

D.J. Reed
May 29, 2011

5th Sunday of Easter (Memorial Day)

Chilson Hills Church
Howell, MI

“With Abandon”

John 14:15-21

<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

Abandoned. It’s a feeling just for orphans – children who have been left by their biological parents - it’s what we feel when someone we love departs.

It’s what we feel after a divorce or after being laid off.

We get a taste of it when the person we’re following on a lonely highway decides to speed up and leave us in their dust.

It’s what this wife felt when the husband she loved was taken from her. There is this sense that he’s still somehow there, but she can’t reach him. She can’t hold him. There is anger, there is despair, there is frustration, there is pain.

This is what abandonment feels like – a cesspool of confusing emotions, and sometimes people would rather feel death than face the pain of abandonment.

When I watch a drama like this one, I think about the correspondence between my grandparents. Willis A. Reed, my grandpa, was a chaplain in the Army during World War II, and when he decided to enlist in the service he had been married to Sarah, my grandmother, for only a couple of months.

Yet, he felt called to serve his country and, more importantly, minister to our boys in their time of great need. And when he broke the news that he would be joining the Army to his mother-in-law, she was genuinely confused. “Willis,” she asked, “What’s wrong with Sarah?”

Why in the world would you leave someone you love to put yourself in harm’s way? Why would you leave at all? How could you possibly abandon the ones you love?

The passage we read earlier is an excerpt from the final words spoken by Jesus to his disciples. Jesus has washed their feet, told them that one of them will betray him, and has given them some final teachings.

More importantly, the disciples now know that Jesus will be leaving them – not cool. You don’t just leave the ones you love. If you really love someone, you don’t leave them.

Takeshi Kanno was a 31 year-old doctor at the Shizugawa public hospital in the Japanese town of Minami Sanriku, and on March 11 the dreaded tsunami alert set him into action. He immediately began moving patients to the highest floors just before the wall of water swallow the street in three minutes.

Over the next two days, Kanno refused to leave the ones he had saved, and when the evacuation helicopters arrived he waited until the very last of his patients had gone before he too left.

Three days after the earthquake, Kanno made it back to his wife just before their second child was born. They named him Rei (R-e-i) which of course means a “beam of light” in English, but in Chinese and Japanese it means, “the wisdom to overcome hardship.”

Isn’t that the highest of human values? To refuse to leave someone, even if times are tough? Wasn’t that the rally cry of “No Child Left Behind,” and the code of ethics embraced by so many soldiers who refuse to leave their fallen comrades on the battlefield?

You don’t abandon brothers. You don’t walk out on family. You don’t give up on commitments. Abandoning is not an option.

My grandfather received the Silver Star “for gallantry in the field of battle,” and that wasn’t because he led a Bible Study in a foxhole. No, grandpa went out into the crossfire to rescue wounded soldiers.

In one of his letters, he recounts the harrowing experience, telling about how hard it was to carry these wounded soldiers on stretchers on uneven, rocky ground. He wrote about trying to hold the stretchers still, so that the soldier wouldn't feel pain from being jostled about. He felt awful when they cried out in pain.

Grandpa didn't leave his brothers, just like Dr. Kanno, firefighters in the Two Towers, faithful husbands, devoted parents, and teachers who put in extra hours for delinquent students. They don't leave – and we call them heroes.

But they did have to leave something didn't they? You see in order to minister to soldiers on the battlefield, Grandpa had to leave his wife. Dr. Kanno had to leave his pregnant wife. To be faithful to something means you agree to leave something else.

I've spoken to several men in this congregation who decided to sell some pretty awesome motorcycles so that they could buy an engagement ring or afford a down payment on a house.

I've heard stories of many mothers who sacrificed careers to spend time with their children. Sometimes, you see, abandoning is necessary to demonstrate fidelity to something else. Devotion to one thing ultimately means you have to leave something.

Another way of looking at it is that abandoning something isn't always the happiest decision, but it is sometimes the best decision.

When Jesus departed from his disciples, he wasn't leaving because he was missing heaven, or that "God needed him more than we needed him." He left because ultimately, it was best for us.

Jesus knew that if he hung around, we'd try to make him a king or politician, and then we'd expect him to establish some empire, amassing great wealth and power with mighty armies to enforce his reign.

So, Jesus, as he had done so many times before when people tried to make him a king, decided it was time to leave. But, and this is a big but, Jesus didn't leave us alone.

He mentions "The Spirit of Truth," something he calls, "The Advocate" which will be with us forever. This "Spirit" is unseen by the world around us, but we know this Spirit because it lives right here; right here with us and in us, directing us and leading us.

One of the great mysteries in the natural world (among other things) is the amazing navigational abilities of the pigeon. It's quite remarkable really. Take a pigeon miles away from their home and if you release them, they will fly directly back home. They won't meander, or make mistakes. No, once they are released, pigeons are able to find the precise perch or coop every single time.

And no one knows how.

Scientists have tried everything to try to disrupt or analyze their amazing sense of direction. They've tried putting coils on their heads, put radio transmitters on them, have placed frosted contact lenses on their eyes and have even followed them by plane and still they can't figure out how pigeons are able to do what they do.

Many explanations have been submitted. Italian scientists have suggested that the pigeons know by their sense of smell and others say that they have metal fragments in their beaks that can sense the waves of magnetism that come from the earth's core.

But even this theory, which is the best explanation they have right now, has been proven to be sketchy. One pigeon expert has said that he has studied pigeons for years, and he says that he often has this desire to grab his pigeons by the scruff of the neck and ask, "How do you do it!?"

