

Dependent

I Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

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In today's Gospel Jesus is leaving his disciples. It is as if the disciples are children playing on the floor and the parent walks to the door and takes hat and coat in hand. The children ask, "Where are you going? How long will you be gone? When will you be back? And who will stay here with us while you're away?" John chapters 14-15-16-17 is Jesus answering these questions as he tells the disciples goodbye. These four chapters are called the "farewell discourse" and they take up a major part of the Gospel of John. As Jesus is saying good-bye to his disciples, he does not tell them they are on their own. He does not tell that they have no other resources other than their own will-power and independence. No, Jesus promises them help and guidance.

For three years Jesus has been patiently instructing them in the particulars of his way in the world. Jesus has allowed them to be first-hand witnesses to all of his wonderful "signs." Now he says, "I'll give you another advocate" (14:16). This "advocate" will be the Holy Spirit who is to be the same Counselor, Comforter, and Guide that Jesus has been when with his disciples.

He does not leave his disciples alone. He does not expect them to find their own way as best they can. He tells them that this companion, this "advocate," the Holy Spirit, "will abide with you all, and will be in you all" (14:17). Note the plural form of "you." The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, is with us, not just me by

myself. Together they disciples will have the same intimate, personal connection with the Advocate that they have enjoyed with Jesus.

When Jesus calls us to follow him he doesn't expect us to be some kind of spiritual super-heroes. He doesn't expect us to figure it all out on our own. Instead, Jesus teaches us to love one another just as God loves us and the way we know that love is by obeying and following Jesus.

A few weeks ago, I was doing a training in Henderson at the Episcopal church for area lay-people interested in becoming lay-chaplains to serve as volunteers in area hospitals and nursing homes. In one of our conversations I made the off-hand comment that loving one another as Jesus loves us is counter-cultural. It goes against the stream of individualism and freedom from any obligation to others. You would have thought I insulted someone's mother. One woman from First Baptist Church, Henderson got downright angry. For her, being a Christian was only a matter between her and Jesus; strictly private and individual. I asked her if her faith was only private, then why was she in training to care for others?

And it is true, that it takes training. Loving and obeying like Jesus is not something that comes naturally. We have to be trained and we have to practice, practice, practice.

It does go against our cultural habits. Why do students go to college? Rarely, in my experience, do they say, "to get a good education," or "to gain wisdom." They say, "So I can be out on my own, so I can live my own life free of parental interference."

What do many older people fear about getting older? Not the loss of a spouse or even death. They say, "I fear becoming dependent upon my family."

What is the main reason that I hear for why a young couple is delaying marriage? “We just don’t want to become dependent on one another. We like our independence.”

Years ago I was speaking to someone who was a member of a liberal, progressive congregation on the East Coast and I asked what they liked about their church. He said, “Because you are free to believe anything you want and no one interferes.”

And while I don’t like overbearing churches anymore than any of you, I also am chilled to the bone with this notion that I, as an individual can believe anything I want and no one interferes. It’s a short step from no one interfering to no one caring, and I want to be in a church where we care for one another enough that we talk and listen to one another about what we believe. And there’s a difference in a church where everyone believes whatever they want to one where we can have freedom of belief but at the same time have spirited conversation and teaching about what we need to believe in order to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

And while I understand that we don’t want to be dependent on others. It seems that we’re living in a society that seeks independence and freedom of the individual to an extreme, with no obligation to others, no mutual care or shared life. If the streets are unsafe, instead of working on reducing poverty that underlies so much crime, we think in terms of installing an alarm system and packing a gun. If public schools are failing, instead of working on ways of improving them, we start private schools. If our water is tainted with pollution, we don’t clean it up, instead we buy bottled water. If our roads are clogged with heavy traffic and falling apart from heavy use, we don’t push for public transportation, we build private toll-ways, and buy a bigger car. If cancer is epidemic, rather than address

its root causes, we invest massive amounts of money in developing new individual therapies. If we're worried about the increase of violence on campus, instead of helping campus security, and finding ways to deal with the increase of alcohol and drugs, we carry our own guns so we can have shoot-outs on the streets, in class, and in the dorms. If the future of Social Security looks insecure, rather than overhauling the system, we funnel the money into private accounts, so those who guess right on the market will win and those who guess wrong will lose. And when public secondary and higher education, public parks, public roads, public health, public TV and radio, public law and order, public arts – and all the other ways we, as a society have determined that many things we can do better together than individually – all these public ways are under extreme duress, rather than finding ways to fix them, overhaul the tax system so everyone, including corporations and the wealthy, pay their fair-share, instead we cut taxes for the wealthiest so they'll have more for their private interests.

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to another way. And in today's reading it is a way that is characterized by love, obedience and dependence. Jesus says that we are to obey his commands. If we love him, then we are to obey him.

Love, which in a Christian context and definition means a life turned outward to the other. Christian love is no mere feeling or emotion and it is certainly not private. Jesus Christ gives content and substance to the word "love." He shows us with his life what love looks like.

In loving, the Christian is simply following a precedent that is set by Christ. Remember, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave us his only Son..." We obediently love as those who have been obediently loved in Christ.

Thus our Gospel links love and obedience repeatedly throughout today's lesson: in verses 15, 21, and 24. Love is something that Christians are commanded to do. We love because we have been loved. We turn outward in care because God first turned outward to us in care.

