

Left Behind

A sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
Ascension Sunday, June 5, 2011 at Peace United Church of Christ.

While I don't have too many difficulties getting a sermon started, one of the hardest things to do is to end one. Even decent preachers commit the sin of "not landing the plane." They get to their destination and make their point, but then they start circling the airport. More than once I've reached the ending of my sermon and just kept going. I doubt I added anything of significance, so why did I keep going?

But hey, it's not just preachers who have a problem with endings. When you have good friends over, how long does it take you to say goodbye? How long do you stay in the doorway and talk before someone actually leaves. How long does it take a parent to leave a crying child at daycare? What about hospital visits? I've been trained as a chaplain and I'm still not sure how to end one of those visits anyway. And, more often than not, I know when I'm visiting someone for the last time. So how do you say goodbye to someone who is dying? As far as that goes, how do you say goodbye to someone who has already died? My brother has been dead now for more than 3 1/2 years and there are still a few days that I'm still in shock that he's gone.

No matter who we are or how mature we are, the movement from presence to absence is difficult at best. When we are in somebody's presence, we aren't alone and our space is filled. But we hate empty spaces. Silence is filled with noise. Empty spaces are filled with stores or a mall. Solitude is filled far too frequently with the presence of others, and if not with people then with alcohol or any number of addictions. I don't know if it really matters just so long as we don't feel our emptiness. We hate the emptiness left behind after goodbyes. And in short the entire purpose of Ascension Sunday is to help us wrestle with Christ's absence; to help us wrestle with the day he said goodbye; to help us wrestle with being left behind.

If you remember, a few weeks ago we talked about Family Radio's Harold Camping; the guy who said the rapture was imminent. Of course now he says he was wrong about the rapture, BUT October 21 is absolutely going to be the end of the world. Really? And Tim LaHaye and others aren't much better. LaHaye is one of the authors of the best selling Left Behind series of books. Honestly I don't even know how many of those books there are anymore, but I do think I understand their fascination, as I understand why so many paid such heed to Camping. Apocalyptic preachers and churches are tired of the chaos that's ensued since Dad said goodbye. Things are mess and they've given up doing their chores. They've given up trying to straighten things out and given up trying to take care of their siblings. They think the house has gone to Hell – literally – and all they want is for Dad to come home and punish those who misbehaved in his absence. And after the bad kids have been taken care of, since the carpet has been ruined, and since so much of the furniture was broken and since even the foundation of the house is a bit askew, Dad will have no choice but to bulldoze the whole thing over and build a new and better house for those who have been good. In short, a sizeable minority of Christianity is at wit's end that Dad said goodbye and they will do just about anything - including resorting to more violence and magical thinking - to get him to come back sooner rather than later. They literally can't tolerate Christ's absence.

In a nutshell that is a bit simplistic but fair, that's the motivation behind the Left Behind crowd; we've been left at home alone and they hate it. But let's be honest; it's not just our literal-minded siblings who are wrestling with Christ's absence. After all, Dad said he'd be back, but that was a long, long time ago. So where is he? Why is he not back? Was it all just a dream? Did he ever really care for us? If so then why isn't he here? Are our atheists and agnostic siblings right? Are today's Scripture lessons but mythology and fables told to soothe the worries of the more immature kids? Are our cynical siblings right? Is he never coming back? For we who believe in Jesus as the Christ, what do we do with his all too real absence?

Here's the best I can make of it. I start with the assumption that what Jesus did at Ascension was terribly difficult. After all, without Christ around, who was going to pull Peter's foot out of his mouth? Who was going to calm the stormy seas? Who was going to teach the kids? Who was going to keep showing them the way, and the truth and the life? But I would like to think that Christ left for the same reason any healthy parent lets go. That is to say, only by letting go can our kids grow into themselves; only by creating some

absence and some distance can our kids decide what to and not to embrace. To the degree to which it's possible, they grow better outside of our constant shadow.

So what if Christ were present today? How would things be different if we were in his everpresent shadow? Well for one, Harold Camping and some of the other kids wouldn't be so rich. It's hard to make money off of Jesus coming back when he never left. More practically and more seriously, the UCC and the Presbyterians and the Lutherans and the Methodists wouldn't be arguing about the rightful role of gays and lesbians in the life of the church because Christ would have weighed in on the issue. I have trouble believing there would be a sex scandal going on in the Catholic Church if Jesus were here. And we could go to Dad and ask him about abortion and birth control and euthanasia and any number of issues that he never really specifically addressed. For that matter, the kids wouldn't be living in different parts of the house as Catholics and Protestants. There would be one united church family because he would have intervened in our silly nonsense a long time ago. Life would absolutely be easier were he here. No question about it.

And we'd be lazy. After all, we would know that there was someone else to do it and someone else to take care of it. And we wouldn't have had the opportunity to struggle with each other and consequently, we would have missed some wonderful opportunities to practice intimacy and covenant. How would we have ever learned to appreciate the diversity of the Body of Christ? But more importantly, if Dad had never left, we would have never been honored with the opportunity, privilege and burden to be adults; to be the ones left behind for the glorious purpose of being responsible for our home, our selves and our siblings.

Almost any decent parent, before they leave, leaves behind some chores to be done in their absence. And if Christ is anything like me, the chore list is more of a Hope list, as in "I really *hope* they do these things, but I have my doubts." Today, Ascension Sunday we get our chore-hope list. Today Christ tells us, "Look, for better or for worse, since I'm not going to be around, people will be looking to you to see what I'm about." Christ may not be physically present, but we are. And how we live and how we die and how we love and how we fight and all of our comings and goings will all say something to others about the presence or the absence of God. This is an incredible burden to which we have been commissioned.

Our Left Behind siblings, however, think God made a mistake. They believe we are too sinful, too evil, too broken to have ever been left with the responsibility to help create the Kingdom of God here on earth. Again this is a bit simplistic, but the difference between the more conservative and the more progressive manifestations of Christianity is how we wait while Dad is out of the house. The more conservative and fundamentalist elements of Christianity spend their time waiting for Dad to get back or trying to predict when he's coming back or how to get him back sooner. They also put a lot of emphasis on how to get in Dad's good graces once he does get back since he's going to be absolutely ticked off when he gets back. Again, it's a bit simplistic but I think it's fair. The more progressive siblings, of which I am proudly one, wait a bit differently, or at least I hope we do. I would like to think that while we are waiting, we try to figure out, "Well, what would Dad do if he were here and let's go do it." If he would be busy feeding, then let's go feed the hungry. If he would be busy healing, then let's do what we can to heal broken people until he does get back. If he gets back tomorrow fantastic, but would he really want us to spend that day waiting for him while others are hurting? And if he gets back a century from now, well then that's all the more reason to be responsible, loving adults today.

So how about it folks? What will we do in a world absolutely full of goodbyes and painful absences? Some of us fill the emptiness by holding onto rigid doctrines and catechisms. Some of us spend our time, - a lot and lot of time - predicting when God will return and how God's going to punish and clean house. As for me, I think it's a waste of time. Life is too short, too painful and too full of goodbyes to spend our time in such endeavors. When Christ left he blessed us. Blessings go a long ways, especially in a world full of goodbyes and absences. We spend far too much time living in the past and/or in the future. What about today? What about this moment? The best way I know how to live this moment is by offering a blessing to others and being a blessing to others. The most productive way I know how to live is to hold on to you when you're present and to hold you in the light when you're absent. In Christ's absence I think that's what's we're supposed to be about, and that my friends, is as good of a place to stop as any. Amen.