

**THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**May 17, 2020; 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year A**

SCRIPTURE READING                      Acts 17:22-31

<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. <sup>23</sup> For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. <sup>26</sup> From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, <sup>27</sup> so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him-- though indeed he is not far from each one of us. <sup>28</sup> For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

<sup>29</sup> Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. <sup>30</sup> While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."                      Acts 17:22-31 (NRSV)

SCRIPTURE READING                      John 14:15-21

[Jesus said:] <sup>15</sup> "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

<sup>18</sup> "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

SERMON

*It's a Hard-Knock Life*

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Last night I was on the phone with someone who's at the bedside of a friend who's dying. There's a lot of that going around. If it's not in our family, we all know someone at this point who's died from COVID-19, and meanwhile, the deaths from disease, accident and old age continue as always. One of the things I hear very frequently from those blessed enough to get old is how hard it is to say goodbye. You feel very alone when you've outlived your nearest and dearest. And most of us by my age have said farewell to parents, and when they're both gone, no matter how old you are, you suddenly feel—orphaned. We all will know that feeling, if we live long enough.

We also rely for comfort, security, and meaning in our lives from our jobs, our careers, our income, our pets, our homes, our children, and we may find ourselves saying goodbye; and what a painful loss it is. At some point we say goodbye to our talents, our abilities, our intellect—our memory! And at the end, we leave it all behind. As my friend said to me on the phone last night, “Well, that’s life.”

As Little Orphan Annie’s friends at the orphanage sing, “It’s a hard-knock life.” Are you depressed yet? Maybe you already were. I’m a pretty optimistic guy, and because in our Bible passage today we’re told we will NOT be orphaned, I thought maybe I should title the sermon, “Tomorrow.” You know, “The sun’ll come out tomorrow, bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there’ll be sun.” Thank you, Annie. Shaddup. You know what else that song says, over and over?

*Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love you tomorrow.*

*You’re always a day away.*

The shining sun, the new day, Always a day away. But never right now, when I need it. Now that’s depressing. And right now, as we all do sometimes, I resonate with Annie’s friends:

*It’s a hard-knock life for us! It’s a hard-knock life for us!*

*No one cares for you a smidge when you’re in an orphanage.*

*It’s a hard-knock life!*

(“Annie,” Music by Charles Strouse, Lyrics by Charles Strouse and Martin Charnin, 1977)

Right now, today, it feels like life is knocking us around hard. Why is that? Where is the promise that we won’t be orphaned, that the Lord is coming to us? On the surface, Little Orphan Annie’s overly bright perspective might seem simplistic and coming from a place of real privilege. After all, the millionaire Daddy Warbucks adopts her. Where’s our millionaire?

I’ll bet you can guess where I’m going with this. We’ve all been adopted by a millionaire—if “millionaire” is a metaphor for enormous riches and power. Our adoptive father is wealthy in other-worldly ways, beyond all imagining. In the comic strip and play, the world sees that Annie is adopted by a rich man—what they don’t see is the bond of spirit and love between them. As our Gospel reading says, “**This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.**” The world doesn’t get it. Only those of us who recognize our adoption can see it. We know. We have been illumined and enlightened. In Luke 8:17, Jesus says, “**There is nothing done in secret that will not become known and come to light.**” So I guess the sun will come out tomorrow after all. Bet your bottom dollar.

In the musical version of “Annie,” Daddy Warbucks’ secretary “Grace” promises Annie, and doesn’t this sound Scriptural--

*Tomorrow morning it begins*

*You’re with a man who always wins*

*Trust him and he’ll prove*

*Mountains easily move*

*Oh, you won’t be an orphan --*

*No, you won’t be an orphan for long!*

That “Daddy” is with us doesn’t mean that life doesn’t offer hard knocks, but that Daddy will see us through, and give us the Spirit to persevere, even in joy.

