

## “Reunion Sunday”

a sermon preached by Bishop William H. Willimon

April 18, 2010

Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19

Well you may imagine what a privilege for mere Methodist, South Carolinian me to preach here for two decades. I’ve missed it greatly. A frequent response to my preaching, in Alabama is, “Did anyone ever tell you that you look like the UNC basketball coach” I trust that today I’m preaching among those who will not so deeply offend.

I’ve also missed shagging (state dance of South Carolina!) under the great tent on Reunion Weekend. When Dean Wells graciously invited me, I excitedly inquired, “Isn’t that Reunion Weekend?” Sam didn’t know. “What has become of Duke values since me? In my day Reunion Weekend was the best part of being faculty.”

“It’s the Third Sunday of Eastertide,” Sam responded, in accent other than mine.

“Who cares? Is it Reunion Weekend?” When I was in college, a professor said to me, “Here you may get an education but you won’t get wisdom until you return for your Tenth College Reunion. You can learn more that weekend than we can teach you in four years.”

In reunions dispersed classes re-unite. There are memories: “Aren’t you the random I met in Duke Gardens, three a.m., magnolia tree, last weekend in June, ‘89?” Reckonings: “Wow! Is that your hair?” And Presence: “Is that you? Really?” And confrontations: “Remember me? Krzyzewskiville? 1999? Brown sleeping bag?”

One reason why this place is holy to me: *God has utilized Duke Chapel for seventy-five years as place of reunion.* Karl Barth, theologian of more notoriety even than Stanley Hauerwas, once sneered, “Christians go to church to make their last stand against God.”

Guilty. Sometimes the dignity, order, beauty and spiritual fuzz of church are perverse defense against a death-defying God. Duke Chapel, like any church, can be abused.

Still, I’ve seen people flee inside this seemingly safe sanctuary only to be smacked upside the head, jumped by God who refuses to stay put.

I recall the student who muttered on his exit one Sunday, “So? It really is true, after all?” I took him as a victim of the divine dragnet of grace. Perhaps he thought he had come away for a polite academic discussion of God, like they sometimes attempt in the Department of Religion, only to get whopped by a real God who loves surprise.

Or the visitor who exited, not with the usual, annoying, “Isn’t Dr. Wynkoop wonderful?” but rather with, “I just met the God I’ve spent my life avoiding.” Gotcha.

Israel had a Tabernacle – portable “tent of meeting” housing the ark with tablets of Moses. John’s gospel begins not only with “the Word became flesh” (which would be miracle enough) but the even more astounding “And the Word” (*eskenosen in hemin*) “The Word tented among us” – the great miracle of Incarnation. Some of you grads got up this morning, even after you over did it last night, because in your student days this great towering church was for you tent of meeting.

As in any reunion, divine-human reunion can be bitter-sweet. Sometimes we want reunion; sometimes we don’t.

One Sunday, a then resident *grand dame* was filleting me at the door of the Chapel, castigating my sermon as “insensitive, disconcerting, and utterly inappropriate.” A crowd gathered – students relish attacks upon the clergy.

After she had given me her best shot, storming off under full sail in a huff, a student bystander remarked, “Well, I guess somebody didn’t want to be as close to Jesus as she first thought.”

Why didn’t I think of that?

In today’s gospel the disciples are returning to what they did before Jesus called and so disrupted their lives – they’re fishing. The response of Jesus’ disciples to his cross and resurrection? Disbelief, doubt, and a relentless determination to get back their world before Jesus.

“It was a good campaign while it lasted, we didn’t get him elected Messiah. The road trips were fun, but the preaching, healing, and exorcisms were often a drag. Let’s go fishing.”

“We ought to get together sometime and remember the good old days on the road,” one chirped.

“Yeah, like a reunion weekend for veterans of the Jesus Campaign,” said another.

Ah, back to the reassuring, anesthetizing calm of the normal! (Sometimes our yearning for Monday is a means of escaping the weirdness of Sunday.)

A stranger calls out from the beach, “Kids, caught any fish?”

“No.”

Those who weren’t good at discipling are not much better at fishing. The stranger gives fishing advice, then kindles a fire for breakfast. Peter is the first to figure out that the stranger is none other than Jesus. He’s back. Jesus, true to form, has returned to the same group of losers who so disappointed him in the first place. He is back, doing what he did before; inviting them to table, taking, breaking, giving bread. Communion. Having seen this action before, they see, “So? He’s back!”

