

Story and Meditation: Who Jesus Loves

May 16, 2021

1 John 5:9-13

John 17:6-19

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There is another ending to last week's story about Trouble. Just to remind you, Trouble was one of three chicks in an 'apapane nest, and she had earned her name by being, well, troublesome, trouble-attracting, and trouble-making. She screamed. She pecked. She called names. She scratched. She screamed some more.

She had a brother and a sister who had had enough. One day Mother returned to the nest to find Trouble screeching and her brother and sister wrestling her to the side of the nest. "Don't feed her, Mom!" yelled brother. "She's been pecking us again!"

"Give her a hard peck, Mom!" yelled sister. "Trouble is the worst!"

Mother did nothing of the kind. She separated the fighting fledglings and got them settled, breathing hard, at opposite sides of the nest.

"Why do you put up with her, Mom?" demanded brother. "She's the worst!" echoed sister.

Mother explained that she had promised to love all of them, to see that they had what they needed to live and thrive and grow. At the end of last week's story, we heard that Trouble had learned quite a bit from her mother's promise to love.

This week, however, is about Trouble's brother and sister.

Some time later, when Trouble was getting some pre-flight instruction from their father and making quite a fuss about it, brother and sister had a question for their mother.

"How can you love Trouble?" asked sister. "She fusses and she fights all the time. Why don't you just love us?"

"That's right!" said brother. "We're good all the time."

Mother didn't say anything to that. She cocked her head to one side, and the two 'apapane fledglings had the grace to look a little embarrassed to have said they were good *all* the time.

"Well, OK," said brother. "Maybe not all the time."

“I understand that you have to take care of all of us,” said sister, just a little grudgingly. “But you seem to care for all of us the same.”

“I don’t just love who you are now, or who you’ve been,” said mother. “I also love the birds that you might be.”

Both fledglings looked confused.

“Do you remember what it was like in the egg?” asked mother.

They didn’t remember much about that.

“Do you remember what it was like when you first hatched?” That was easier, but there wasn’t a lot to remember in those first hours and days.

“Are you the same then as you are now?” Well, no, of course not. Now they were getting ready to fly.

“Do you think you’ll be the same as the days go by?” Definitely not. There were all sorts of possibilities.

“I love those possibilities before you,” said Mother, “the things you might accomplish, the flights you might fly, the friends you might make, the chicks you might hatch. I love all the wonderful things you might become, even though I don’t know what precisely they are. I love you – and I love Trouble – for who you’ve been, who you are, and who you might become.”

A lot of things happened on the night that Jesus was arrested. He gathered with his closest friends and disciples for a celebration meal observing the Passover festival. He washed their feet. He predicted his suffering and death. He warned his followers that they would abandon and deny him. He promised to return. And then, John records in the 17th chapter of his gospel, he prayed for them. That’s what we heard read.

I find something very curious about this prayer. Jesus had spent some time being very realistic about his closest disciples: one betrayer, Judas; one denier, Peter; ten abandoners. When he described them in this prayer, however, they sound much different. “They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.” “[they] know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” “They do not belong to the world.”

Really? In the next few hours every single one of them would behave in the other ways that Jesus had predicted: denying and abandoning. Jesus faced his last hours without them. I would guess that during that night and the next day, they did the worst things they ever did in their lives.

Jesus could have defined them by those actions. He could have let them all go. He could have risen from the tomb and gathered a new, more reliable group of people around him. He could have said: you are all betrayers. You are all deniers. You are all faithless friends.

Jesus didn't do that. He did not define his followers by the worst thing they ever did. He chose to see them, to pray for them, to love them for the people they would become.

Cheryl Lindsay writes at ucc.org, "No one has prayed more for us than Jesus. In some ways, the earthly ministry of Jesus was prayer itself, the ultimate expression of intercessory prayer in which the One (in whose divine image we are created) advocates on our behalf as a living prayer."

Sometimes we take a lot of praying for. One of the things Jesus did in this prayer was to speak about the disciples and their relationship to "the world." They were in the world, but they did not belong to the world, he said. It's pretty clear that he meant the world of humanity, with its squabbles and sins, its egos and errors, its power plays and perils. You will hear it said, however, that by speaking in this way about the world Jesus basically described the rest of the created planet to the status of corrupted and evil. Claudio Carvalhaes writes at Working Preacher:

"At this point we need to make a distinction that will help us understand the world we live in and must deny and the world that we live in and must work for. Perhaps we could make a distinction between the world and earth. The world is that part of our planet that lives in patriarchal structures, necropolitics, police violence, prisons, militarization, attacks on the poor, closing of borders, some rich people getting richer while everybody else becomes poorer, and the whole destruction of the earth.

"The earth is the part of the planet that has to do with our most primal sources of living, the part of who we are. We are all made of soil; those who live in sync with the natural world, who don't live by desires of consumption but care for the poor and the animals, rivers and oceans, birds and insects, live in the earth-gift of God. When Jesus becomes human, he is both God's gift to the earth and the earth himself."

Of all the things we need forgiving for, I think taking the words of Jesus as justification for abuse of other people and of other parts of Creation might take the most forgiveness.

But Jesus did not, does not, define us by the worst things we did, or do, or even will do. He sees us, he prays for us, he loves us for the things we might become.

We forget, perhaps, that eleven of the twelve disciples became inspired and persuasive leaders in the days, months, and years after Jesus' resurrection. After all, we've got four books – the Gospels – that describe them as being pretty incompetent. We've only got one book – Acts of the Apostles – that describes them as accomplished, even heroic. Christianity has created a curious double vision of the twelve. They were well-meaning clowns. They were figures of

greatness. They were weak and ignorant. They were strong and faithful. They were sinners. They were saints.

The disciples were Trouble and her brother and her sister, loved for who they'd been, who there were, but also for who they would become by One who could see those possibilities much better than an 'apapane mother.

The same is true of us. We are still growing and changing. We are not who we were. We are not who we will be. Jesus has loved us. Jesus does love us. Jesus will love as we become us.

Cheryl Lindsay goes on to write at ucc.org: "Jesus makes it clear that his will is for followers to be actively engaged in the world but held, upheld, and strengthened by God even as they provide a distinct witness of the Jesus way of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration that threatens the systems and the powers of the world. Following Jesus is a journey that takes us to the glory of the resurrected life by way of the cross. It's dangerous, perilous, and, at times, heartbreakingly lonely. It was for Jesus, and he knows, it will be for those who truly commit to this life. Yet, at the same time, the glory on the other side can only be fueled through the fire of the journey."

Who does Jesus love? Well, one answer is clearly the one that was the answer last week: everyone. More to the point, Jesus loves everyone in the fullness that still lies ahead for them. Jesus loves the future selves that are taking shape and form. Jesus loves everyone beyond the worst thing anyone ever did.

Including you. Including me. Including us all.

Amen.