

ALL IN GOD'S HOUSEHOLD
Sermon by Brett Webb-Mitchell

John 14:15-21
First UCC Asheville, NC; April 27, 2008

In the state of North Carolina we are on the cusp of witnessing a rare event: voting in a Presidential primary that actually matters! Having lived in this state for almost twenty years I cannot remember a time in recent history in which our vote may make a difference in the Presidential primary. It is in that political spirit that a certain phrase has become popular in recent months: “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me”...or as one politico has mentioned: “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, makes you a veteran politician.”

We hate to be fools by our own volition, or to be made a fool of by others in our lives, especially in a world that reminds (whether we want to hear it or not) that we are not good enough and need improvement, from our fashion to our houses. We will do everything in our power to avoid being humiliated or made fun of, not wanting to be the center of attention unless it is done with our humble consent. It is one thing to be caught unawares when we walk into a darkened room full of guests who shout “Surprise! Happy Birthday!” with balloons and confetti flying everywhere, versus a television Nickelodeon moment in which a vat of green gooey liquid is poured over the head of an unexpected contestant in a truly “gotcha” moment. Being fooled, we feel embarrassed, a little ashamed that we were made a fool of in front of others though the situation was a little bit out of our control. But being ever the quick learners that we are, our radar set on heightened alert, our back bone straighter, our senses heightened, we know when we are in a similar situation, again, in which we were made fools of before, and we do

everything in our power to avoid or be prepared for what may happen...even if we simply pull up our collar, wear a hat, or put up an umbrella when the green gloppy, sloppy goo comes descending from the rafters again. If we come out fools again, and our friends knew we did not want to be made a fool again, then there is a good chance that the friendship is in jeopardy. This time, the shame is not only on “you” or “me, but is shared between people, and has the potential of fracturing relationships and communities.

In the Gospel of John this morning, John captures this fascinating give and take between the disciple we know simply as Philip and Jesus, in which Philip wants to be absolutely, one hundred percent sure that Jesus is who Jesus says he is: the Messiah, God’s Beloved, the Son of the Most High, One with God, the Creator of heaven and earth, Son of David. Philip simply asks: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied”...well, at least for the time being or maybe for the next few minutes, perhaps an hour, but not too long. John juxtaposes this sentiment on the heels of Thomas wanting to be sure exactly where they were all headed in following the Messiah earlier in this chapter. The reason Philip wants to be sure that Jesus is exactly who Jesus says and portrays himself to be is because, well, “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me, Jesus.”

Jesus’ response has almost a parent-like warmth to it, in which Jesus simply, carefully, and lovingly responds to Philip’s continual spotlight search for reassurance to his query “Show us the Father”. After asking “you really are who you say you are, right?” Jesus then asks Philip this question: “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?” Jesus then gives all the fret-filled disciples (then as well as now) the kind of assurance they were looking for. He spoke directly to their concern that

maybe they were foolish before other members of the Jewish community, having followed this charismatic rabbi and gentle prophet, who just so happens to make wine out of water and heal people at the drop of a hat or touching the hem of his garment. “O yea of little faith” meant nothing to the disciples. Their faith in Jesus was far smaller than a mustard seed. They were hoping for the best and expecting the worse in following Jesus. While Jesus is rock-sure of *his* destiny as Savior of the World, the disciples in all four gospel accounts (and then some) showed themselves to be a fluid mixture of being “a little sure, and a little not-so-sure” when it came to their belief in Jesus being exactly who he said he is. And along with fearing for their very lives because they were followers of this prophetic vagabond, knowing that the Jewish authorities had already started strategizing Jesus’ demise, they also feared being found foolish in the eyes of those in their households, let alone their neighbors and friends. “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice...”

With a tone of authority laced with eternal hope and a spirit of grace, as could only be uttered from the lips of the God of creation, Jesus guarantees to his disciples—then as well as now—what they were and what we still long to hear: that we are, and will never be left destitute and alone in this world as followers of the Christ. “I will not leave you orphaned,” speaks the Beloved, who then turns around and calls us *his* beloved. In that day and age, much like our day and age in parts of the world, being orphaned was close to being dead, disconnected from caring relationships. Being an orphan then, like now, meant that one was totally dependent upon the existing cultural and social and religious network in order to merely survive, let alone thrive. The call for caring for orphans is found throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, as well as the

New Testament, and ranks right up there with caring for those who are widows, along with people with disabilities. Indeed, *not* to take care of those in such obvious need—namely, the need of being part of a loving household and community of faith—were seen as an action against the will and commandments of God: it was a sin.

