

Not a command but a promise

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Sixth Sunday of Easter - May 14, 2023

Texts: Acts 17:24-28; 1 Peter 3:8, 9; John 14:15-21

Acts 17:24-28

Paul explains to the people of Athens that the god they worship as “unknown” is in fact the creator and parent of all.

The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”

1 Peter 3:8, 9

Dearly Beloved, siblings in Christ, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

**By the Spirit in us we will not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse;
but, repay with a blessing. For blessing we were called.**

John 14:15-21

John records Jesus’ long farewell speech to his disciples. This is a small part of it.

‘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.’

Word of God, Word of Life. **Thanks be to God.**

Volunteering at the Gage East Library a couple of times a week has refreshed my memory in a couple of ways. First, how absolutely hopeless I am at discipline. Mostly because I laugh when kids are naughty. But second, and more important, how much children teach us about God.

One child came in this week quite downcast. “I had a bad day,” he said. “What was bad about it?” I asked, naturally. Head hanging, he said, “I was in occlusion twice.” Occlusion?? Ah, maybe *seclusion*. Time out. “What for?” “Hitting people.”



Oh, yeah. That’ll do it, all right.

Nevertheless he perked right up when I read a book to him. I let him pick it out. Z is for Zombies, an instant success. I think I’m in love.

Despite never having had a child of my own—or maybe because of it—I think nearly everything children do is adorable, or at least hilarious. How people can stand to hurt children is beyond me. It makes me think they must have been wounded themselves as children in ways too awful to imagine.

This weekend being Mother’s Day Weekend, I had the idea of letting the kids make cards; except, we made cards to thank someone who helped us grow since having a living and loving mother or father is not a given at Gage East. This was a painfully sweet reminder of our gospel for today, where Jesus says to his disciples: “I will not leave you orphaned.”



What a promise. We are, obviously, an older crowd here. How many of us have two living parents? How many have one? How many have experienced the death of both parents? I was in my 20s when my mother died, in my 60s when my father left this world. But they did not leave me orphaned. I have always been covered in the mother-father love of God. I was one of the fortunate ones who learned love from my parents. Jesus likened himself to a mother hen, longing to take her wayward chicks under her wing. He will not leave us orphaned.¹

Isn't it only right that on this weekend especially we should remember the womb from which we all came? Back in Advent, I shared with you the medieval phenomenon of the Opening Virgin, the Virgin and Child statuettes that open to reveal the fullness of the Triune God: In this one we see the tiny dove, the Holy Spirit, resting on the head of God the Father who in turn upholds the crucified Son. The womb of the Mother holds them all.² She does not leave them orphaned; God is born and reborn of woman. And we are reborn children of God. We are not orphaned.



¹Ann from Detroit. Love and Happiness. 2008

²Vierge Ouvrante Notre-Dame-des-Murs de Morlaix



Look at the stained glass window on the left: As in the open virgin, we see at the top the Trinity, with the familiar flame of the Spirit, covering Creator God, who is blessing the Son, who extends loving arms to the disciples.³ Love moves from the divine to the human. And back. Compare it with the painting of four generations of women. See the similarities? A poem goes with the picture:

I am the daughter
of a daughter.
Who is the daughter
of a daughter.
Who is also the daughter
of a daughter.

Some of us are mothers
but all of us are daughters,
all birthed through lines
that weave back to
that First Mother.⁴

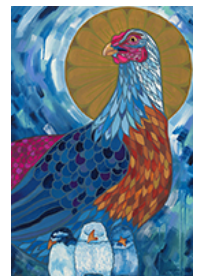


Whose name, Eve, means “life.” Who does not leave us orphaned.

But, some of you may have noticed, our gospel begins and ends with words that seem to make God’s love dependent upon our obedience. This may be perplexing, or even a cause for doubt, if you feel yourself to be lacking, unworthy, unloving or unlovable in any way.

As a child, I took this saying as a command: If you love me, obey me. If you don’t obey with all your *heart and soul*, you obviously don’t love Jesus. I remember how the stern-eyed church elders visited my childhood home every year to examine us for sin, even us little ones. They asked me severely, “Janice, do you always obey your parents?” I shriveled up with shame. “Yes,” I said. “But sometimes I don’t want to.” Even as an 8-year-old, I was sure *unwilling* obedience, obedience without sincere love, bought me a ticket straight to hell.

