

WE ALL GOT LEFT BEHIND

Sermon, June 5, 2011

Texts: Acts 1:1-12; John 17:1-11

Those of you who know me know I never use “props” or visual aids for the regular sermon, but I will be doing so today. As so many of the confirmands grew up on my children’s sermons over the years where I did make ample use of such props, I thought it appropriate to break with my tradition and use a visual aid for the “grown-up” sermon this morning. As I am now in my fifteenth year as your pastor, I have had the privilege of holding in my arms and baptizing five of the eight confirmation students here this morning. These students who are about to publicly confirm the faith into which they were baptized are a living testimony to the integrity of this congregation and their parents who so faithfully worked to fulfill the promises made fourteen years ago in their baptisms, to do all we could to raise and nurture them in the Christian faith.

This article of clothing I hold in my hands was often worn by one of these students fourteen or so years ago ... for those of you who can’t see, it is a bib. Emblazoned on the bib are the words “**F.B.I. Agent in Training**” under the official seal of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This bib was actually worn by all three of my children, not just Hannah ... as many of you know, my late father-in-law was an F.B.I. agent for over thirty years. Charlie had been here along with my mother-in-law Elaine for both Lydia’s and Stephen’s confirmations; it was always meaningful to have them both here taking the usual “place” of parents during the laying on of hands. Unfortunately, he departed this life this past October and could not be here (at least in body) this morning. I’m so pleased and touched, though, that my two sisters-in-law (my late wife’s sisters) accompanied Elaine in traveling to Warwick this weekend, Karen from Elkins, West Virginia and Barbara from Rochester, NY; all three will be coming forward to lay hands on Hannah as she is confirmed in the faith.

This bib calls to my mind a story of a pastor who was talking with a prospective new member, a man who was so very enthusiastic about joining the church. When asked by the pastor why he wanted to join, the man replied, "I want to join this church because I so enjoy being fed by your ministry." He certainly meant it as a compliment, and I’m sure the pastor took it as such, but the wise pastor went on to reply, "Well, that’s fine, but I think you should know ... we want our members to wear aprons, not bibs."

“WE WANT OUR MEMBERS TO WEAR APRONS, NOT BIBS.” There was a time when we all needed bibs, but bibs are for those who are not yet ready or willing to feed themselves. BIBS are for people who only want to be fed. BIBS are for those who are more interested in being served than in serving. BIBS are for those who only understand the church to exist for *them* and to feed *their* needs and *their* wants. BIBS are for babies in the faith, or those who are not yet of the faith, those who haven’t yet grasped what it means to be part of the church, the grown-up servant people of God.

I’d like to show another article of Hannah’s clothing; this is Hannah’s apron. She wears this apron every time she bakes in the kitchen, which is often. She loves serving, she loves baking chocolate chip cookies (and cranberry squares) for just about every youth function, and here’s the funny part: she doesn’t even like chocolate! But she knows her father and her siblings and her friends in the youth fellowship and the people at church love chocolate, and baking cookies is something she knows how to do, so she does so, and often ... I think she’s made one hundred or so dozen in the past year while wearing this apron.

An APRON is an apt symbol for church membership. APRONS are for those who have a heart to serve others in Jesus’ name. APRONS are for those who know they are the church, and they go to work being the church. APRONS are for those who are growing in faith, and are eager to help others grow. APRONS are for those who take the time and energy to feed their spiritual hunger as well as the hunger of others. APRONS are for those who come not to be served, but to serve ... and if that sounds familiar, it should, for Jesus said it of Himself: “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” APRONS are for those understand they are best nourished, best fulfilled, when they go to work. Jesus calls His disciples to wear aprons, not bibs.

In our reading from Acts, it’s been forty days since His resurrection, and Jesus assembled His disciples together on the Mount of Olives. Now, they’ve been on the Mount of Olives before. Forty *seven* days before, to be exact, for this was where Jesus started His parade into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. At the time, many thought that Jesus was going to ride in and start taking charge, booting out the Romans and restoring the throne of David to re-establish the kingdom at long last. As you know, all those hopes

evaporated five days later when Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. But ... the third day He rose again from the dead. In the resurrection of Jesus, the hopes for the kingdom were also resurrected in the hearts of His followers; their hopes came back to life. For the last forty days Jesus has been meeting with them, "... showing many convincing proofs He was alive, and speaking about the kingdom of God." Now here they are, back on the Mount of Olives once again, the same place where they had been forty-seven days ago, so it's not surprising they ask, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" "Are you going to do it for us now, Lord? You've been talking about this kingdom ever since we've known you; we've been waiting. Is this finally the time?"