In order to love in this obedient Christ-like way we are promised that we shall not be "desolate," not left on our own, not orphaned and alone. We shall be enabled to love because of the gift of the "Spirit of truth" who "dwells with you." A major work of the Holy Spirit is to enable us obediently to love – to turn our lives outward in caring for one another in this hard world.

This week has reminded us how dependent upon one another we truly are. The massive tornado in Joplin and Josh Stuckey's close-call survival, Robyn Guillory's father very bad automobile accident, which killed his passenger and left him in a tough place, and John Heath Sr.'s car wreck, which while not as bad as Robyn's father's, it too could have very easily been different. They all have reminded us that life is fragile and that each day we have is a gift.

These kinds of "natural" disasters and accidents also reminds us of how little control we really have in this life, despite our considerable efforts to manage, contain, and forestall the unforeseeable.

Life is fragile, peace is always precarious, and the earth itself no respecter of persons or property. One storm and a town is forever changed. One tire blow-out and one life is ended and another changed forever. One gigantic wave and whole populations are decimated; one seismic shift and time changes.

We humans exist in a complex, interdependent web of relations with each other and with a planet that is sometimes inhospitable to our habitation of it. It was

as instructive as it was terrifying to hear that medical records in Joplin were carried by the storm to whole other areas of the state. In the recent Japanese tsunami, the waves were felt as far away as the California coast as the tsunami made its inevitable way westward. And the radioactivity will be felt world-wide. What happened in Japan didn't stay in Japan. What happens in one place is felt in other places.

No matter how many of us in our society want to go it alone and be independent of everyone else, we have always been linked to our neighbors near and far, Our independence won't save us. Perhaps acknowledging our mutual dependence and shared vulnerability might be a step in the right direction. Maybe caring for one another, will move us toward the One who will save us.

I cannot explain why bad things happen. The Bible spends very little time on explaining such matters. But it is clear that our task is to be present with those who suffer, just as God is. To love because God loves.

To pray, and to pray with our hands and feet, our sweat and tears, our time and money is part of our calling. We are to make credible the God who is Father and Mother, a God of love and mercy, not violence, and who promises that "though the earth be moved . . . though the mountains tremble . . . the LORD of hosts is with us" (Psalm 46:2-4).

And I'm more and more convinced that this is central to our life and calling here in Nacogdoches: that life is to be shared and not hoarded, we are to love one another because God has first loved us, that we are connected to one another no matter how much many want to deny it, and that we are neighbors, even with people we don't like or agree with. From Habitat to Humanity, to C&R Cut Bottle,

to the Farmers' Market to quality public schools to public sidewalks, all are about a vision of a shared life, of being neighbors.

Denise McDonald reminded me this week of a great example for us. It's the famous scene in the book and movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which takes place late one night on the steps of the jail. Atticus Finch is sitting outside on the steps of the jail, while his client, Tom Robbins is in the jail. Driving up in several old cars and trucks comes a lynch mob. They come to take matters in their own hands and kill Tom Robbins, and they come as an anonymous mob.

The children of Atticus, Jem and Scout and their friend Dill, come running up on the steps to stand with Atticus and Scout engages one of the men, whom she recognizes, in conversation:

“Hey, Mr. Cunningham.”

The man did not hear me, it seemed.

“Hey, Mr. Cunningham. How's your entailment gettin' along?”

Mr. Walter Cunningham's legal affairs were well known to me; Atticus had once described them at length. The big man blinked and hooked his thumbs in his overall straps. He seemed uncomfortable; he cleared his throat and looked away. My friendly overture had fallen flat. ...

“Don't you remember me, Mr. Cunningham? I'm Jean Louise Finch. You brought us some hickory nuts one time, remember? ... I go to school with Walter,” I began again. “He's your boy, ain't he? Ain't he sir?”

Mr. Cunningham was moved to a faint nod. He did know me, after all.

“He’s my grade,” I said, “and he does right well. He’s a good boy,” I added, “a real nice boy. We brought him home for dinner one time. Maybe he told you about me, I beat him up one time, but he was real nice about it. Tell him hey for me, won’t you?” ...

“Entailments are bad,” I was advising him, when I slowly awoke to the fact that I was addressing the entire aggregation. These men were all looking at me, some had their mouths half-open....

“Well, Atticus, I was just sayin’ to Mr. Cunningham that entailments are bad an’ all that, but you said not to worry, it takes a long time sometimes ... that you all’d ride it out together ...”

I began to feel sweat gathering at the edges of my hair; I could stand anything but a bunch of people looking at me. They were quite still.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

Atticus said nothing. I looked around and up at Mr. Cunningham, whose face was equally impassive. Then he did a peculiar thing. He squatted down and took me by both shoulders.

“I’ll tell him you said hey, little lady,” he said.

Then he straightened up and waved a big paw. “Let’s clear out,” he called. “Let’s get going, boys.” (from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 175-176).

It took Scout, one little girl, to remind an anonymous mob that they are neighbors with one another which averted a lynching.

And perhaps all it takes is one small church to remind a whole town that we are neighbors, that we are connected, and that the love of God empowers us to love each other. Amen and amen.