Later, I came to think of Jesus’ words as a statement of fact: If you love me, of course you’ll obey. Don’t worry about it. But now, in my later years, I’ve come to think of it instead as a promise. Just as Jesus promises not to leave you orphaned, so he promises you love, love where you live and move and *have your being*, love that covers and protects you like a mother hen, love that flows from you to others⁵. A love that breaks you open to love yourself as God loves you: unconditionally and indestructibly and inescapably, and to love your neighbor that same way. Every neighbor. No exceptions.

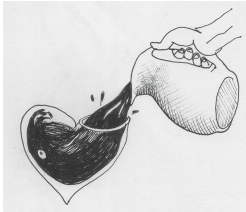


³ Church of St. Catherine of Sienna, New York. 1930. Remain in My Love,

⁴ Poem: The Daughter Line, Arlene Bailey ©2023. Art: The Daughter of the Daughter of My Daughter, Julie Dillon.

⁵ Lauren Wright Pittman. Mother Hen, 2018.

Sometimes, when I'm deep in prayer I surprise myself by how much love I feel toward every living thing on earth, enemies included. Then, like a bad smell, the thought of someone who has irritated me or hurt my feelings floats into my mind and the good feeling evaporates. *Phhttt. Darn it.* Foiled again. Pride before a fall and all that.



It's obvious. I'm in occlusion. There's a blockage somewhere. What my young friend at the library helped me understand with his curiously apt word is not that I've broken Jesus' command to love and failed my God yet again, and deserve to be punished. No, the occlusion is that I've stopped myself up against receiving God's love. Closed myself off from the promise. For a minute there, I thought I actually produced love on my own. I forgot that God is the source of all love. But rather than beat myself up, I can laugh at my humanity, my unfailing failure to be perfect, and let God fill me, love me, again.⁶

Yes, God judges us, but God's judgment is always mercy and God's justice is love. Maybe you, too, get too occluded by judgment or self-criticism to love perfectly. Most of us do. Yet you are all perfectly loved. You will never be orphaned. You will be loved. And you will love. Promise.

Prayers

God, turn our hearts to You to receive once more Your love and mercy poured out each morning. May every breath of this day be to celebrate and remember your glorious presence that sustains and guides us. Fill us with the power of Your Holy Spirit to be your compassionate hands and feet redeeming a sick world. Protect us from what in ourselves wants to keep us away from You.

We give thanks today for all those who have taken on the role of helping others grow, mothers, fathers, sisters, teachers, mentors, friends. And we pray for all of those who would love to fill those roles but are prevented by war, poverty, illness—their own desperation or their own woundedness.

Our hearts go out to those under the threat of rising flood waters and soaking fields, those whose homes and livelihoods are in danger. May we be present to help as we may, but may we also be aware of the connection between our behavior and a changing, volatile climate.

As we live in a city of healing, may we grow with you to be healers ourselves, offering the love that begins and ends in you. Especially we pray for Judy Leal, Jane and Ed Burgstaler family, especially daughter Jenny, Connie Holst, Dick and Nancy Massaro, Vera Atkinson's daughter Teresa, Shannon Cisewski, Ron Murray, the Hall family, especially Jennifer, grieving today, Larse and June Pillers. Thank you for the promise that you leave none of your children orphaned.

⁶ Fill Me. Liz Valente, 2021

The Daughter Line

I am the daughter
of a daughter.
Who is the daughter
of a daughter.
Who is also the daughter
of a daughter.
Some of us are mothers
but all of us are daughters,
all birthed through lines
that weave back to
that First Mother.
All connected from
the very beginning.
All connected in the now.
Mothers,
Daughters,
Grandmothers,
Great Grandmothers,
Great Great Grandmothers.
All daughters born from
One. Original. Egg.
from
One. Original. Woman.
So why the separation?
Why the animosity toward each other?
Why the arguing and fighting,
back-stabbing and lack of support?
The next time you see another woman,
look in her eyes and see the
Ancestral Lines – the lines of women –
that lead back to you.
Where are we going Mother?
And how will we get there Sister?
By staying connected Daughter
and allowing for difference.
For we are each one,
after all,
all Daughters
of the
One Mother.

—Arlene Bailey, 2023