

The First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
Roland P. Perdue, Interim Pastor
Sunday, June 24, 2012

Carry Me Like Water
John 14:1-6, 15-20

When Diego woke from his uneasy sleep he was lost and sad and far away from himself. It was as if he was always fighting to belong to his body, to himself, to the city he lived in. Always he woke wondering where he was....He stared at himself until he remembered where he was; in this room, this room where he slept but which could never be his. He felt himself to be always on the edge of homelessness.¹

“He felt himself to be always on the edge of homelessness.” El Paso author Benjamin Saenz describes more than Diego, a character in his book *Carry Me Like Water*. He also describes many of us “always on the edge of homelessness.” Oh, not the homelessness conjured up by people on our mean city streets, panhandlers on the corners wearing signs reading, “Homeless: Will Work for Food,” or soup kitchens, storefront missions, or refugees fleeing from this place to that. Our homelessness is different; it is not physical or material, but a homelessness of the spirit, of not belonging to our bodies, to ourselves, or to the city in which we live – wandering on the very edge of emotional homelessness.

DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN IT HAPPENED TO YOU? Reach back in your minds to those warm spring days past when you and your gang played “hide and seek.” You hid so well, concealed yourself better than ever before, you planned it for days – just where they would never be able to find you. You ran tingly and sweaty to that special place and hid. You waited for them to find you, waited while they called your name, you waited until all the noise of their searching died down, waited until it was quiet and still, waited some more. Finally you came out of hiding and ran into the middle of the yard expecting to hear cheers of praise. Instead you heard nothing. You were right after all. You won! They could not find you. You lost! They quit looking for you and went home. “Homeless,” you were left behind. Remember?

Some of us continue to play emotional “hide and seek” the rest of our lives. We never let anyone know us, really *know* us, or get too close.

Or somewhere deep within you is a hollow, nearly empty place, a space vacated when someone special left. People do not have to die for this to happen to us. Divorce will do it. So will disease, chemical dependency, or depression deep enough to wipe out all sense of belonging and hope. People you love only have to leave – emotionally, spiritually, or physically leave – and you are on the edge of homelessness.”

¹ Benjamin Alire Saenz, *Carry Me Like Water* p. 3-4

In the movie based on Arthur Miller's *The Misfits*, a woman described the reason her marriage was dying. She said of her spouse, "No, nothing is really wrong. He is not abusive or anything like that. He just isn't there. He is physically present. But he just isn't there!"

Last week's Father's Day was a tough day for many. Many a church member stays away from church on Mother's Day, Father's Day, the anniversary of a family death, or some such day filled with raw memories because they do not want to hear of the joys of parenthood when they are bereft of parents, childless or at a great emotional distance from family and friends. Those days are just too heavy for those of us who have been left behind on the raw edge of homelessness.

The sense of being left behind on the edge of homelessness permeates the conversation Jesus has with his disciples in today's Gospel reading. You do not say, "Set your troubled hearts at rest," to calm, confident, and collected people. "My children," Jesus has said seconds before, "I am with you for just a little while longer; then I am going away, and I can tell you right now, you cannot come with me." Not wanting to hear this kind of talk, Thomas, the one called the Twin, asks, "Lord, where are you going?"

Deep within that question is implied another and much more poignant question. It is this: While you are gone, what's going to happen to us? What are we supposed to do?" It is a deeply personal question. "What am I going to do if you're gone?" If your pastor retires, if your associate pastor for mission leaves, if your breadwinner is terminated – what are we to do?

JESUS' RESPONSE IS SO MUCH LIKE SOMETHING OUR PARENTS, STEP-PARENTS OR GUARDIANS HAVE SAID TO US THAT IT IS ALMOST LOST ON US.

We have heard it so often, we have tuned it out. He says, "If you love me, you will obey my commandments." Have you heard it before? "If you love me," say parents and step-parents, "you will do as I say." And more often than not, you and I do what they have said because we know **they love us**. It is not so much that we love them, although we do. It is that they love us enough to care for us, to nurse us to health, to sit up nights worrying about us, to – in short –put up with us, to stay with us.

And then Jesus adds the assurance we all need to hear, "I will ask the Father in Heaven to give you the Spirit as an Advocate, someone who will really be on your side as you do my works, and the Spirit will be with you forever....I will not leave you like **orphans**."

