

I Will Never Leave You

Year C, Proper 17 – Hebrews 13:1-8

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I learned to ride a bicycle when I was eight. I had ridden my bike for a couple of years with training wheels, but I was eight before I would agree to try without those crutches. It was a momentous time. It was an exciting time. It was, for my eight-year-old psyche, a decidedly *terrifying* time. I think that even at eight I was aware intellectually that nothing truly horrendous could happen to me. But in my *heart* I just knew that if ever I leaned too far to the right or too far to the left – if ever I pushed too quickly back on the coaster brake – if ever I stopped madly pedaling for the smallest fraction of a second – I would be mangled and crippled for life.

In point of fact, to this day I have no doubt whatsoever that the only reason I got through the whole terrifying ordeal was my father. Dad was not the most patient man I have ever known. In fact, I suspect that Dad was the model for my own impatient nature. But when it came time for me to learn how to ride my bike, Dad was there at the ready.

We took off the training wheels, went out to the middle of our suburban Phoenix street and Dad held the bike as I mounted the beast. All went smoothly as Dad went over all the fundamentals of how to operate the various parts of a bicycle. Then – we started moving. At first it was just him pushing and me holding the handlebars in a death-grip – not pedaling – not steering – not *breathing*. Down the street and around the block we went, Dad running and pushing, me riding. One by one, the various parts of my anatomy returned to my control as Dad ran along side talking me through it. “Move your feet, Boy. Pedal.” “Steer into the corner and lean just a little.” “Relax, you’re doing fine.” Pretty soon we were moving along at a pretty good clip. I was pedaling, steering and even breathing within normal limits. And Dad was chugging along beside me.

Then I noticed that the hand that *had* been firmly holding the back of my seat was at Dad’s side. There’s no other way to say it – I freaked! My body and my mind acted as one – and froze completely solid as I began to veer, out of control, toward the curb and my *certain* doom. Dad reached out instantly and took hold of me again. “Don’t worry” he whispered. “I’m right here.” “I’m not going anywhere.” I went back to steering and pedaling – *and* breathing. And Dad went back to running.

We must have circled that block a half-dozen times like that. I was still none too sure about my ability to manage that bike, but I knew that Daddy was there. I eventually learned to ride, but it *wasn't* a matter of skill. I eventually learned to ride, but it wasn't a matter of ability. I eventually learned to ride, but it wasn't a matter of effort. I learned to ride my bicycle as a matter of *trust*.

We spend a good deal of our lives, don't we, with a death-grip on the handlebars. We try to move forward, but in fear and despair we can't manage to pedal. Or we go speeding breakneck down the path, terrified that if we lean to the right or to the left – if we touch the brake to slow down a bit – if we stop madly pedaling, even for a single second, we will be mangled – and crippled – and *damned*. We are more than just afraid for our lives – we are afraid for our very *souls*. Afraid we won't measure up somehow. Afraid we will fail to live up to some standard that we have set or that we have bought into. Afraid we will get off the track of God's purpose for our lives. We spend a good deal of our lives terrified that we won't perform well enough, that we'll “mess up,” that we just plain aren't good enough.

But tucked into this morning's lesson from the letter to the Hebrews is a reminder that life is not a matter of skill. It's not a matter of ability. It's not a matter of effort. Life, most especially the *Christian* life, is a matter of *trust*. In the midst of all our fear and trembling, our Father is right beside us, holding on to us and whispering, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” It's not a matter of our own adequacy or inadequacy. It's a matter of trusting that our Father is with us – down the street, around the block, over and over and over again.

The problem is we're not particularly good with trust. One of the handful of things that I learned as a student of psychology years and years ago is that science has figured out that we as human beings have a mind that was *designed* to trust. Back in school we called it evolutionary psychology. I've come to prefer calling it being made in the Image of God. In any case, we are apparently born hard-wired to trust. The problem is that from the moment of our birth, our software, our programming, the patterns that we develop as we grow up and live our lives, point us in precisely the *opposite* direction. The Father proclaims, "I will never leave you or forsake you." But we thoroughly resist that notion at every turn.

"Lord, I've heard that before," we say. "I've trusted in others only to be let down time and time again." "I've trusted in so *many* others, given my heart, given my everything, given my *self*, only to have that trust thrown back up into my face." "I've trusted only to find myself lying on the pavement, bruised and battered and bleeding."

But God responds, "I'm the one who formed you from dust." "I'm the one who brought you out of bondage into perfect freedom." "I'm the one who died in your place long before you were born onto this earth." "I will *never* leave you." "I will *never* forsake you."

"Lord, I've walked away from you so many times." "I've known with certainty what you wanted of me, known with certainty what was right, known with certainty which direction you wanted me to go. But I went my way instead." "I've left you a thousand times. I've forsaken you a *thousand*, thousand times." "With that kind of track record, how can I possibly expect you to be there... for *me*?"

But the Lord responds, "Every step you took on the path, I was there." "Every time you *left* the path, I was there, too." "Climb the highest mountain, I am there. Swim the deepest river, I am there. In the blazing light and in the darkest night, I am with you." "You may think you are leaving me, but I will *never* leave you." "I will never forsake you."

"But Lord, we've been up and down this street a million times." "We've been going around this same block my whole life." "There must be a limit." "You won't, you *can't* hold me up... forever."

But our Father replies, "What are limits to me?" "Though all the earth be shaken to its elements, I will *never* leave you!" "Though time itself dissolve back into the nothingness from which I formed it, I will *never* forsake you." "From the beginning, you are mine." "And to the absolute end of ends, I am yours."

We need not live lives of loneliness, despair and fear. Our God is ready to hold us up through *whatever* comes. Our Lord is willing to give himself to us time and time and *time* again. Our Father is able to keep his promise that he will *never* leave us, that he will *never* forsake us. And so we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can *anyone* do to me?"

He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. It's nothing but a certain fact. Thanks be to God.