

Home Alone No More

John 14:15-21

Whitefish UMC

April 27, 2008

- † You've seen the movie, "Home Alone," right? Like others of its genre, it manages to evoke the scary nostalgia of being left home alone when you were a kid. On the one hand, you're scared to death of what might be lurking in the basement, of the frightening noises of the house creaking, of the scratching of the branch on the windowpane.
- † On the other hand, you get to do all the things that grownups would tell you to stop doing, if they were there. Things like staying up late to watch Saturday Night Live, eating all the ice cream in the freezer, giving your cat a haircut, and going to bed on the couch in front of the TV.
- † Of course when you're older, there's "Riskier Business" involved. The things you do while the grownups are gone have greater consequences along with higher risk, and the fear takes second place to the thrill of being home alone.
- † In today's gospel lesson, the disciples aren't exactly thrilled with the prospect of being left home alone by Jesus. They've had their feet washed; they've eaten their last supper with their Lord; Judas has left the place in a hurry. Jesus begins to talk.
- † "Love one another, do not be afraid; believe in God, believe also in me. Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but I will not leave you orphaned. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also."
- † He goes on like this for several chapters, telling his disciples everything they need to know before he leaves them. And where is he going? He's going to die, actually. But he doesn't act like it—he talks more as if he's going off somewhere for just awhile—for a time away, an evening out—and leaving them in charge while he's gone.
- † His instructions are so extensive that the disciples start to get nervous. "When will you return?" they wonder. "A little while," he says, "and you will see me." And some of them do get to see him—in the locked room, on the shore for breakfast, on the road to Emmaus. But then he is gone again.
- † If you're like me, these reassurances dredge up memories of waiting, while time seemed to stand still, until your parents would return from their time away. As the oldest of three daughters, I was the one left in charge when they went away. Before my youngest sister was adopted when I was seventeen, I only had to be in charge of my middle sister.
- † But that was pretty scary anyway. Penny had a congenital heart condition that left her susceptible to all kinds of illnesses and accidents, and I was supposed to be especially responsible. And I was VERY responsible.
- † Probably so much so that I was also a bit overbearing. Penny retaliated by knowing just how to push all the right buttons to get me upset. A few years later when Sally, my youngest sister came along, my mom was sent to the hospital with

- a ruptured appendix. Sally was two months old, my dad worked late into the evening, and Penny was not happy with a new baby in the house.
- † I remember wondering if my parents would ever come home. What if there was an accident on the way back from the hospital—they might never come home again and then where would we all be? I was the babysitter, but I was a potential orphan, too. I had to act like everything would be okay, but I wasn't so sure.
 - † Meanwhile, I was supposed to love my sisters, take care of them, even when they were annoying, wouldn't listen to me, and made a mess of things. And how was I supposed to do that? I was just a big kid myself—I acted like I knew what I was doing, but I didn't really.
 - † As I look back on that time, and on the time while my parents took Penny to Vanderbilt for college in Nashville and left me in charge of my three-year-old sister who caught her finger in the screen door and almost cut it off, I wonder how I ever got through it.
 - † Plenty of you know what I mean, not only because you were left home and in charge, but because you are Christians. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “We are all of us Christ’s elder children in the world, the ones he has left in charge. We are the responsible ones, the ones he has trusted to carry on in his name, and everywhere we go we see the faces of those whom he has given into our care.”
 - † Yes, Jesus has given us a list of instructions, but how can we possibly carry them out without him? It’s so much easier just to follow the crowd and look out for ourselves.
 - † You probably have heard that there is a perfect storm brewing in the world around food shortages. The price of fuel, the effects of global warming, and the use of food products for biofuels have conspired to threaten the survival of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people.
 - † So what are some people in our country doing? Flocking to Costco and Sam’s Club and stockpiling rice—so much so that those stores have had to limit the amount that can be purchased per customer.
 - † Of course we don’t want to act so selfishly, but if it’s not the crowd that shapes our moral choices, what does? “If you love me, keep my commandments,” Jesus says. Well, what commandments? Isn’t faith about more than laws?
 - † Yes, but it is about *obedience*, at least in part. Now most of us don’t even like the word, “obey,” do we? It strikes resistance to the legalism so prevalent in some forms of Christianity. And rightly so.
 - † For faith is about more than “thou shalt nots,” even though the proliferation of big billboards with the Ten Commandments on them around the valley would lead you to think otherwise.
 - † And yet, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself,” is what Jesus’ calls the greatest commandment, and he echoes it in today’s passage.
 - † How do we figure out what that means, and how to love? In addition to obedience, we find guidance for living in *imitation*, namely the imitation of the lives of people who have walked in Christ’s ethical footsteps.

