



“I Will Not Leave You Orphaned”

John 14: 15-21

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 29, 2011

In September 2006, Dr. Randy Pausch, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. One year later, he spoke to 400 people in the university's lecture series named "Journeys." The series was created so that faculty could "share their reflections on their journeys – the everyday actions, decisions, challenges and joys that make a life."¹

Dr. Pausch entitled his lecture: "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams," and throughout his talk he shared the important lessons he had learned. He said things such as: "You've got to get the fundamentals down because otherwise the fancy stuff isn't going to work" and "I'll take an earnest person over a hip person every day, because hip is short term. Earnest is long term." He turned those lessons into a book entitled, *The Last Lecture*. He died in 2008, leaving his family and friends with his book and a YouTube video of his lecture.

If you knew you had only months to live and were given the opportunity to give your last lecture, what thoughts would you share? Would you recall a childhood incident that altered the course of your life? Would you share the guiding principles you learned on the athletic field or the world of business? Would you talk about the music that makes your heart soar? Would you talk about the ways the love of your life enriched your journey? Would you tell about the importance of your faith: the times God gave you strength to endure a tragedy; the challenge to forgive as you have been forgiven; the hope that this life is not all there is. What would you say in your last lecture?

Scholar Jean-Pierre Ruiz points out that today's scripture lesson from the Gospel of John "is a key portion of Jesus' *Last Lecture*."² The scene is the Last Supper. Jesus has gathered with his 12 disciples in an upper room in a house in Jerusalem. Sensing that the end is near, Jesus says, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer." The disciples shift in their seats and wonder what he's talking about. Peter gives voice to what each of them is thinking: "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus responds by talking about laying down his life for them and going to be with God.

As the meaning of his words begins to sink in, the disciples are struck with extreme separation anxiety. What will they do after he is gone? How will they manage? First fear, then grief pulses through their bodies as they try to imagine life without their master.

Seeing their distress and aware that the road ahead will be demanding, Jesus, in his last lecture, comforts his disciples and reassures them that they will not be alone. In verse 16 of today's reading, Jesus says, "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you."

The Greek word that the New Revised Standard Version translates "Advocate" has various translations because it encompasses multiple meanings that cannot be adequately expressed with one English term. In addition to Advocate, the Greek word means Comforter, Helper, Supporter, Exhorter and Counselor. This Advocate/Comforter/Counselor is what we generally call the Holy Spirit or God's Spirit. What some call the Holy Ghost. In his last lecture, to mitigate the trauma his closest friends will soon experience, Jesus assures them that God's Spirit will take his place and will be with them forever.

The way Jesus expresses this is to say, "I will not leave you orphaned." In the ancient world, orphans were usually in desperate need of a support system. Like widows, orphans were usually poor, neglected and vulnerable. Their daily wellbeing was precarious and their future was uncertain.

Jesus assures his disciples they will not be deserted. They will not be cut off from the one who gives them energy and inspiration. They will still be connected to their source of meaning, joy and hope. Jesus will not simply be with them as a cherished memory – an influential leader who transformed their lives, but now is gone – he will continue to be with them as a powerful, internal force.

Jesus says, "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***." Jesus reassures them that he will only be apart from them for a short time. Soon he will return to them through God's Spirit.

If you are a parent, you have likely had the experience of seeing yourself in your child. If your child is your biological offspring, some of what you pass along is in your DNA. But if your child is adopted, you quickly realize that part of you is transmitted to your child by other pathways. What father has not heard his own words roll off of his child's lips? Sometimes they are words we did not think they had heard! What mother has not seen her child act exactly as she does? Children are little sponges soaking up the world around them, internalizing sounds, feelings and images. And, of course, it's not simply children who internalize their experiences. We all do. Every moment of existence, we are taking in the world both consciously and unconsciously.

People of faith believe we have interior experiences of God. God is transcendent, that is, apart from us. Yet, God is also immanent, that is, within us.

God's Spirit is that interior urging that motivates us to act in Christ-like ways. God's Spirit pricks our conscience when we're jealous or greedy. God's Spirit gets under our skin when we lust or lie; when we treat someone unfairly or ignore people in need. God's Spirit also prompts us to check in with a friend who is struggling and to stand for a just cause. God's Spirit urges us to take care of God's creation and to be generous with our wealth.

But there are many voices within us that clamor for our attention, so how do we know which intuitions are aroused by God's Spirit? Jesus makes it evident in this morning's passage and elsewhere in scripture. He says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And what is his chief commandment? We are to love God and to love others as ourselves. Further, the Scriptures indicate that the chief way to express our love for God is to love our neighbor.

How does Christ want us to express love? Not through rigid rules or predetermined prescriptions, but by opening ourselves to others in all of their complexity. We recognize each person as needing care and concern, and we attempt to understand the needs of others by imagining how they experience life. This is closely akin to the Native American saying that beckons us not to judge another until we have walked a mile in the other's moccasins.

The word Jesus uses for love is *agape*. *Agape* love is not a mushy emotion, but rather is thoughtful and action-oriented. It is a desire to act for the good of the other.

Anthony DeMello traveled to Africa where he witnessed firsthand the gripping poverty that leaves so many children hungry. The sight of starving children disturbed him and he tried to distance himself emotionally from their condition. Then a little five year-old boy caught his attention. As he struck up a conversation with the little boy, he realized this child was in considerable pain from his hunger. The boy had a bloated stomach and other effects from hunger. DeMello felt anger brewing within at the unfairness of the boy's plight. When he could take it no longer, he turned away from the boy and cried out, "God, this is despicable. This little boy has no place to turn for help. Why don't you do something?" And DeMello said that it was as if God thundered in his soul the response: "Anthony, I did do something. I made you."

DeMello was never the same after that moment. He changed his way of living. He began to contribute his money to alleviating suffering and give his time to improving conditions for people who are poor.³

In his last lecture, Jesus spoke words to his 12 disciples that were intended for all of his subsequent followers. Once he was no longer physically present, he would not leave us orphaned. God's Spirit would be present throughout the world; not only externally, but also within each of us. God penetrates your heart, mind and soul, encouraging acts of compassion, inciting anger at injustice, nudging you toward wholeness, warning you of the danger of self-centeredness, and primarily encouraging you to love others with reckless abandon.

The tornado that struck Joplin last weekend cut a horrific path of devastation. It killed over 120 people, but there could have been one more death. The monster twister clobbered the home of Dan and Bethany Lansaw. When it hit, they huddled on the floor next to each other, covering themselves with pillows. But then as the house was ripping apart, glass flying and shattered pieces of wood zooming through the house like missiles, Dan climbed on top of his wife to protect her, using his body as a shield. He saved her life, but in the process lost his own.

What prompts people to sacrifice their lives for others? What gets inside of people and motivates them to such selfless acts? Could it be God's Spirit that prompts us to love others with the same depth that Christ loves us?

NOTES

1. Description of *University Lecture Series: Journeys*, on the Carnegie Mellon University website.
2. Jean-Pierre Ruiz, "Exegesis," in *Lectionary Homiletics*, April – May 2011, p.73.
3. Thomas Tewell, "Enter at Your Own Risk," June 29, 1997.