

**SERMON: "GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN"**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian church**  
**Rev. Richard D. Clewell**  
**SCRIPTURE: John 17: 6-19**  
**MAY 24, 2009**

As you saw the sermon title this morning, you may have thought that I was following up on the sabbatical commissioning of Louise Westfall and Bob Moncrief last Sunday. And that might be quite appropriate – they truly are gone from us and certainly will not be forgotten during their quarterly respites and programs of renewal and learning. Even in their physical absence we remember clearly words that they have spoken or values they have demonstrated which have informed and often shaped our life journeys.

Perhaps upon perusing this title, you said to yourself that it is an interesting and relevant description for Memorial Day weekend. This is a time when we remember family, loved ones, and friends as well as those who sacrificed their lives on behalf on their fellow citizens in times of war and world crises. Indeed, we do honor these women and men and hold them in our deepest thought and remembrances.

Maybe your experiences are similar to mine when at times I hear my late father's words reminding me of values I seek to live by which are his continuing legacy to me. The relationships we have experienced in our process of living inform and impact the way we think and behave.

These title words came to mind in catching the essence of our lectionary text from the Gospel of John. Jesus has a final discourse with his disciples just prior to his death. His final words to them are highlighted in a poignant prayer. (Read John 17: 6-19) It is important to recognize that this prayer is uttered under the pressure of imminent arrest and execution along with the sadness that he is leaving them. It expresses his intimacy with and love for the Father and his own followers. It is important to note that the author of the gospel writes decades after Jesus' death and resurrection to express a persecuted community's longing for sustained connection with the One who is the source of their identity and their ultimate hope. In this week in the church year when we celebrate Christ's ascension, his departure from their and our presence is recognized; he is gone from physical presence but certainly cannot be forgotten because his on-going

transforming Spirit enables them to stay connected in their continuing journeys of faithfulness to the way of God's kingdom in a world system to which their values no longer apply. They are now called to embody Christ's presence in the world. That is why this prayer was instructive for them and for us today.

The first petition in this prayer (v.11-16) is for their protection. This protection is not insulation or isolation from pain and suffering, but rather a plea for on-going spiritual connection and under girding in their calling to be God's people. It involves being unified as a community and finding the joy of a fulfilling life of faithfulness in every circumstance. It emphasizes an on-going relationship with the divine which carries on faith formation and a viable witness to the surrounding world system.

Interestingly, in verse 20, John includes you and me as followers who through the centuries of faithful witness and tradition have encountered the living Christ through others and are called to be identified with Christ in our own process of faithfulness. We need to ask ourselves: do we genuinely have a sense of Christ's presence with us? Do we experience the transformation of heart and being which runs counter to our culture and world system? Are we willing to risk doing what Christ has shown us in loving and doing justice? Are we joyful as a community in our journey of faithfulness and response to God's grace in our lives?

The second petition in this prayer (v.17-19) is "to sanctify them in the truth." Sanctify means "to make holy" or "to set apart" for a divinely appointed task. In this gospel John describes Jesus as the Word and the truth, the fullest revelation of the divine. This petition sets forth a way of life in a relationship of oneness in Christ which enables a fuller way of life and ultimate meaning. There is no longer blind luck or coincidence but a sense of sacred presence. Instead of being self-centered and disconnected, a relationship of community is established and the common mission of love and compassion is offered in a world which needs such values and transformation desperately.

This word was needed so much in the early church to which John wrote and is just as necessary today over twenty centuries later. As much as they, we need to continue to relate to Jesus the Christ, not as just some historical character who did good, but as a continuing real presence in changing our lives and the lives of others

as we relate our experience of the divine. This Word of truth, this expression of God's kingdom way and the people of that way, i. e. the church, is alive in transforming power through us in this world in which we live but are not "of" because we walk to the beat of a different, ever-present drummer. Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world," and his followers continue to shine that light on the world's darkness. Love and divine justice lived out through Christ and those who follow after him are and will overcome the hatred and oppression of the world system.

Again, comes the question – What kind of Christians, followers of the Way, will we be? If in name only, then we are no different than anyone by any other title. If we struggle in the way of faithfulness, we may expect to experience some hostility and confrontation, but also to become open to new encounters with the divine and to understand more fully our place and purpose in living in relationship to Christ's spirit. Marcus Borg in his book, *The God We Never Knew*, puts it well when he writes, "The invitation of the Christian Gospel is to enter into that relationship in which our healing and wholeness lie, that relationship which transforms us by beginning to heal the wounds of existence, and makes our lives in the here and now a life with God." Truly the very heart of our Christianity is the heart of God – a passion for our transformation and the transformation of the world.

It is in Jesus Christ that we discover the way of genuine life and struggle for faithfulness. But we never are alone in this process as Christ lives on with us. The author of Matthew's Gospel in reporting Christ's parting words to his disciples (Mtt. 20: 28) declares, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the ages." Gone but not forgotten; in fact a living presence by his Spirit to grow us in the way of faithfulness and as his body to make an impact on this world. Thanks be to God. Amen

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