that call? Will you walk the streets of this neighborhood and get to know the people? Will you pray for them – pray for ways to minister to their needs, to be Christ to them? The prayer of Christ for protection and strength still covers His disciples today – still covers you and me as we carry out the “Unfinished Business of the Often Uncomfortable In-between.”

I think it was in a collection of bulletin bloopers that I came across an announcement that said, "Due to Pastor so and so's retirement, we are taking up a special offering so we can give him some parting momentum." They meant "memento," I think - something to remember them by. But maybe there's a lesson in that. All of the good-byes of life, the setbacks, the discouragements, the disappointments, and the empty gaps are meant to give us "momentum." To propel us forward, despite the struggle, to keep on reaching for that blessed day when the "unfinished" is complete and the in-between is accomplished and the gap is filled by Jesus, Himself and we will be home forever with Him. Amen.