

You Need Never Walk Alone

Confirmation Sunday

Scripture: I Corinthians 11:17-26; John 21:9-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Last week I suggested to you that I would hope that you are living your truth. The question was, "Whose Truth Are You Living?" and I said I would hope you could answer me, "My truth." And yet, I am aware of the fact that, for most of us, life moves along. There is enough to detract us, enough to keep us occupied, and not many of us without some stimulus, pause long to ask ourselves the serious and ultimate questions of life: "Why is there something rather than nothing? Is this all there is? What does it all mean?" But life does have a way of catching up with us, and I have a theory that most of us don't probe those deep questions or think about them a great deal until life does catch up with us, and then some peak experience perhaps, or some diagnosis filled with terror, or crisis, causes us to ask, "What does it all mean?" The whys and the wherefores of our human existence remain, even for the most reflective life, a mystery and a question.

I said last week I hope that you have moved to a point where you can say, "I'm living by a vision, by an insight, by an intuition that resonates with my own being. I have a sense of living my truth." But, I also indicated that one does not come to that in a vacuum. There is a tradition into which we are born. There is, for most of us, an orthodoxy of one sort or another in which we are schooled. Some of us who are older have been thoroughly schooled in it, and that tradition serves a purpose. It does become a scaffolding or the ladder by which we scale the various questions and issues of life to the point at which we can come to claim our own truth.

On Confirmation Sunday we recognize that, as a community of faith, we do take seriously the traditioning that enables one finally to fly on one's own. At Christ Community we take that traditioning very seriously. We have our eighth grade class, some 20 strong at the 10 o'clock service, who will be given their candle. Here at Christ Community, at Baptism, as you know, we give to the parents a candle at the point of the infant's baptism with the suggestion that they light that candle on the anniversary of the baptism in order that they might tell their child about the story of their baptism and its meaning. But on Confirmation Sunday, we give our young people their own candle, and by means of that ritual,

symbolically, we are saying, "We have done what we could do, but now it is up to you to guard the flame of your faith and to keep it burning." In the hymn that we just sang there is that phrase, "When you go out where demons dwell." What parent has not been through the scary experience of launching a child, knowing that, finally, they have to go out on their own and the individuation process is such that we cannot guard them and keep them? We have to turn them loose. And so, symbolically in the Church, in this community, at least, that is what we are saying today. "Here is your candle. We have done what we could do."

I think we do it well here, and Colette brought to us the Worship Center which is a nurture program for children, I believe, second to none, a program which has beautifully appointed space with great intentionality and a highly trained and dedicated team of teachers, ministers, celebrants. Colette has written the curriculum which we use here for three-year-olds through fifth graders, and Mary Ackerson has written it for the next three grades. I don't think any other congregations could boast that the curriculum that the children and youth are exposed to is as reflective of the understanding, the insight, the spirit, and the posture of the larger community. This is not something you go out and buy in some bookstore warehouse. This is not some commercially produced product that has to appeal across the spectrum of theological positions. This is a curriculum that nurtures our children in the finest and deepest insights and the spirit of this community. Perhaps most important, beyond all of that, is that intentional greeting of the child and in every way possible at every opportunity possible, to say to the child "God loves you. You are loved of God, and one day God will call you to be God's servant, helper in this world," that continuing positive regard that saturates our children as they go through.

And we share the stories; we share the biblical stories told in wonderfully creative fashion, and the way of Jesus, the stories of Jesus, going through the life of Jesus as we in this setting go through the Christian Year. The children are invited to hear the story with the question, "I wonder," and that question or that questioning, wondering mode is followed through consistently into their adolescent years, so that our children are engaged, their imaginations are engaged, their minds are engaged. They are welcomed into the story and then invited to wonder about it.

One has to be an old fossil like me who had it all the other way to appreciate the difference that that makes. For example, what is the catechism method? The catechism method is a method of questions. Well, you might say, that's just like the Worship Center, just like our youth classes, raising questions. But, there is this difference: In the catechism method, you are given the answers and you memorize the answers. I don't mean to demean that or denigrate that. After all, it has worked for generations. And certainly some of us who were persecuted thus had the lines of that tradition deeply, indelibly written on our being, and that is precisely why, for some of us, it has been so difficult to learn to fly, because we have earned with us the baggage that was loaded on us in the most caring and

loving fashion by those with the best of intentions. But, you do see the difference. Are you invited to wonder? Or, is the question raised to which you are given the answer to memorize? You can do that whole thing without thinking about it at all. You can go through that whole procedure without once asking, "But is it true? What does it really mean?" So, what I am saying this morning is that we have been serious about bringing our children and our youth to a point at which they have had a sense of being a part of a tradition, a thought-ful tradition, a tradition that has a point of view, an understanding, and I think, frankly, we have done it very, very well. I can say that without anything about myself because it is done totally apart from me. But I have never in all these years of my ministry known it to be done as well as it has been done here in the last dozen years.

Today we say to our confirmands, "You have a candle now to nurture on your own. We have done our best to give you a sense, an identity, of who the community is in light of the larger tradition, and now you are prepared to find your way." What I really want to say to them, and I think that it has meaning for all of us, regardless of whether we stand to get our candle today or not, is that, "Although you're on your own and I hope you find your own truth, you need never walk alone." That's quite something other. You need never walk alone, because you belong, because you are a part of a family, because you are a part of a community. I think that is so terribly important. If we have done our job right, then those whom we launch will always feel some kind of a spiritual bond here.

