

Sermon Text: John 14:23-31

I struggle with Mother’s Day. I struggle with Mother’s Day for many reasons, but one is I want to preach the Gospel, and it does not always lend itself directly into our sainted mothers, and some of you have reported to me that your mothers aren’t as sainted as other mothers. Some of you have reported to me that your mothers can be very difficult, and you even cry out a short prayer when it’s the caller ID and you say, oh Lord, it’s my mother! I know these things, and so I will be preaching not so much about mothers, but I wanted to share one absolutely true story about how special mothers are in a family. Even in a family where you have a mother and a father and siblings, there’s something very special about a mother’s love and care. True story.

In my church, I won’t say which church, but in one of my churches; it was a gray and gloomy day. It was about 5:00 p.m. Wintertime. Kind of dark because the weather was dark and stormy. A young girl called me, and she was one of those young girls, who take up the preacher when a preacher says anytime you need something, you call me. She took me at my word. She called me. She said I’m afraid. I don’t know where my mom is. I said, “Mary Catherine, what is wrong? Is your mother late?” She said, “Yes, my mother should be home.” I said, “Well, are you afraid? Do we need to come over there?” She said, “Well, yes, I’m scared. Me and Stewart and David and Dad are here by ourselves!” That’s a true story. I quit worrying about her somewhere in the conversation.

There is something special about having your mother intact. Some of our mothers have gone on. We do remember their good influence. We also remember that mothers, just as are fathers, just as are each of us, are sinners saved by grace, and we do need that grace.

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In an interview in today’s Christian Woman magazine, a writer and a speaker named Carol Kent wrote the following. She said, “One day when my son, Jason, was young, we were eating breakfast together. I had on an old pair of slacks and an old fuzzy sweater, and he flashed his baby blue eyes at me over his breakfast cereal, and said, “Mommy, you look so pretty today!” I didn’t have on any makeup, she writes. I said, “Honey, why would you say I look pretty today? Normally, I’m dressed up in a suit and high heels.” He said, “Well, when you look like that, I know that you’re going someplace, but when you look like this, I know you’re all mine.” That is sweet.

Who do we belong to? That is the topic today that really matters in the Gospel reading. Relationships. In today’s passage, Jesus was asked, just before I began reading in Verse 23, whom he planned on revealing Himself to. He answered, “All those who love me will do what I say. My father will love them, and we will come to them and live with them.” He turned the question upside down. It’s not who will Jesus be revealed to. It is that the children of God are those who seek out and spend time with God and do the things, which Jesus taught. His teachings are God’s teachings. Those who live what He taught, those

who love as He loved, those who do what He said, those are the ones who know God, know who Jesus is, and God takes up residence inside of these people, and it shows on the outside sooner or later in smaller and larger degrees. Jesus seems to be saying that faith is not a mystery that you figure out. Faith is a relationship that you grow into as God grows in you. It takes time. It takes contact. It takes comfort in knowing God, not as a concept, but as a person, relaxed and revealed in Jesus Christ. When you know the God made known in Jesus Christ, when you know that God loves you even at your worst, without fresh scrubbed face and external veneer, then you can begin, then you can begin to comprehend and use the power God gives you to love other people, to love other people in the same way.

I spent a few hours yesterday afternoon with an old friend riding bicycles through the countryside outside of Clinton. We rarely see each other, but we know each other. We know each other's wives. We know each other's children. We know each other's strengths. We know each other's weaknesses. We are still friends, and we don't have to talk every week or even every month. A real friend is someone you can relax around, someone you can be yourself around. You can say some things around a friend that would turn off or disappoint or even anger a casual acquaintance. Think about it for a minute. Do you think about God as a true friend or as a mysterious casual acquaintance?

Proverbs 18:24 says there are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. That's good worldly wisdom, but I also believe it's about God. There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. God is or can be our friend who sticks closer than a brother or a sister or mother or father. God wants our trust, our love, our time. When we enter into trust and love and time with God, God enters us through God's Holy Spirit in such a way that we are changed. Changed for the better, and changed forever. All of our friends change us in some direction or another. Jesus said all those who love will do what I say. My father will love them, and we will come to them and live with them.

I will never preach mere belief. I preach living with and arguing with and struggling with and praying to and growing into the constant friendship of God, always waxing and waning, and ultimately changing the whole direction of your lives.

In the 1990s, fourth grade students in Portland, ME carried out an experiment their teacher was teaching them about the Gulf Stream and how it carried water over close to Europe. They put some messages in some wine bottles and corked them up, and gave them to a fisherman to drop off deep into the Gulf Stream, and they hoped that some would make it up over to England. That was their hope. Just a few months later, they got some responses from bottles that washed back to Canada, and then everybody sort of forgot about it. Two years later, one of the students, Jeff Hite, received a surprise letter from a girl in Pornichet, France. She found one of their bottles, two years later, while walking on the beach with her father. It just took more time than they expected.

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, May 13, 2007

When we cast our lives into the ocean of God’s love, God’s Holy Spirit like a Gulf Stream current often carries us far from where we expected to be. It may seem that we are cast here and there at random, but then there are those moments when we find ourselves found, when looking back we see that some unseen force had directed us to a particular time and place, and that I believe is God working things together for the good.

