

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 14, 2023

Faith, Okemos

Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:8-20, I Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

## **I Will Not Leave You Orphaned**

“Honesty and love”...foundational words that came to me during my junior year in college in 1963 and '64. Years marked by JFK's assassination... by George Wallace declaring “segregation forever”... by the reawakening of the women's movement (Betty Friedan)...by MLK's arrest in Birmingham –“Parading without a permit”... by the cruel tactics of Bull Connor... by the Supreme Court ruled that state mandated Bible reading in schools was unconstitutional....by an attack on American journalists in South Vietnam...by our entrance into the war in Viet Nam after North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked a US destroyer ship in the Gulf of Tonkin... by MLK's “I have a dream” speech and his letter from the Birmingham Jail, by the bombing at 16<sup>th</sup> St. Baptist Church in Birmingham killing four young children, by a mock election to protest systematic disenfranchisement of blacks in Mississippi, by the killing Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby, ...by Nelson Mandela sentenced to life in prison....by President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act. A tumultuous both deeply troubling and hope-filled time in so many ways, affecting so many lives...

“Honesty and love”... One day in my sophomore year while working in the chemistry lab (pursuing a major in chemistry), it came to me that this was not to be my profession. My grades were fine, though calculus was a struggle. But my really difficult, deeper struggle was about discerning what God was calling me to be and do with my life. My father, grandfather, and great grandfather were all pastors. I was determined not just to follow in their footsteps.

This past week my brother, Jim, and I drove to Dubuque, Iowa to visit folks at Wartburg Seminary where my dad, grandpa, and great grandpa had all studied to become pastors. Jim and I, together with Phylis and Jim's wife, Livvy, were supporting a new program intended to equip men and women especially in Latinx faith communities to become pastors through study and practice in their home place, honoring each person's learning pace and style (rather than having to move

themselves and their families to the seminary, to try to conform to a more traditional educational model). We've been giving gifts for this new initiative to honor the memory of our forebears who set high bars for commitment and diligence and often, creativity in their ministries. We wanted to see how this new way of forming leaders for the mission of the church was progressing.

At 20+ years old in those early '60's, I couldn't see myself measuring up to the gifts and contributions of my forebears. But now realizing that being a chemist was probably not the best path for my future, I started to pray: Okay, God, I haven't experienced a clear call from you to follow in my family's footsteps, but [in the words of the anthem the choir sang last Sunday] I'll take "one step" toward becoming a pastor. I'll continue to pursue a degree in chemistry (just in case) but also take classes like Greek and world religions to prepare for seminary. At least bless me, God, by clearly closing the door to this path if this is not what you want for me to be and do.

And now some 60 years later, while more than once I have struggled with doubts and feelings of inadequacy for this calling, I realize that God never shut the door. To paraphrase the words of the psalmist, God heard me. God did not reject my prayer. God did not withhold unfailing love for me. God did not leave me alone. And in the language of the Gospel, Jesus did not leave me orphaned. I was never not God's child, never not a member of God's family, never not with Jesus and the Holy Spirit at my side

Surely the times we live in now are no less tumultuous than in 1963. All I knew then and more fully know now was that, is that, honesty and love are all that matters. Now I can say more confidently from whence that honesty and love comes. Jesus said, "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 [honesty]...I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you...because I live, you also will live."

This is the gospel, the good news I proclaim to you this morning. In what ever ways you struggle, in what ever ways you worry about what's happening in our world, however befuddled and discouraged you may be by the plethora of lies and hate, Jesus, risen from the dead, asks only that we love him and that we love one another. Jesus, risen from the dead, promises to plant in our hearts the Spirit of

truth. Through this Holy Spirit Jesus will never not walk with us, never not stand up with us and for us.

Then, living lives of God-given honesty and love, whether as a chemist or a pastor, a teacher or a line worker, whether single or married, whether working full time or semi-retired, whether a mother or father, daughter or son, we can live boldly and humbly and reverently and gently and graciously in this world too often filled with broken promises, with fear, harshness and ill will.

For to us, through Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection, is given the Spirit of truth and of love. One day we will all be judged by this One who died for us, who daily forgives all our sins, forgives all our deceptions, forgives all our failures to love as we ought. We will be judged by the One who raises us up every day to try again to be honest and loving. On that day that One who judges us will also stand with us and for us. This judge is the One who heard our cries, listened to our prayers, and never, never stopped loving us.

Amen.

JDS