Ryan and Michelle Boeve will bring their newest child from Sarasota, Florida, to be baptized here. I don't know if you were here a year or so ago when Jim VanEenenaam brought his latest baby back and Peter Theune spoke then, talking about the miles and the geography, from California to Spring Lake Children's Moment here, and the reasons one would come back in order to celebrate that sacrament here. That sacrament of initiation brings one into a family and a community and one belongs, and in everything that we do, we try to say that. And where it is said and received successfully, there is a bond that is never broken. There is a community here and a family here and no matter how far you go, or wherever your journey takes you, you do belong. There is a rootedness here and an affectional bond, and a community of people who care and embrace. I think that is terribly important.

I read the passages I did this morning because they are about the Eucharist, and in a few moments we will celebrate our Lord's Supper, or the Eucharistic Feast, and that meal is a sign of community, of family. Where is a family gathered best? Around the table. Where do the best things happen in a family? The family meal. And Jesus' ministry – There have been those who have looked at it all, and said, "You know, the very heart of his ministry and his life was that open table fellowship," and the point of it was that everyone was welcome to come, that there were no outsiders, the open table, a sign of the inclusion of the grace of God that was embodied in Jesus. That was his way. That was that which marked him. That was that which set him off from the religious establishment. That was one of

the factors, of course, that got him crucified. But, during the days of his ministry, he was constantly at table, breaking bread.

We know the story of the Last Supper, or maybe it was a Passover meal. It was Passover time. The Gospels differ as to whether it was on the time of Passover or the day before, but it doesn't matter. He had a Last Supper, in any case, which was consistent with the practice of all of the days of his ministry, and it is that meal that we will remember in a few moments. But, it didn't stop there, for we have in Luke two instances of Jesus at table in resurrection appearances - the road to Emmaus and the story immediately following, when he was with the disciples. And then the little story in the 21st chapter of John's Gospel, which the scholars say was tacked on to the Gospel; it probably was not a part of the original. What that 21st chapter was about was who had authority in the leadership of the new community. I'm not interested in that, but I think it's a rather delightful picture to see the disciples back at their trade again, out fishing, Jesus on the shore saying, "Lads, have you caught any fish? Come and have breakfast." This was consistent with the whole pattern of his ministry that he took bread and fish and they had a meal which certainly had to be reflective of the meals they have had before, and of the Passover meal that he shared on the evening of his betrayal, and of course, in that early community some decades after his death and resurrection, as John was writing, it was reflective of that Eucharistic theme which was the meal that marked the family.

It was not just an ordinary meal. It was a meal in which everyone was invited and everyone came on the same basis. That is why Paul scolds the Corinthians in the passage I read. He says, "Some of you, you 'haves' come and have a big feast, and the 'have nots' don't have anything." We know from the social context of the time, they were dirt poor. And so, there was a division within that early community in Corinth. There were those who had plenty who, with insensitivity, humiliated those who had nothing. Paul said, "You are not discerning the body of Christ. You are not eating and drinking worthily."

You know what that meant to me when I was a kid and the communion service was held? It meant that some people were coming to the table without sin confessed. If you were raised a Scottish Presbyterian, you would have been introduced in a former century to the practice of "fencing the table." You get the image? Fencing the table was a preparatory service in which the congregation was confronted with all of the potential sin in their life, called to confess and to get right with one another, to come to the table with everything cleared, the accounts all cleared. That's what the preparatory service was about. As a child, I remember a wonderful pastor of my childhood who preached a great sermon, a preparatory sermon from the verse in the Psalm, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, he will not hear me," and if you don't think we went out of there in fear and trembling ... The sacrament was so holy that you couldn't approach it unless your hands were clean and your heart was pure.

Now, I don't know what Paul would have said about that. He probably would have said, "Well, that's a good idea." But, might he not have said the same thing he said to the Corinthians for another reason? Why are you making distinctions? Why are you making this a table of particularity rather than a table of universal access? Because, who is righteous? Who is ready to come to this table, standing in one's own righteousness?

At Carl Juhl's funeral a little over a week ago, I was moved sitting here as Bob Kleinheksel was the Celebrant and he gave the invitation to the table. An invitation to the table at a funeral is always a delicate matter, because you have all sorts and conditions of humankind. You have rabid Baptists, serious Catholics, lapsed atheists, particularly when it's a Juhl funeral, what kind of mongrel folk will come? I was so moved at Bob who, I think in the inspiration of the moment, said, "Come to this table. Come, whoever you are. Come from wherever you are coming from. Come if you believe; come if you believe nothing; come if in this moment you want to experience solidarity with this family in this moment of grief and loss."

We are so privileged, those of us who get to offer the bread and the cup. We get eye-to-eye and soul-to-soul contact. It is a moving experience. It is a table of the family, a table at which we belong, wherever we are in our journey, a table at which we belong. And so, you need never walk alone.

Do you realize how radical that is? Do you realize what a far cry that is from institutional Christianity generally? Do you realize how risky that is? Do you realize how grace-full that is? How marvelously exciting that is? How beautifully it reflects Jesus?

You belong here and wherever you go, you can always come home here, and the table will always be set. You need never walk alone.