

# “You Can Choose your Friends, but...”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 4, 2009*

World Communion Sunday

Psalm 26

Rev. John Wahl

Hebrews 1:1-3, 2:10-12

In author John Irving’s book, entitled *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the ten-year old male narrator describes his three older cousins this way:

*I would never describe my cousins as bullies; they were good-natured, rambunctious roughnecks and daredevils who genuinely wanted me to have fun – but fun in the north country was not what I was used to in my life...My cousins were active, combative athletes – my grandmother called them “the warriors” – and I lived a different life whenever I was with them. I was both crazy about them and terrified of them; I couldn’t contain my excitement as the time to see them drew near, but after several days, I couldn’t wait to get away from them – I missed the peace of my private games, and I missed Owen Meany; I even missed my grandmother’s constant but consistent criticism.*

*But I loved being with my cousins; they were so vastly stimulating that rarely could I sleep in their house and would lie awake all night, waiting for them to pounce on me, or for them to let Firewater, the boxer, in to my room, where he would lick me to death; or I would lie awake imagining what exhausting contests I would encounter the next day.<sup>1</sup>*

By the time that I was ten years old, my three older cousins – all teenagers at the time – had transformed their back yard from a modest lawn to a daredevil’s playground. Much of the driveway had been consumed by a skateboard park – with ramps and jumps and bowls crudely formed from discarded pieces of plywood. And the swimming pool, which I assume was installed with intentions of rest and relaxation, had become the scene of many narrowly-avoided catastrophes as my cousins and their friends would jump from the roofs of both the house and the garage – having to clear a good fifteen feet of concrete patio – in order to splash “safely” into the five-foot-deep water.

Needless to say, I was both amazed and terrified by my cousins and their utter sense of recklessness. Games of any kind were – at their house – contests of survival; no such thing as “touch only” or “call your own foul” existed. But, no

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<sup>1</sup> John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, p. 52-55

matter how perilous the path down which they would lead me, I tried to follow: knowing that at its end lay either the intoxicating thrill of accomplishment or, more likely, the agony of defeat.

This book of Hebrews calls Jesus the “exact imprint of God’s very being.” (1:3) This description, of course, refers not to the way that Jesus looked – male or single or bearded or sandal-wearing – but the essence of who Jesus was; what Jesus valued and stood for. “Jesus,” as Presbyterian pastor Susan Andrews puts it, “is the real thing – the authentic pioneer of God-drenched living, reflecting the glory of God in the flesh-and-blood experiences of earthly life.”<sup>2</sup>

But Christ is not only an exact imprint of God in the way that he lived, but also in the way he died – and the why. To the Jews, a crucified Christ was a scandal, because for them, the mysterious God – the one whose name they were not allowed to even utter – could never be visible to human eyes. God was the voice that spoke to the prophets and the fire and cloud that appeared to the Hebrews wandering in the desert. But a person, in flesh and blood, that could not be God.

And to the Gentiles, a crucified Christ was – as Paul says – foolishness, because for them, a God who feels and suffers and weeps and dies was an abomination to a well-cultured mind. Their gods were warriors and conquerors: to be feared because they were mighty and not afraid to show it.

But to those who follow Christ, who acknowledge him as both the pioneer of their way and their brother in the journey, a crucified Christ offers life. And yet, the Christian life is one that is filled with paradox – so much so that it may seem both scandalous and foolish. The book of Hebrews – which was written not for first-hand witnesses to Jesus’ life, but to second-generation Christians who were beginning to doubt – encourages us to embrace this paradox, even when it seems like inconsistency.

We are called to follow a Jesus who embodies both glory and humiliation, power and suffering, authority and servanthood, grace and obedience. This Christ is – as we are told in Revelation – both alpha and omega, beginning and end.

When Jesus instructs his followers to come to him like a little child, maybe he is talking not so much about innocence and blind obedience, but instead about

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Andrews in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

having the ability to embrace life's paradox. Maybe we are to approach Jesus like a ten year-old boy who is going to stay with his rambunctious older cousins. The road that lies ahead may not be safe, but certainly thrilling. It can be the kind of adventure that keeps you up at night, wondering what will come next; when you might be called to step beyond what is comfortable, to what is enlivening.

The crucified Christ has chosen us to be his brothers and sisters – and cousins as well – members of the same body with Christ as its head. And yet, we often do not treat one another within the church as if we were bound to one another; dependent upon each other and on Christ for anything we might accomplish. In the church, we behave instead as if we can pick and choose who is in our family of faith. God has already done it; and so whether visiting with our spiritual family fills us with giddy anticipation or impending dread, these are your brothers and sisters. And so, what are we to do – build each other up instead of tearing down; pray fervently for one another; share what you have been given; forgive over and over again.

Susan Andrews goes on to say this:

*It is as if we (contemporary Christians) are afflicted by the spiritual version of chronic fatigue syndrome – out of sync with the culture around us, weary of serving, and unable to muster either the discipline or the delight that daily discipleship can offer us. The electricity of Hebrews can reignite our faith, reminding us of the amazing grace of God's very imprint in Jesus and in us, and assuring us that endurance through suffering – as well as joy – is the power of God in us for others.<sup>3</sup>*

In Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper, during that part that we call the great prayer of thanksgiving, when the congregation lifts up its collective heart, the Holy Spirit also lifts up the congregation to the place where Christ lives and reigns in heaven.<sup>4</sup> It is in this meal that we are given the opportunity to glimpse the glory of God, by doing what Jesus commands us to do and remembering why we are to do it.

In the communion feast, there is enough for everyone – it takes place at a table to which everyone who wishes to be there has already been invited – and the grace of God is brought to reality when we share with one another.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hegeman in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

But such glimpses may also occur in a community's heroic struggle to respond to a natural disaster or to some human enemy or to some unreasonable disease. In the midst of these encounters with the holy, we get that foretaste of the "ultimate redemption and harmony of the cosmos."<sup>5</sup> I pray that the team we send in two weeks to the Gulf Coast might not only experience that sense of profound rightness in the world, but might also serve as agents of God's amazing love in and for the world.

Hebrews offers a glimpse into the integrated, redeemed world that has been given to us through a crucified Christ: a taste of both what we – as individuals striving to follow in the footsteps of Jesus; and the church – seeking to do Christ's will as his body; and the whole creation – moving toward the fulfillment of God's sacrificial gift, might become. We can grow toward perfection – toward becoming more like an exact imprint of God – if we diligently and faithfully travel the way of Jesus, the way of love that gives up life in order to offer life to all. AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> Rodney Hunter in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Oct. 2006