Through our Daddy’s gift of Jesus, and his sacrifice on the cross, all things are possible, and even judgement and despair, these things of darkness, “**come to light.**” Judgement is overturned. Forgiveness reigns. Death has no sting. We still have sorrow, but our lives are lightened. Even the most despairing that life has to offer can give birth to new life in Daddy’s sacrifice. Joseph Rosenbaum, a Holocaust survivor in Poland, wrote this:

Before you were conceived I wanted you  
Before you were born I loved you  
Before you were here an hour I would die for you  
This is the miracle of love. --Maureen Hawkins

Mother is always there when you need her. She helps, protects, listens, advises, and nurtures physically and morally. She makes sure that her family is loved 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. At least that’s how I remember my mother, for the few precious years I was blessed to have her. But no words can describe the sacrifice she made out of love for me, her young son.

I was 19 years old, and I was being taken to a concentration camp with a large group of other Jews. It was clear that we were destined to die. Suddenly my mother stepped in and traded places with me. And although it was more than 50 years ago, I will never forget her last words to me and her good-bye look.

“I have lived long enough. You have to survive because you are so young,” she said.

Most kids are born only once. I was given birth twice—by the same mother. (“Most Kids Are Born Only Once,” by Joseph C. Rosenbaum. From Chicken Soup for the Mother’s Soul. Copyright 1998 Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Jennifer Read Hawthorne, Marci Shimoff)

What would you do with your life if a new one was given to you, at the cost of someone else’s? At the end of the movie “Saving Private Ryan” (1998), in which several soldiers die saving Private James Ryan, a dying captain whispers to Ryan, “earn this...earn it.” That is exactly our condition. We’ve been saved and adopted. And we have a chance to earn what was given to us in grace.

In Bible times, a Roman adoption literally meant a new life. All the old was wiped out. All debts were cancelled, and the new person had right of inheritance to all their father’s possessions. So do we. And our father, our Daddy, is the father of Light.

What a freeing concept! We’re not released from our worldly cares, but the existential knowledge that they have lost their meaning means we are no longer children of this world, but the next. Like Annie, who’s always out with Sandy her dog, having adventures made possible by Daddy Warbucks, inevitably she is caught up in

drama and saved in the final frame by Punjab, the mystical servant of Warbucks. One might say the Holy Spirit, the Advocate sent to make sure we aren't orphaned?

No matter what the world throws at us, we can see it through. I had a good friend some years ago who survived a terrifying rape attempt, and for a long time she couldn't sleep at night, consumed by anxiety. The only thing she could do was pray, and eventually sleep and peace would come. And today, by God's grace and the help of therapists, she has recovered. No matter what our burden, no matter what our anxiety or fear, it can be released. There's a poem I know called "God's Boxes of Love:"

I have in my hands two boxes  
Which God gave me to hold  
He said, "Put all your sorrows in the black,  
And all your joys in the gold."

I heeded His words, and in the two boxes  
Both my joys and sorrows I store  
But though the gold became heavier each day  
The black was as light as before

With curiosity, I opened the black  
I wanted to find out why  
And I saw, in the base of the box, a hole  
Which my sorrows had fallen out by

I showed the hole to God, and mused aloud,  
"I wonder where my sorrows could be."  
He smiled a gentle smile at me.  
"My child, they're all here with me."

I asked, "God, why give me the boxes,  
Why the gold, and the black with the hole?"  
"My child, the gold is for you to count your blessings,  
the black is for you to let go." --Author Unknown

Let go. More adventures will follow, surely, for "humans are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward...but commit to God, who does great and marvelous things without number." (Job 5:7-9) What will you do with your new life? Will you share it, from your abundance, just as it was shared with you? Will you work to change this hard-knock life, so that maybe one or two of your sisters or brothers won't get knocked down? Will you accept your inheritance of light? Little un-orphaned Annie is a child of hope, whose incurable optimism never faltered. The sun WILL come out tomorrow. The Son will rise on the third day. ...And a little child shall lead them.

Amen.