The Risen Christ doesn’t just come back but as usual enlists, summons, commands them – love me; feed my lambs. Three times he tells them, love me by loving others. Repeating it three times. (He’s worked with these idiots before.) A short time before, Peter denied Jesus three times (18:15-18); not Peter thrice declares his love for Jesus.

On the beach, Monday morning, is reunion, unsought, unexpected, maybe even unwanted reunion.

That’s Jesus for you. Like I say, I’ve seen it, here. Some random student staggers into my dark, gothic Chapel office (“Who let you in here?” I ask, in love.). Tells me some bizarre story of a voice, a light, a summons offered to the wrong person at the wrong time and – having read John 21:1-19 – I mutter, “How typical. I can’t get into the dorm without permission from Dean Wasiolek and Jesus shows up anywhere he pleases.”

See? It wasn’t just that Jesus was raised from the dead; it was that he immediately engaged in reunion. He came back to those who had failed him and, all evidence be damned, once again, ordains them to be about his work: “Love, as I loved you. Do the same things I’ve done to you.”

The Bible may be read as a book of reunion – Abraham and Sarah met by God on a starry night, Jacob wrestled to the ground by the River Jabbok, Mary hailed by an angel, the disciples found on the beach by the Jesus they thought they had lost.

Do you know what Jesus' name, "Emmanuel" means in the Aramaic? Look it up. Sometimes we want reunion; sometimes we don't. Reunions can be sad or glad. But one point of this Easter story: it's not up to us anyway. Tabernacle, meeting, reunion is something that Jesus does.

Most of Jesus' post-Easter appearances were near Jerusalem (John 20, Luke 24) – this one is out in the hinterland, the ougback, that is, Durham.

A student tells me that he has taken a philosophy course and has decided that God is bunk. He's now an atheist, so he says. I, as spiritual advisor respond (in love), "Sophomore! You're an Armenian for God's sake. Do you know what the Turks tried to do to your great-grandparents? A name like Klonic Gregarian, no way you'll ever be rid of Jesus!"

Ran into him last fall in Cambridge. He's teaching at Harvard, volunteer organist at his church. "You were right, I'm back," he said glumly. Ah the reach of a God determined to have reunion, even at Godless Harvard!

After floundering about in my first years here -- giving unsolicited advice to students, exploring whether they think they were or were not a Christian, how little they can believe about Jesus and still make it under the bar, how good they have to be and still be considered member of the flock -- I finally came to a simple definition of Christianity (academics hate simple definitions): *A Christian is anybody who has been met by Jesus. A recipient of reunion.*

Richard Nieburh defined "conversion" as when you discover that the God whom you feared as enemy is in truth your long lost friend. Reunion.

Reunion is good news for some: Relax, Christianity is not what you think or feel about Jesus – it's what Jesus does to you. Not a technique for how you use him but rather his use of you.

Bad news for others: Your attempts to escape are futile. If Jesus means to show up to you in church or breakfast on the beach or in the classroom, give in, give up, say yes. Reunion.

A preacher hears great stories: people minding their business, full of personal reservations, doctrinal questions, only to get called, clobbered, dragged into a reunion for which they had not registered. (Don't tell me a story about you and God if you don't want me to use it in a sermon!)

I remember a conversation in which I lamented the relatively small number of students we attracted to the Chapel. A student responded, "Go easy on yourself. I've heard you preach. It's amazing that you get anybody. Look. Duke attracts people who are smart enough to know that if Jesus showed up their lives would become more difficult than they already are. No wonder they sleep in."

There are perfectly understandable reasons for not registering for reunion. That's OK, because reunion is what God does anyway.

Today's first lesson is from the last book of the Bible. It's a metaphorically charged vision. In the end, God will get what God wants. All God's separated, far-flung family shall be summoned to reunion at the table. God will tabernacle with humanity. Heaven will alight on earth.

Though it annually takes Handle and Dr. Wynkoop three hours in *Messiah* to tell you, I'll tell you in thirty seconds: Jesus, the one whom we tried to push out of our world

on a cross, shall reign, shall gather every living creature to himself, calling us to the table, living reunited with the dead, the lost, found, everybody, in the end...home.

Then we'll know; we're not fated for separation, loneliness, exile, autonomy in the cold dark uncaring cosmos. We were made for meeting. Creation is coaxed to communion. We shall be raised for reunion