How would Jesus follow up on this claim that we will never be orphaned in this life or be made fools of? Jesus carefully explained it thusly: first, being sent in Jesus' stead is none other than the Holy Spirit, the Holy One, who proceeds from the God the Creator and Jesus the Son, a belief that is central to our faith, echoed in the words of the ancient Nicene Creed. The Holy Ghost, the Paraclete, which literally means "Advocate" or "helper" and "mediator," will be not only with the disciples after Jesus' death and resurrection, but is with us today in this very Church, who makes and is re-making us members of the body of the crucified, resurrected, and beloved Christ.

Second: this Holy Spirit is the very embodiment or ensoulment of Truth, who guides the Church today in living in the Truth. It is with the eyes and ears, nose and touch of faith that we know the Spirit is visible, is real, is manifest, is truly made of the very same nature of Christ, of God, residing in the Church, which happens to be the very people of God. As I was told by a group of Benedictine monks when I was on pilgrimage to venerate the Black Christ, *el Cristo Negro*, in Esquipulas, Guatemala, "The Christ you seek you cannot find unless you bring him with you." The Spirit of Christ resides deep in our lives, known in the act of fellowship, of relationships, with one another. It is when we are not living truthfully that the Spirit causes great discomfort among us all, for complete transparency, made possible by the Light of lights, demands no less. It is only in our most vulnerable state of being that we can truly know the intimacy of Love divine

all love excelling. It is a voice above and from within that whispers softly or declares loudly: “You’re my Beloved, on you my favor rests.” This is the core Truth of our being.

Third: Jesus will not leave you orphaned; Jesus is coming back to us. As I wrote these words for this very sermon, I myself sat back in order to take in the truthfulness of what was just typed on the page. *None of us are alone in this world.* Even though we may feel alone when standing in the middle of a forest, swimming or canoeing out into the middle of a lake, standing on the edge of a dry desert, or even sitting in the middle of a mall or a street corner in downtown Asheville, none of us are ever alone, orphaned, separated from anyone and everyone who could love us. The Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, resides in us always, traveling along neural pathways, charging the mind with thoughts and stimulating the heart to feel enthralled with love of God, love of humanity, and love of neighbor. Prayer helps make that connection alive, as do the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, as well as the employment of other Christly gestures. And it is this inward knowing and outward manifestation and affirmation, doing and being the word and work of God in our world today, in which we keep the commandment first lived and taught to us by the very author of love himself: it is in loving one another as we were first loved by God that we know we are never alone, because we know love in loving others. It is the very Christian act of agape or sacrificial and gentle love that embodies the very works of Christ himself in us, and for us, in which God’s will is done. And it is in loving one another that first tells us, reminds us, and continually calls all of us to be members of the household of God.

“I will not leave you orphaned” is more than a more rhetorical promise: this promise has flesh and bones added to it, as well as spirit, because it the very Spirit of God

that shapes us to be a community of love for one and all. It is a promise that we can bet the bank on, that we can reach out and do the incredible and impossible with in the eyes of the world, because it is not a mere human being who makes this promise of eternal accompaniment: “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you” is a promise made by Jesus, sealed in his blood, and being made manifest and growing steadily in the lives of the followers of the Christ to this very day.

In our baptism, and in the baptism we have witness this day with all the waterworks, we are reminded that the Church is not an orphanage, an aggregation of single, fragmented “I’s,” nor are we acting alone as orphans in this world. Baptism is a watery reminder that we are not alone in this world. What we are seeing and hearing is none other than our carrying out the simple sacrament, which Christ himself commanded us to practice over two thousand years ago as was practiced on him, in which with drops of water and repeating the Triune names of God, we celebrate what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do for such is the nature of God: bestowing on us, in real and tangible ways the manifold blessings of grace, of love, and of hope as God’s beloved. Regardless if one is able-bodied or disabled, of either gender, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or straight, of any nationality or ethnicity, of all socioeconomic classes of people, and politicians of all stripes, in baptism we participate and swim in baptisms’ waters, which is the way of God while reassuring the world, beyond a shadow of doubt, that we are what St. Paul first called us: truly fools for the sake of Christ (1 Cor. 4:10).

Fool me once, shame on you? Friends, we are, in the eyes of the world, the penultimate fools, for the source of our crazy antics—loving one another regardless of who we are but because we see the Christ in each other—is the very one who hung on the

cross and rose from the dead. While those around us clutch, hoard, guard, and play safe with their lives, we understand that the only life worth living is one in which we give life away for love's sake, which in turn makes this a life worth living. As Fred Buechner wrote years ago, God showed us a man who gave his life away to the extent of dying a national disgrace without a penny in the bank or a friend to his name. In terms of men's and women's wisdom, he a Perfect Fool, and anybody who thinks she or he can follow him without making something like the same kind of fool of him- or herself is laboring under not a cross but a delusion. In this world, there are two kinds of fools: fools who keep getting fooled not once, not twice, but forevermore...and then there are "fools for Christ's sake," who make up the household of God. Welcome, and be, God's household of magnificent—or as they say in my community, fabulous—fools!

Amen.