There it is! **Orphans**. Jesus puts his finger right on the sore spot. "I will not leave you **orphaned**, forsaken, betrayed, alone, lost, sad, and always at the edge of homelessness. **I am coming back to you!**"

That is the "blessed assurance" of our faith. That is the clear and undisputed message of all our scriptures, it is the sum total and bottom line of all our doctrines. That is the center which holds when all else is soft and shifting at the edges. God's essential promise to our Jewish brothers and sisters is "I will be with you!" And Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us!" He is called that in the gospels because when the first followers were in his presence, they sensed that God was in their midst. God was experienced as conscious of them. And now we are promised

the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is the provocative and pervasive presence of Jesus with us now and forever. Jesus will not leave us alone, on the edge of homelessness, orphaned.

I am moved by the utter simplicity of a poem by an anonymous Native American. It goes:

Sometimes I go about pitying myself
And all the time I am carried on great winds across the sky,
Or the tides and waves of the great ocean.

There is so much in our lives which frightens us, over which we have no control, and about which we can begin to feel sorry for ourselves, to pity ourselves. Yet there is a force, greater than ourselves or the tasks before us, which carries us, supports us, and lifts us when we are on the edge of desperation and hopelessness. That force, the provocative presence of Jesus, carries us by great winds across earth and sky.

Be attentive to the winds and waves in your life.

We are carried by the great wind and tide of Christ's Spirit when we realize our parents are just people trying to be and do the best they can be and do. They are not perfect, but then neither are we. And as we forgive them their mistakes, even if they are now dead, we can be set free to live as best we know, not pitying ourselves by blaming parents, step-parents, or anyone else for what we are, but striving to do the Jesus-like thing to our children, friends, and loved ones.

Be attentive to the winds in your life.

And we are not orphaned but carried on the winds of Christ's Spirit when we feel the touching embrace of someone who loves us and stands by us even when we walk away and try to go it alone. Jesus' Spirit comes to us in those touches, and Jesus will not let us alone. He has come back to be with us, to be for us, and to be there for us as we seek to be his people in today's crazy world.

An event happened recently in New York City which points in the same direction. The lead singer and piano player of a musical group called The Johnsons is named Anthony. He has performed all over the world, and is well-known by those who enjoy the genre of music he and the Johnsons love and play. He has received Mercury nominations and the respect of knowledgeable musical colleagues.

He appeared as the headliner at the Town Hall in 2005. A reviewer wrote, "On the Town Hall stage, the Johnsons grew quiet, and Anthony turned from the piano, his round eyes scanning the audience mischievously. He whistled - crystalline little bird call that lasted maybe five seconds. And then he did it again.

"The hall was silent. No one knew what he was doing. He seemed to feel the weight of many blank stares. But as he whistled again and kept at it, it became clear that Anthony would not stop. For all his delicacy, he is, like Lou Reed and Boy George, a survivor - an angel and a Viking at once.

“And then it happened. From way up in the balcony you could hear, just barely, a distant whistle back. Then more joined, and more. The whistling bounced around the hall, filling it with birdsong, and Anthony sat back, smiled and listened, relieved and grateful” (*The New York Times Magazine*, September, 2005).

Solidarity! That's what it is about. It is about being received and welcomed in a green place where growth is possible. The willingness to be vulnerable to and with one another and the openness to join one another in attentiveness to the winds of the Spirit and the encouraging whistles of solidarity.

Perhaps the church is at her best a community of people who have learned to whistle together as they pay attention to the winds of Christ's wild Spirit. We choose not to make music or life's melodies alone.

BENJAMIN ALIRES SAENZ SAYS IT WELL. In *Carry Me Like Water*, Helen, who is pregnant, is standing at the stove watching pasta as it “dances around in the boiling water.”

She looked down at her large belly, and touched it. She ran her hand over the smooth, well-worn cotton fabric that pressed against her stomach as if she were rubbing a crystal ball, as if that ball were telling her the future would be as good and as warm as the evening sun that was filling her house with light.

She smiled as she rubbed herself. Her friend Elizabeth had told her she would never have a firm stomach again. ‘I never had one to begin with.’ She laughed softly... She stood glowing in the kitchen... so this is joy, she thought, so this is what it's like. And though she knew this rush of pure adrenaline would melt as fast as snow on the desert, she felt complete and happy. When the sharp feeling passed, she did not feel sad and disappointed.

- *ibid.*, p. 7-8

So that is **what it's like!** Joy: to be carried on the great wind, to be caught up in Christ's presence. So this is what it's like. It comes. It goes. And we are all, just like Helen, pregnant with the possibility of giving birth to a new understanding of what it means never to be left behind, alone, on our own by ourselves at the edge of homelessness.

Jesus said, “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming again to be with you.” Trust that. Trust him. Know joy. You are not homeless. In God's presence there are many rooms – room enough for you whoever you are and whatever you have done – room enough for us all!

Amen.