Jesus responds, in so many words, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. Don't get all caught up in that speculation. But you know, I'm leaving and you're going to do this now. You've been fed by Me long enough; it's time to take off the bibs! You won't be doing this alone, but get your aprons on and be ready ... you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will go to work being My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." As soon as He said that, He just disappeared from their sight. We're told Jesus "... was taken up, and a cloud hid him from their sight." They all got left behind as He was taken up into heaven. This past Thursday, the Christian church celebrated this occasion. June 2 was "Ascension Day;" and we celebrated here by having committee meetings ... I think next year, though, we will have a fitting service of worship, for this is a momentous occasion to commemorate. It is the day Jesus ascended to His seat at the right hand of God, and left us, His disciples, behind ... and He left us behind with a high purpose and a special calling.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, I'm sure the disciples were startled, sobered, even a little terrified. Jesus is now gone and they are left behind, they are left in charge? And He's left them with the most amazing responsibility and job description ... to be His witnesses throughout the world. When the disciples first heard this, I think they were so stunned. They just stand there staring up in the sky, thinking, "How can THIS be? He isn't leaving US in charge of this, is He?" As these disciples are all gazing up into heaven, suddenly two angels appear and say, "Why are you looking up into heaven? Someday He will be back; when that happens is the Father's business. Meanwhile, you have a job to do, don't you? 'Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth', remember?" **You got left behind for a purpose!** You've been fed long enough, now it's time to take off the bibs, put on the aprons and get ready to go to work! You will bring about the kingdom!" Contrary to the exclusionary (and highly dubious) "theology" of that Christian horror/science fiction series of the same name, ALL disciples of Jesus Christ get LEFT BEHIND ... we got left behind to do the work Jesus calls us to do, and we are to keep on doing it until He comes back.

In the Gospel reading, it was the night before His crucifixion, and Jesus prays in John 17: 4, "I have brought You glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." I've spoken of this before, but the Greek root word here for "glory" is the word "doxa"; we get our word "doxology" from it. The root word has a connotation of *radiance*. It has to do with shining forth, and it has to do with an almost lingering *radiance*. In a practical sense, the word can mean to leave behind a favorable or radiant *impression*. In this sense, to glorify God is to leave a favorable, radiant impression, and/or to leave an accurate *representation*, an accurate *witness* of the nature and character of God. Jesus can say, "I've done that. I've glorified You in the earth. While I was here I left an accurate impression of Who You are. My life has radiated Your truth, by my life I have left an accurate impression of Who You are. I have completed the work You gave me to do."

Now, at this point in John, has Jesus done everything there is to do? Of course not. At this point, He hasn't gone to the cross, He hasn't risen from the grave, there are millions of people in the world who have no clue as to Who He is. However, He *has* certainly left an accurate impression of Who God is, He has radiated His truth, the Love of God has indeed shone through Him ... and, as He told the disciples earlier, the Holy Spirit of God will now come and take it from there. In like manner, our chief duty is to glorify God. We can't do everything there is to do, but we can faithfully go where He sends us and we can work to leave a lingering, faithful and accurate impression of the radiance of God wherever we live and work, wherever we may have opportunity to serve. In so doing, we can be a faithful witness, one who gives a faithful representation of the only Truth there is ... and let the Holy Spirit of God come and take it from there That's how we fulfill our divine assignment. We are called to put on our aprons and serve, to go to work, to be faithful, and to try and leave and/or radiate an accurate impression of Who God is wherever we go, and to keep doing so until Jesus returns.

So, I give this as a charge to the confirmands joining the membership of the church today, and I give it as a reminder to all who are part of this congregation: "WE WANT OUR MEMBERS TO WEAR APRONS, NOT BIBS."