

Sermon Text: John 14:15-21

This is an adventure here today with all our children, showing their milestones, the things they have learned, and I am impressed. I am impressed with all of them. I don't know if any of them has prepared a sermon for today, if not, then I'll go ahead with the one I have.

Some people were teasing me because in the newsletter it said, “Sermon title to be announced,” and they weren't sure I would actually have one or not, well, you let me know afterwards whether I did.

This you may want to finish for me. It's a very old story, and I hope it makes a very good point. One day a man decided to clean up the half-dead trees on his property so he went to the local hardware store to buy a saw. He told the salesman what he wanted to do. The salesman recommended a small chainsaw, and he promised that he would be able to cut down 10 or 20 trees an hour with that particular make and model of saw. Well, the next day, the man came back with the saw and his blistered, bandaged hands, and he complained that he could cut down only one tree in two hours, far less than what he was told he could cut down, 10 or 20 in one hour, and besides, his arms were aching because the thing was so heavy. Well, he was sent back to the service department. The technician checked the sparkplug. It was fine. He checked the gas. It was fine. He checked the movement of the chain, and he grasped the cord and gave it a quick pull, and the chainsaw roared to life. The customer's eyes got big, and he said, “What's that noise?” I know, that's bad, it's old, but Jesus promised in this scripture that he would never leave us powerless, that he would never leave us orphaned, even though there would be times when we would be flabbergasted, there would be times when we wouldn't have the words. He even promised that, through the Holy Spirit, he would give us the words to say, the direction, the power to love and forgive, the comfort and companionship of God through the Holy Spirit, but so often in our church, when we start to speak of the Holy Spirit, the congregation says, “What's that noise? What is that strange concept, the Spirit?” We've been doing this Christian faith too often with blistered hands, all by ourselves, and Jesus said, “I will not leave you orphaned. I will not leave you deprived of parental love. I will not neglect you. I will not abandon you. I will not give up on you. I will come to you.”

I'm reminded of Psalm 27:10. We've been studying the Psalms in the Wednesday night class. It says, a Psalm of trust, “Even if my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.” Even if mother and father forsake me, the Lord will not, and Jesus has come to us by the Holy Spirit, who lives with us and in us as a constant reminder of God's nearness, but sometimes we turn our heads in some other direction, for reasons of our own. God is available, but we are free to turn away, and we do so to our own hurt.

A fellow pastor tells a sad story of an attorney friend, who was often assigned to be the advocate for a child in domestic disputes. One single case involving a family consisting of a husband, a wife, and their adopted son made him give up that part of his practice. He

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

May 1, 2005

would never do it again. You see this couple had problems, and as in all marital problems, their problem was in seeking self instead of seeking the middle ground. Anyway, this polarized couple thought they could paint their picture a little bit prettier if they had a child. This is an aside, but folks, if you can't find the middle ground and you can't compromise and you can't get along because you've taken opposite corners, a child will not make it better. Well, this couple could not conceive so they adopted a three-year-old boy. Five years later, it was obvious that the husband and the wife still were more interested in themselves than in the marriage, and the wife simply walked out, and she petitioned for divorce. She renounced all claims to the couple's property, and surrendered all custody and visitation rights to the boy. The husband, now alone with the eight-year-old boy, saw this as simply one more move in an ongoing war game so the father petitioned the court to renounce his custody of the child as well. The judge appointed this minister's friend as the attorney to be advocate for the little boy. This was the attorney's last custody case, and here's why. A final court hearing was scheduled in the county courthouse on the morning of Christmas Eve, and the father's request was put before the judge in clear and blunt terms. As the attorney for the child, my friend argued that no parent can walk away from his or her responsibilities just because it's inconvenient or unpleasant. In the end, the judge agreed with the attorney about parental responsibility, but he was not going to force that little boy to return home where he was unwanted and unloved. The attorney said he would never forget that Christmas Eve morning, standing in the corridor of the courthouse with a social worker on one side and him on the other, holding the hands of this eight-year-old boy, watching the man walk down the hall toward the exit of the building, and the child crying, “Daddy, don't leave me. Daddy, don't leave me.”