Jesus promises in John 14 that we will not be left as orphans. We will not be left alone no matter the stormy sea or the apparent chaos in our lives, God is with us, and God’s Spirit is indeed within us. A place has been prepared for us as a final destination. A house not made with human hands.

Now, we shouldn’t really ask how can we tell who is and who is not a child of God, but people do ask it. You cannot until the end, and the end belongs to God, and in the meantime, all that we can see is are they, are we moving in waves slowly, ever so slowly toward the ability to love, the ability to care and show compassion as Jesus taught it and as Jesus lived it. Still we cannot judge anyone’s final state. Jesus did say all those who love me will do what I say. My father will love them, and we will come to them and live with them. When a person trusts and knows God and accepts that God loves us no matter what, it changes us, and God takes up residence in us, and God sends His Holy Spirit to us, and we begin a journey that ends at home with God.

Emerson wrote, “What lies behind and what lies before are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” Faith begets trust. Trust begets the internal working of God’s Holy Spirit, and God’s Spirit changes us inside and out. God’s Spirit directs us home. Jesus calls us to undergo changes so radical though; so profound that we know we need God’s help to even begin. He calls us to forgive those who hurt us, to pray for those who mistreat us, to bless those who hate us, to give aid and comfort to those who need us, to humble ourselves before the weak, to be most merciful and compassionate toward the outcast and the dregs of society, and to do all these things consistently means for all of us an entire lifetime of change. Never are we fully equal to the task. In all ways, there is a need to reorder our lives and always there is a need to be still and to perceive the gentle currents of God’s Spirit pulling us or pushing us in a particular direction. God is mysterious and real all at once.

Albert Einstein once said, “The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious.” He said, “Whoever does not know it can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead.” An unknown poet said something similar in this way, “He always said he would retire when he had made a million clear, and so he toiled into the dusk from day to day, from year to year, at last he put his ledgers up and laid his stock reports aside, but when he started out to live, he found that he had already died.”

If your pursuit of happiness is not dominated by the mysterious, as Einstein put it, or is not dominated by something more important than your life, as William James put it, or if your pursuit of happiness is not dominated by the Holy Spirit of God, as Jesus put it, then spiritually speaking, you are not yet living. Jesus said my peace, my peace I leave you.

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My own peace I give to you. A peace, which the world, nothing in the world can give, I give to you, and so do not let your hearts be troubled or let them be afraid. Truth is more than mere words. Truth doesn't just make a noise. Truth makes a difference in our lives! Follow Jesus and you will change. You will change in ways that make people ask how in the world do you live that way with peace in the middle of this situation, this world, this chaos that we call modern life?

Now, I'm going to close with an imaginary dialogue, and we have so many actors in this congregation that I'm embarrassed to try, but imagine someone who believes and yet does not believe, someone who wants to believe and yet is afraid to stand out in their belief, and imagine that person speaking to you, seeing your peace, and wanting it, and at the same time not wanting to step away from what the world has promised. The two choices. Yes, love and follow Jesus' teachings, and the world may ask why don't you have the same shallow priorities I have? Why don't you spend more time and money dressing up your life to fit the current trend, whatever it may be, like I do? What makes you think you have the right to be peaceful and loving when you don't even care what the world thinks of you? What makes you think you have the right to sit there peaceful while I'm blessing you out? Why don't you get angry back at me? Why are you so peaceful when I am following every fad and fashion and I am no nearer peace than I ever was? I have it all, and I am no nearer peace than when I sang my heart out at Bible school when I was five-years-old and sang yes, Jesus loves me, and I believed it – then, and now I don't believe it? I can't believe it openly because faith has fallen out of fashion. Christian faith is mocked, and I will not be mocked! The last time I felt peaceful, the last time I smiled like you are is the last time I believed with all my heart that Jesus did love me, and that was all that mattered. Now, I buy things to be worthy. I buy things to fit in. I fit in nowhere! I am at peace nowhere! I am going broke buying acceptance, and I cannot even accept or love myself. I love God more or less, but I don't want to talk about it, and I don't want to invite people here or even mention His name. If they ask about my peace, I would not have much to say. How do you keep yours? Where did you get that peace? Why are you so unashamed of your faith when everyone else preaches that religion is more problem than solution? Where did you get that peace? I want it. I want it, but if I get it, if I get it, I am so afraid that with that peace I will also have to change, and I'm afraid of change! I'm afraid of what people might say! I'm afraid that I might have to choose between following God and the path of peace or following whatever comes next. I'm afraid to be different. Isn't it enough to just know what Jesus taught? Isn't it enough to just study the Bible and to sit through a boring sermon from time to time? Does God really expect me to stand out, to stick my head up above the crowd and act differently? Doesn't God know what happens to people who act differently in the world? Look what happened to Jesus! While they hung Him there on the Cross, I bet He had that same look on His face that you do now. You make me sick. Please get mad. Please give me a reason to call you a hypocrite and dismiss you and the whole thing. You say Jesus loves me, and what if He actually said all those who love me will do what I say, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and live with them? What if that is the only way to get the spiritual peace I've been trying to buy in so many ways? What if I really have to let God in and let God change me? Oh Lord! What will people say!! It could turn my world upside down! Amen.