

“Good News for Babysitters”

Neil Engle
May 13, 2007
Text: John 14:23-29

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

Unless you were an only child, you probably had the experience of having to babysit a younger sibling, or having an older brother or sister babysit you. As one of six children, I cannot remember a time when we had an outside babysitter come into our home. There was always one of us around to watch the others – and as each child got older and left home, it naturally fell to the child next in line. I eventually got my chance to babysit my younger brother Stuart. My folks would be gone for an evening and I got to babysit. I’ll never forget the weekend that I almost blew my sitting privilege for good. My parents went out of town on a Saturday morning, and soon after they drove away, Stuart and I hopped on our bikes and rode to the local shopping area in Prairie Village and parked in front of the Bruce Smith Drugstore. Stuart stayed with the bikes while I went in to make the purchase. I was in and out within five minutes. I was afraid someone would see me or stop me, and I came out with two packs of Roy Tan tiparillo cigars. We couldn’t wait to get home – when we made it into the house – we locked the door and pulled the drapes closed. Stuart opened his box and I opened my box and we each took out one of those cigars and we slowly peeled off the cellophane and put the white plastic tips in our mouth and we were ready to light up. Now I was the babysitter, so I got to strike the match. We puffed and puffed and got those tiparillos blowing smoke and then we sat on the couch laughing and puffing and coughing and feeling like big shots and thinking that life didn’t get any better than that. We smoked a couple more cigars that afternoon and then it dawned on us that the house was beginning to smell a little. We rummaged around in the hall closet and found a full can of Glade air freshener and we sprayed in every corner and on everything we could find.

Now I’m not sure how my parents found out – they’re parents – maybe they just knew. Maybe they were suspicious when they walked into a house that smelled like pine, maybe they read the guilt on my face or they could see Stuart had something to tell. After the grounding I received as punishment was over, I was allowed to babysit again. On those occasions when I was to be left in charge my folks would caution me about locking the doors, taking phone messages, taking care of the house and not letting Stuart fall down the basement stairs. On their way out the door my parents handed me emergency phone numbers and told me their return time and then they were gone. I was in charge. It was a good feeling to know that I was trusted. My parents trusted me and Stuart trusted me as well. It was also a little scary knowing I was responsible for someone else, and what would happen to him if my parents were in an accident and never came back. He could end up an orphan. I could end up an orphan. I had just as much to lose as he did, but since I was the one in charge I was supposed to exude confidence and know what to do and have the answers.

Most of you know what I’m talking about – whether or not you have been a babysitter, because you’re Christians. We are Christ’s elder children in the world, we are the ones He’s left in charge. We’re the responsible ones – the ones He has trusted to carry on His name and everywhere we go we see the faces of those whom He has given into our care. Some are eager to meet Him – some are not – some are still waiting, some have given up. You know, it’s tough being the ones in charge. We have all those questions: “Where is He?” “Where did He go?” “When will He be back?” Babysitting is tough – you know how it is – you can feel prepared for every conceivable situation, and then something totally unexpected happens and then what do you do? Quick-check the list – what did Christ say to do when the doctor says “it’s malignant”? Since we’re in charge now, what’s our plan for dealing with senseless violence? What do we say to those whose town has been wiped off the map by a tornado?

Those of us who have been left in charge by Christ are sometimes anxious, we worry. We know times are precarious, the phone at midnight ringing, its hollow ring is too frightening to answer. Who’s in trouble? And in the daylight we worry how long we can keep working at this pace without forfeiting our family. Plenty of the pieces of our lives are filled with trouble. Anxiety is our constant companion. Hearts are often troubled. We’re concerned about what’s going to happen to us. We are no different from the disciples of Jesus – they were being left in charge and they were nervous. Jesus was very concerned about them – that’s why in John’s gospel we have a farewell from Jesus that runs four chapters – 14 through 17. Jesus is about to return to God, and He’s telling His disciples everything they need to know before He leaves them. He knows they’re anxious, and tells them, “Don’t be uptight – don’t let your hearts be troubled. I go to prepare a place for you.” He promises them and us a place – a permanent one, an abode large enough to accommodate the love that binds Him to God on one hand and binds Him to us on the other, a giant heart of a place with room enough for everyone whom love unites. I go to prepare a place for you, He says, but then several verses later He says, “I

am going away and I am coming to you.” Did you catch that? The first time we hear Jesus talking about a place to which He was going that no one could follow, to a place we would have to wait for Him to come back from and show us. But then we hear that Jesus is no longer going but coming. The place is not out there somewhere but right here, a place in the present where God dwells with those who love Jesus and keep His word. One writer calls this place “the Peace Place”:

This Gospel isn’t about a mansion in the sky by and by. This Gospel really is about Jesus Christ; fifteen times in it Jesus says, “I.” If you study the I’s you cannot miss the point that the Peace Place is with Christ and through Christ with God. If he goes to prepare a place, he comes back to take us to be with him. He is the way to the Peace Place, so being with him is being on the way to and in the Peace Place. Being in him in belief and baptism is being with God, being with God now.

That is what Philip did not understand and what you and I have some difficulty understanding. The Peace Place can be in a tumultuous and torturous upper room if we are in it with Christ who says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” The Peace Place can be on a cross if we are on the cross with Christ who says, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” The Peace Place can be where disillusioned disciples are ready to run away if we are there with Christ who says, “Peace be with you.”

The Peace Place is where Christ is, and we know it very well. We know it when we receive the bread and the wine and give the cup of cold water. We know it when we receive the word and become some person’s manna. We know it when we receive the yoke and look over our shoulder and find that our yokemate is none other than the Christ. *The Peace Place is the oft-known presence of God in Christ.* It is being in Christ and having Christ in us right now.

God in Christ abiding with us – seems to involve becoming part of a large extended family – a holy family. A colleague put it this way: “When God and Jesus move in with us, apparently, they make lots of keys – keys for the Holy Spirit, keys for other disciples, keys for all kinds of indwelling cousins in Christ. Coming and going, we learn to recognize each other, and to call upon each other for everything that people who live together do.”

Now that strikes me as good news for we babysitters, because it means we are not alone in the house. There is someone else at home, in us and in those for whom we care, which means that we don’t have to be God-sized for them. We can be human-sized instead, with room within us for God to dwell and heal our hearts from the inside out. In other words, it’s not all up to us. We have help, guidance, someone to help us through the scary nights and the lonely days.

That’s good news for babysitters. And it’s also good news for those of us who might feel alone or orphaned because of a change in their life situation. You see, whether we’re dealing with the death of a spouse, or missing the love and guidance of our mother, or getting ready to graduate from high school, there are times in our lives when we feel orphaned, when we feel alone.

I hope some of you had the pleasure of seeing “Into the Woods,” the Stephen Sondheim musical, that was presented here in town recently. It’s a set of fractured fairy tales – Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk, and a new story about a Baker and his wife who seek to lift a curse in order to have a child. The plot is too complicated to summarize here, but its themes are not. Each of the characters is looking for something he or she lacks and dearly wants: money, love, beauty, power. To find these things they go into the woods, each alone, each on a journey. By the end of the musical, the characters realize that they are participants in one another’s story. Some of the characters run from the consequences of their actions, others refuse to own any complicity. But enough of them pool together tiny bits of individual strength, humility, compassion, and goodness, for the giant to be defeated. And even the giant is not really bad, not really to blame, but that’s another story.

When I saw “Into the Woods,” I was moved by the closing song entitled “No One is Alone.” The song is really a hymn. It reminds us that we all struggle with right and wrong, good and bad; and beautiful shades of gray. Each of us faces painful yet inescapable questions and riddles and feelings and greats. We cannot run away, but the good news remains that we are not alone. The song says: “People make mistakes. Holding to their own thinking they’re alone. No one is alone.” We are not left as orphans.

Those who have truly loved and cared for us – our parents, our spouses, our children – live deep inside us, and no one can take us out of their hands. We may have to learn a new way of communicating with them, since they're inside us now and not always available on the outside. If we want to talk with them, we may have to sit down someplace quiet and listen very carefully for the sound of the wind blowing inside of us, for the sound of the still small voice that speaks in silence more often than it speaks in words, but there can be no doubt about where home is for them or for us. Coming or going, God dwells with us, leaving us babysitters notes all over the place – “Love one another, don't be afraid, believe in God, believe also in me.”

O God, when the troubles of life close in, when being one of those whom Christ left in charge gets to be a bit overwhelming, let the words and promises of Jesus reach out to us. Let not our hearts be troubled – for we know we can move confidently into the future for Jesus Christ is there, and we are not alone. Amen.

Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for her words and insights, and to Forrest Church for his assessment of “Into the Woods.”