Love is fine, until it costs. Jesus said, “I will not leave you orphaned.” If you think you're to live this life of faith all by yourself, you are wrong. Jesus said, “I am with you, will be in you. I am present through the Holy Spirit.” Jesus promises if you obey the commands I give you, I'll ask the Father, he will send you another comforter, another advocate to be with you always, the spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept because it neither sees him nor knows him, but you can know him because he remains with you and will be in you. We are to keep Jesus' commandments. We are to love one another as I have loved you, said Jesus, his great commandment, but to keep that commandment, we need God's help. God and God's spirit is that help. Real love is giving yourself to another. Just as the husband and the wife of my true story never gave themselves truly to one another and never gave themselves or their hearts to their adopted son. Real love as Jesus revealed to some degree implies dying to yourself so that a part of you can be given to another. You cannot be safe and love at the same time. You cannot always win and love at the same time. You cannot get through real love without being, to some degree, scarred. Now, there is plenty of fake love in the world, and that requires no dying to self at all, no compromise. You know, romantic love, I hate to say this, but in my premarital counseling, I say that's largely an illusion you both agree to create, and if you have the energy and the inclination you can do that, but romantic love on the surface doesn't require self denial. It's all stars and flattery and sweet music and self-involved, just as politicians practice a sort of love and flattery. It requires no dying

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

May 1, 2005

to self. It's all done for others with the hope of return. Courting a sweetheart, you hope for some sweetness in return. Flattery in business, you hope for some business in return, a payoff. To love as Jesus loved, that deep, mysterious, heavenly self-giving love with nothing hoped for in return is beyond human ability and beyond even human desire because when you think about it, the God in Christ example is an uneven relationship as the idea, and what I mean is this. Jesus offered us relationship now and eternal, love unconditional, forgiveness complete, and for all this, exactly what does God get? To make it even clearer, what could we possibly give God in return for his love, for our souls? If we are to love as Jesus loved, uneven relationships are par for the course. Weigh the cross, if you can, in a cost benefit formula for God. The only thing we can give God is our trust, our faith. What God promised the apostles and us is God's continuing presence in our lives through the Holy Spirit. We are not alone. We are not orphaned, and we are not abandoned, and if we are still keeping score in our relationships, we have not yet begun to love as Jesus did. Look around. We need spiritual help to do good, to love, to forgive, and to even begin to think beyond ourselves. Jesus gave us the example when he was with us on earth, and he sent the Holy Spirit to be our comfort and our helper, even now. The spirit will give us the strength to love if we ask. Jesus was our helper. He says, “I will send you another helper.”

Now, loving is serious work. It's hard work, and can be done only with help from God above. The best we can do, without God's spirit, I'm convinced, is fake it. Faking it helps no one, and eventually when it costs too much, we stop faking it, and then we create one more unloved, cynical so and so in the world. Now let me get just a little bit personal here, how many cynics about love, how many cynics have we helped create by faking love until it began to cost too much, and then we stopped? How many cynics have we helped create when love cost too much so we walked away, passed by or ignored, or gave up on another? Love costs. It cost God to be in relationship with us. Consider the cross. Consider our vows and promises made to God when we join a church, or when we say a tithe belongs to you, Oh Lord, or when we invite God into our covenants, such as marriage or the parental covenant in Baptism where we promise to live a Christian life and instruct that child until he or she can claim the faith for themselves. It costs us to relate to God and to others, and we find ourselves no less than that father in court, in my opening illustration, when it costs too much. We find ourselves sometimes, when faking it gives out, just quitting. We walk away. We can't do this. It's too hard. Yes, it's too hard if you're trying to do and live as Christ lived, on your own, in fact, it may be impossible. Yes, it's too hard to love and forgive as Christ did on your own. You weren't meant to do it on your own. God did not leave us orphans. He did not leave us on our own. We reduce this faith of ours, too often, to a list of rules, and too often, we are satisfied with knowing the rules, but we long ago stopped worrying about keeping the rules. We tried it once, and it was too hard. I hope I can say this big enough to make it heard. God is still here. God is still with us. This instant. Now. In our trouble. In our weakness. In our striving. In our good intentions that don't quite make it on our own. God is still available to give us the courage to love and to care and to forgive, and to be generous with our time and our talents and our treasure. God is still here. This sanctuary, this heart, your heart, God is here, and God is help, and God is power to do as