What is guiding them, what is pulling them towards home like a... Spirit of Truth, which Christ said would be in us, abiding with us and guiding us. Guiding us to live like Christ, to behave as he did when he walked among us and told us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Many of us have a member of our immediate or extended family we choose to ignore or avoid contact with. For (one of our church members) Jason Miller, it was a member of his extended family who had stolen

from several members of the family, he was a drunk, he even went to prison. Needless to say, no one wanted to talk to him or even have him over for a family gathering.

But Jason decided to listen to “The Spirit of Truth” the one who stands up for us and wants what’s best for us. Jason decided to listen to that voice that was guiding him and leading him like that strange GPS that mysteriously guides pigeons. He kept feeling like he should reconnect with this family member, and so, Jason gave him a call.

Jason found out that this family member is now a Christian, that he’s living a new life, and he even asked for forgiveness. They’ve gotten together several times since that conversation. And, I tell you, if you ask Jason about it today, you’ll see that he is so glad that he listened to that invisible Spirit of Truth. Because when he did, Jesus revealed himself to Jason. Jesus isn’t with Jason physically, but Jesus certainly was in Jason’s act of forgiveness, compassion and love. By listening to that Spirit, Jason was acting out the life of Jesus and showing everyone what he looked like.

There’s an old preacher’s story that’s been used a hundred times, so I might as well tell it again.

Joe was a faithful servant at one of those local homeless shelters for drunks and crack addicts on the rough side of town. There’s wasn’t a thing Joe wouldn’t do – clean toilets, mop the puke off the floors, talk to punks with a violent reputation – you name it, Joe would do it.

But, later, Joe developed cancer and eventually, Joe died. They held his funeral in the homeless shelter and at the end of the service when the preacher asked if there was anyone in the room who wanted to follow Jesus, a rough looking bum ran to the front of the chapel and fell before the cross yelling out, “Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe!”

The preacher went over to the man and gently whispered into his ear, “I think you mean, make me like Jesus.” And the homeless man looked up and asked, “Is he like Joe?”

This is the way that Jesus reminds the world of who he is, through ordinary “Joe’s” and “Jason’s;” through people like you and me who listen to the Spirit of Truth to act like Jesus. People know Jesus not only because they read about Jesus in the Bible, but because they know people who live like Jesus and listen to the Spirit of Truth. They know Jesus because they see Christ living in you.

And when we obey these teachings, acknowledging the presence of the Holy Spirit, we remember that *we* are not alone that we have not been abandoned and that Christ is still present among us. We remember that we are not orphaned or forgotten, that someone still loves us.

The wildly popular Toy Story movies have been adored by just as many adults as they have been loved by children. People can’t help loving the odd couple, Woody and Buzz, their motley crew of friends, the brilliant animation or the heartfelt storylines.

But I think the primary reason people love these movies so much is the underlying theme of wanting to be loved, and the pain of feeling abandoned.

Every toy wants to be played with and held. By contrast, the greatest fear and most devastating feeling is to be left by the side of the road, to be forgotten on the shelf, given away in a yard sale or a donation pile, or to be abandoned and left in the trash.

But isn’t this what we fear as well? Don’t we fear being alone for the rest of our lives? Don’t we fear finding ourselves irrelevant or forgotten? In fact one of the most traumatic experiences one will ever endure is being abandoned, neglected and detached from someone we love. It’s deeply frightening and scarring.

In 1997 my grandfather, the one who served as an Army chaplain, passed away. And several years later, my grandmother followed suit. After she was laid to rest next to my grandpa in Bluff City Cemetery in Elgin, IL, my dad turned to his three siblings and said, “Well, we’re orphans.” I don’t know exactly how they felt when that phrase sunk in, but I can imagine that this realization was quite troubling.

Do you think Jesus' disciples felt the same way? I can imagine that they would have the same feeling, that same dull pain in their chest.

This is probably why Jesus assures them, that these words, these commandments of his – if followed – will draw them close to the Father. They will stir a love for Jesus and that love will remind them of Christ showing them the character and life of Christ in the lives of ordinary people.

I told you before that the primary theme of the Toy Story movies is the theme of separation and abandonment. During the second and third Toy Story movies, Woody finds himself separated from his beloved owner. The other toys try to convince him that he's not wanted, that his owner is too old to play with a cowboy doll like him.

But Woody, undaunted in his quest to return home, continuously reminds himself of the love and devotion of his owner, by looking at the soul of his shoe. There, is written the name, "Andy," the name of his owner, who had written it on Woody's shoe as a claim of ownership, and it becomes a constant reminder to the toy that he has not been abandoned and that he is still loved.

We may not have something written on the bottom of our shoe, but we have the Spirit of Truth, we have the words and teachings of Christ to remind us that Christ is alive and we are alive, that we are not abandoned, but we are loved with abandon.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS
For Sunday, May 29, 2011's Sermon
Foundational Scripture: John 14:15-21
<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

Featured Scripture Reflection: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."
– John 14:18 (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>)

Opening Icebreaker: Recall a time when you and a special someone parted ways (saying goodbye to a child, a spouse, a friend). Describe your feelings during and after the departure.

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Read John 24:15-21 (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>). What did you notice as you read that story? What words or phrases stand out to you? Do you have any questions about the text?
- Read John 24:1-14 (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>). What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this passage help us understand the previous passage?
- Read Matthew 28:16-20 (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>). What stands out to you in this passage? Compare this passage to the previous passages.

How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the "Good News" in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing these passages, how do these passages encourage you?
- How do these passages challenge you?

God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

A prayer

God, we are your children. We have been adopted into your family and your Holy Spirit cares for us. We are your children and we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen