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“Tread Lightly”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

6th Sunday of Easter

May 29, 2011

Acts 17:22–31; Psalm 66:8–20; John 14:15–21

Jesus bids farewell to his disciples at the last supper,

according to John's Gospel, with these words to live by:

“This is my command, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

It's very similar to the farewell/valedictorian speeches that many of us have heard

or will hear at all the various graduations,

spoken to an inner circle of disciple-classmates,

yet meant to be overheard by a wider circle of observers who sit in the stands,

or who hear second-hand, these words of import and challenge.

Jesus speaks clearly to his graduates in imperatives:

love me; obey my command; love one another.

And Jesus promises to provide help in his absence,

so that believers will not feel abandoned, like orphans.

“God will give you another Counselor to be with you forever”, he promises,

“the Spirit of Truth – whom the world cannot accept

because it neither sees or knows this Spirit.”

When my husband and I were vacationing in the North Carolina mountains recently,

we ate, for us, an unusually hearty breakfast one morning,

and afterwards, prepared to go out for an extended hike

to walk off those extra muffins, butter and real cream.

As we were pushing open the screen door to head out,

Ann, the owner of the bed and breakfast where we were staying, said,

"Keep an eye open for the Pink Lady's Slippers along the trail.

They are very rare and hard to spot,

but we've heard there are a few of them blooming."

"We don't know anything about them," we answered,

"or how to recognize them if they were to appear at our feet.

We don't know what to look for. What do they look like?"

So she took us outside, to a shady nook close to the inn,

and showed us a patch of Yellow Lady's Slippers,

a more-prolific cousin of the elusive pink orchid,

whose flowers resembles delicate little baby booties,

dangling from the underside of a single crooked stalk.

"Lady's Slippers are rare," she said, "because they are symbiotic,

growing only in soil enriched by a specific fungi for support.

Most people tend to walk right past them, but perhaps you'll be lucky and spot a few."

And so we departed for our woodland trek,

looking hard at first for the tell-tale pink flower, but hardly looking later,

as we became aerobically engaged and entangled in good conversation.

Suddenly, as my husband lifted his dainty size 13 bootie,

he stopped, suspending his foot in mid-step and exclaimed,

"There it is! There's a Pink Lady's Slipper, right beside the trail.

I wasn't even looking for it, and I almost stepped right on it."

Had we not known what we were looking for;

had we not been instructed by Ann, the inn-keeper,

of the wildflower's structure, shape, and color,

we would have overlooked it completely, or perhaps even worse,

we would have crushed it beneath our heels,

oblivious to the precious quality of its existence,

and to our possible sin of complicity in eradicating this endangered species.

God will be sending you a precious God-presence-Spirit in my absence, Jesus says;

a Counselor, an Advocate, a Spirit of Truth,

whom the world neither sees nor recognizes.

Look for this God-presence as you walk through life.

Look for it within yourselves as you lace up your hiking boots
and go out for a meander, for it will be *in you*.

Look for it in others, too, as you lean into a good conversation
and jiggle your foot as you listen, for it will be *in others*, as well.

Look especially for it as hidden among those considered to be rare,
elusive, and endangered.

And please, tread lightly, less you miss or harm the God-presence in yourself or in others.

The late Reynolds Price, beloved writer and professor at Duke,
called John's Gospel the most mysterious book in the New Testament.

Price says, "It is the most original and outrageous work in any type of prose or verse...
it is a burning outrage".

And he asks "Is it one gifted lunatic's tale of another lunatic, wilder than he?"

(Alfred Corn. *Incarnation*. "The Gospel According to St. John", by Reynolds Price, p. 39).

Price notes that as John's Jesus prepares to part ways with the disciples,
he leaves them with two main points to remember:

1) to believe that "I am," and 2) to love each other as I have loved you.

To believe, and to love, that's all.

Believe what?

Price terms it this way: (to believe) that Jesus is the Messiah,
the Son of God, God incarnate,

"an earthly condensation of the God who made everything" (Corn, p. 65).

I like that: the earthly condensation of God.

It makes Jesus seem like dew, or manna, from the cloud of God.

Jesus is like "the brightness after rain," to quote the last words of David
concerning the promised Messiah (2 Samuel 23: 4).

Love whom? Love, one another – the other, one by one.

Sometimes it is clear to us whom we are being called to love:

our fathers and mothers, their fathers and mothers, our children, our friends,
those who look, think, act or believe similarly
to the way we look think, act and believe;
those who do not ruffle our feathers.

But what if "the other" whom we are called to love, does not fit these profiles?

What if the other is a hidden presence in our midst:
someone, or some group or entity not far from each one of us;
near-by, yet unseen and unknown;
what if the other is someone or some group or entity who lives,
and moves among us, but has no full being?

What if the other is as rare,
and as easily overlooked and stepped over as those ephemeral Pink Lady's Slippers,
we almost stepped on in the forest?

I was shocked recently by a bold statement I stumbled upon in my reading,
concerning our human propensity to tramp flagrantly
through rare and precious manifestations of the Holy,
without giving it much thought.

It came from Dr. Dean Thompson,
recently retired president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary,
and a good friend and colleague of ours
while we served churches in West Virginia.

Dr. Thompson said this in a speech delivered to the Presbytery of West Virginia:

*As we study our nation's history,
we discover a long and regrettable record of our majority groups
seeking to bar our undervalued groups and minority groups
from the table of equal participation and leadership.*

*Such exclusionary-based thinking regarding Native Americans, African Americans,
women, and many religious and immigrant peoples has failed, again and again.
By the grace of God (and hopefully sooner than later), such exclusionary-based actions
against our beloved gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered colleagues*

will end in failure.

Thompson made this impassioned statement

prior the recent passage of Amendment 10-A to the PC(USA) Book of Order,
which amends the wording of requirements for ordination in the church.

He based his endorsement of greater inclusivity in the church upon

his trust in the power deeply-rooted in the sacrament of baptism,
which he believes ordains *all* who are baptized into the priesthood of *all* believers
and the communion of *all* saints, NO HOLDS BARRED.

Commenting further, he declared:

*No one should attempt to block or hinder any Christian from the blessed and historic
privileges and responsibilities involved, indeed, inherent in our baptism.*

*So, the church needs to cease its debilitating resistance
of baptism's enfranchisement of the priesthood of all believers
and the communion of saints, and simply get on with it.*

(Dean Thompson, remarks at the meeting of the Presbytery of West Virginia, March 1, 2011).

Dr. Thompson's yearning became a reality, within the Presbyterian Church, USA,
with the passage of Amendment 10-A by a majority of the presbyteries
on May 10 of this year.

And on May 23, the Church of Scotland, Scotland's largest Protestant denomination,
followed suit, lifting a moratorium in effect since 2009,
and officially voted to allow gay and lesbian ministers to take office in parishes
for the first time since its formation 450 years ago.

In the aftermath of such historic occurrences,

my husband and I sought the counsel of a dear friend this week,
who is an openly gay man, involved locally in a community of faith.

We treated him to lunch, and over omelets and green salad,

we asked him these questions with all seriousness:

What do you think will be the impact of this change in ordination upon our churches,
and what would you like it to be, from your perspective?

He thought about it for a minute, took a few bites of salad and a sip of water,

before answering, "Well, our churches have already lost many of us," he said.
"We're just too wounded or angered to come back to the mainline church,
or we don't feel safe there.

So you need to continue to press the ministry of invitation and hospitality
to let people know that church is a place where they will be
welcomed, safe, loved, and cared for,
and a place where their gifts and talents will be valued."

Then, what he said next blew my socks off.

After taking his time and buttering a slice of bread, he added,
"Nevertheless, I think you must tread lightly with your faith communities
in the weeks and months ahead
because not everyone is on the same page about this issue.

You want to be considerate of the struggle everyone is having
to realign what they have been taught in the past,
with what they are now being called to do in the present and into the future.

You want to be good listeners and hear the pain that others might be experiencing
as they struggle with this change."

When he said these things, I felt the Spirit of truth in me,
resonating with the Spirit of truth in him, and I sensed amazement,
as if I had just stumbled upon a rare woodland flower.

And his comments struck me as odd, as a Jesus-type comment,
as if the endangered Pink Lady's Slippers might comment finally
to all the reckless hikers,

"Hey, we apologize that the dew on our leaves got your socks wet,
and we're sorry about all that pink detritus deeply embedded
in the treads of your sneakers that now stains your steps."

He might as well have said, "Father, forgive them, for they have neither seen
nor known what they were looking for."

Jesus, the earthly condensation of God who made everything, says,
the precious Spirit of Truth lives *in us and in others*,

especially in those who live and move and have no full baptismal being.
Some of us never see this precious God-presence,
or know what we are supposed to be looking for,
so we have tramped and traipsed all over endangered holy habitats.
So while part of me wants to do cartwheels down the aisles,
and, as Dr. Thompson suggests, "simply get on with it,"
another part of me wants to offer a word of apology as a church leader,
to our beloved gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual friends,
for failing to notice or recognize the Spirit of Truth dwelling in you;
and to now seek to make our church a hospitable, inviting, and safe place for all,
as we claim in our own welcome statement and our core values statement.
But I also want to be cautious and to tread lightly as we "get on with it,"
to be considerate of all of God's children that we might be one,
that we might walk side by side with great empathy and mutual understanding
into this new era of church history.

And I want us all to ask these questions in all seriousness,
as we lace up our shoes and prepare to walk together:
who else in our midst is precious, but hidden;
who else is fragile and on the verge of extinction if we don't protect them;
who else lives and moves and has no full baptismal being among us?
Our youngest children? Our youth? Our immigrant friends?
Our friends who are homebound or handicapped? Those with autism or Alzheimer's?
Those with mental illness or disabilities? The poor?
Friends, the journey is never over. Yet more love is required.
There will be other paths where Jesus will beckon us to follow with much love and care,
and other precious children of God whom we will be called to notice and to nurture
into full baptismal identity and being.
Jesus said, "The ones who love me, will be loved by my Father,
and I, too, will love and show myself to them." So may it be. Amen.