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

May 1, 2005

Jesus did. This is what the scripture, I believe, is about. In times when I have pushed my pride aside and myself aside, I have found that God’s spirit is powerfully available to help me hold my tongue, keep my temper, be generous, stop, help, get involved, at times, and go that one extra mile, two extra miles beyond my schedule, or get involved past my comfort zone, at times, but not all the time because sometimes I, like you, turn away. And we know that God has moved in our lives. I was speaking with the confirmation class this morning, and they said, yes, they had felt God move in their lives. I think we know that God’s spirit is here, and I also think far from being afraid that God is absent, we may be more afraid that God is present. Afraid that if we pray, help me forgive, God can and will. Afraid if we say, God help me be more generous with my time and talents and treasure that God can and will. It may be that we are just aware of God’s presence and power enough to know better than to call upon God because we know if we do, off we may be led down paths that will cost us, and so we don’t. Amazing things happened when the apostles were guided by the Holy Spirit, but these things cost them their livelihood, their time, the comfort of their families, and for most of them, it cost their lives. You don’t really need help, when you think about it, to do easy things. God sent us help because there are hard things for each of us to do. Do we pray for spiritual help to do them? Do we? Is it because we don’t believe or we have an inkling of the difficult, costly things God might ask from us, and we’d rather not have the guidance and the courage to step out and do them? We may ignore God’s guidance to go and do, just as in the story Ebenezer Scrooge tried to say of the ghost of Christmas past, no, that was a just a dream brought on by a bit of bad beef. We may ignore those times when God was near us and cast if off as well. God wants us to grow in talent and in courage and in tasks to build his kingdom of love and light, and we’ve been watching this building going on behind me, this project, for it seems a lifetime, but for a very long while. One thing we know, nothing gets built without hard work and sweat and a lot of people specializing in many, many, many different skills. That’s why Jesus had to send us a comforter, a helper from above, to see to it that we keep the commandments of love that Jesus gave us and that he lived so intensely. He lived so intensely that the world hated and crucified him. God gave us himself in Jesus Christ on the cross, and God continues to give himself in the Holy Spirit, and God’s spirit within us enables us to begin the baby steps of learning to love without faking it, to love even when we get nothing back, to love even when it costs us, and make no mistake about it, it will always cost. God in our hearts, the Holy Spirit within, gives us God’s love to share and to show for real. We give what we have. We give and we show what we have on the inside, and if we have only selfishness, then that’s what the world gets from us. If it’s a false face covering a Teflon personality, never touching anyone, never getting involved, then we leave hardly a ripple in the world when we pass, but if we have within us God’s Holy Spirit, something is going to happen. God will do something through us. Love will find a way to work through us. It will change those who receive it, when God’s love works through us, and it will change us as well.

There is a story about the Berlin Wall back before Communism failed in Eastern Germany. The hostilities were flaring, not very long after World War II, and what they did on the eastside was dump truckloads of stinking garbage over the wall into West

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

May 1, 2005

Berlin. Many of the residents wrote to the mayor, demanding revenge. That's what people want, revenge. The mayor, and I think I see God in this, responded in a unique way. He asked the people to gather flowers from all over West Berlin, and to bring them to a certain place at the wall, and they dumped over the wall into East Berlin this avalanche of beautiful, fragrant flowers, and then they dropped a banner from their side over into the East, and written on the banner were the words, “We each give what we have.” Give what you have, and accept God's comfort and help and guidance in the Holy Spirit, and you'll have more to give. You'll be connected. When you are connected to God, God always sends you out to other people. I see this constantly through the scripture. Connected to God, God sends you to others. Someway, somehow, some notice of a need in a friend or family or co-worker or community or even a stranger, or some notice of a downcast face or hunger, literal, or hunger emotional or spiritual for touch or hope. God will send you, and the spirit will enable you, and give you courage to do what is right, but it will cost. It will cost time. It will cost rescheduling. It will cost inconvenience. Sometimes, it will cost even money. Love always does.

As I close, I want to give a quote from C. S. Lewis. He says, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to be sure of keeping your heart intact, you must give your heart to no one or nothing, not even a pet. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries, and avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safely in the casket or the coffin of your selfishness, but in that casket, in that box, safe and dark, and motionless and airless, it will change. It will not be broken, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, unredeemable. The only place, outside of Heaven, where you can be safe from all the dangers of love, is Hell.” Here and now, we are not alone, and the choices are connected, our life connected with the love of God and the love of others, or the other choice is disconnected, a life of solitary, but safe, disconnected Hell. As we read in Genesis, it is not good for man to be alone. Thanks be to God, we don't have to be. God is with us now just as God was with the disciples. Let us call upon Him for courage, for love and forgiveness enough to share, for guidance, for strength to live as Christ lived, and to obey his commandment to love one another. In Jesus' name. Amen.