- † The problem of course, is that the heroes we imitate are human. Think of Eliot Spitzer, of Martin Luther King, Jr., even of Mother Teresa in experiencing her dark night of the soul while hiding it from the world.
- † Christian tradition recognizes this reality and suggests that the only moral hero Christians finally dare imitate is Jesus. Augustine advocated “the imitation of Christ” in the fourth century. Thomas a Kempis developed it further with his fifteenth century spiritual classic by the same name.
- † And popular culture has picked it up with its WWJD bracelets and “what would Jesus drive” slogans. “What would Jesus do?” The problem is that it’s often hard to figure out. After all, Jesus was a first-century pre-modern Galilean peasant. How would he fit into a post-modern world of computers, global warming, and nuclear fission?
- † As Michael Lindvall says, “On top of that, it’s not obvious that I’m always supposed to do what Jesus did. Jesus did not marry (at least we think so). Does that imply that I shouldn’t? Jesus lived a life of poverty. Does this mean that all his followers should be poor?”
- † Jesus died on the cross. Does this imply that all followers are called to martyrdom? The obvious answer to these questions is ‘no.’”
- † So even though obedience and imitation are valid instructions for us as we wait for Christ to come home and take us to him, they aren’t sufficient unto themselves. In his farewell discourse, Jesus promises that we won’t have to figure it out all alone.
- † He promises instead to send us an Advocate, to be with us forever. And what or who is this Advocate? The Spirit of truth, of *inspiration* that will help us in our weakness, in our fear, in our confusion.
- † All we have to do is ask, right? If only it were that easy. But when we make room in the busyness of our lives for prayer, we invite the living God into the midst of our complex and sometimes unsettling lives. It doesn’t mean we get all the answers we want, or even any answers at all—at least at first.
- † But when we go about the daily living of loving, as long as long as our love is freeing, empowering, challenging, and comforting—as Jesus’ love is, the Spirit will come to us. How?
- † In the still small voice that speaks in silence more often than it speaks in words. In the sound of the wind blowing inside of us with whispers of consolation and encouragement, in the little nudge that calls us into our best selves.
- † Mostly it just means paying attention. It means not being so responsible that you’re overbearing and miss the opportunity for joy and playfulness. It means making your home in the love of Christ and abiding there no matter where you are or what is buffeting your sense of material security.
- † It means taking responsibility for letting obedience, imitation, and inspiration chart the course of your life, instead of just following the crowd or your own addictions.
- † As followers of Jesus, we are meant to be home alone no more. We are part of the great extended family—a holy family at that. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, “When God and Jesus move in with us, apparently, they make lots of keys—keys for the Holy Spirit, keys for other disciples, keys for all kinds of

indwelling cousins in Christ. Coming and going, we learn to recognize each other, and to call upon each other for everything that people who live together do.”

- † And what is it that people of the beloved community do when they live together? Love as Jesus loved us, with the Spirit’s guidance in the everydayness of each moment. Love in the particularity of our strengths and weaknesses, whether we are the oldest child, the middle, or the youngest.
- † Welcome home. Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, “Good News for Orphans,” in Gospel Medicine. Cowley Publications, 1995.

Michael Lindvall, “Lost in the Moral Crowd,” March 16, 2008, Brick Presbyterian Church.