

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/7/2009, Holy Trinity Sunday
Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17
“Moving on in Life”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My beginning text this morning is from Romans Chapter 8 -- the same Chapter we considered last Sunday. This time, I want to lift up St. Paul's call to Christian boldness. He invites us to take stock of our status as “children of God,” and so, to have no fear:

¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back *into fear*, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God... (Romans 8:15-16, NRSV)

To praise this blessed assurance that we are adopted into God's family and therefore are entitled to confidence in life, and to pay tribute to today's high festival of the Holy Trinity, I am aiming to give now a Trinitarian meditation on the idea of “moving on in life.” I have a certain Bible passage in mind for that. It comes from the missionary testimony of St. Paul to the Athenians, and it goes this way:

²⁸For in him we live, and move, and have our being... (Acts 17:28, KJV)

I like this saying because it expresses the nearness of God to us. We “live and move and have our being” *in him*. St. John Chrysostom expresses the intimacy between God and you and me with the charming phrase “neighbors.” Let me read the passage for you:

He is so near, that without Him we live not: “for in Him we live and move and have our being.” (v. 28.) “In him;” to put it by way of corporeal similitude, even as it is impossible to be ignorant of the air which is diffused on every side around us, and is “not far from every one of us,” nay rather, which is in us... For he says we are God's offspring, i.e. God's own, His nearest neighbors as it were. (Chrysostom, on Acts 17)

Let us, then, enjoy the idea of moving on in life with “our nearest neighbors,” at our side: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit going with us, accompanying us in our transitions. I mean to discuss this idea from beginning to end, starting with people who are happy and setting out in life on adventures, like young Maggie Luthar, and ending with those who have died and moved on to heaven, like two elderly Christian gentlemen for whom we mean to give thanks in prayer this morning: Donald Hazel, whom many of you knew in this congregation and about

whom Lisa Roberts once mentioned that he had eyes that were “as blue as the Montana sky,” and The Rev. Glenn Stone, who was one of my fathers in the Lord here in the New York Synod and who died just yesterday. So, those are the beginning and the end: those who are happy and setting out on adventures and those who have died or to whom death draws near. And in the middle are most of us. This middle time: it too is important, maybe especially important. We are neither going anywhere adventuresome, nor are we near to death as far as we know. We are just carrying on, through the great quiet times of life. I mean to discuss this middle time of life using the happy story of Caleb, one of the brave and faithful spies Moses sent to check out Canaan. For each of us, whatever our changes and transitions, I want us to be encouraged by the thought that we have our nearest Neighbors with us day by day in this life.

So, let me begin with those who are happy, on the threshold of adventures. Many of you will remember Louise Schalow, of blessed memory. Once upon a time I was driving her somewhere. I do not recall the details, just that we were driving on the Triborough Bridge and Louise sighed with contentment and with longing as she noticed one of the great airplanes taking off from LaGuardia Airport. She laughed and said that every time she saw a plane, she wished she were there! She loved to travel. She loved to be up and about and on to something.

And that comes our way, sometimes in life. We are up and about and setting out on adventures. So it is for our member Maggie Luthar. At the end of this liturgy, we are planning to pray the prayers of Farewell and Godspeed as she sets out for Aspen, Colorado for the summer, and then Norway for nine months, and then perhaps onwards to Banff, Canada. Life is long and we certainly hope to see her again and then we will be happy. But for now, she is moving on. Not long ago, another of our young members, Russell Collins, likewise set sail for far shores, off on the adventure of moving to Texas.

But the thing about adventures is that, by definition, they carry with them risk and uncertainty. They include fun, but also the unknown. But my theme in this sermon is that not *everything* is unknown for those moving on in life. Indeed, the Christian adventurer has a right to know something very glorious: that the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit go with her, go with him. And they are the best Company, the nearest Neighbors. The Holy Trinity has sworn himself, for example, to Maggie when she was baptized, right here at Immanuel Lutheran Church, and therefore no matter where she roams on this earth, she will be heading into His territory. This earth, as faraway and as strange as it sometimes is, is nonetheless nothing but home for God and therefore home for Maggie too, in the company of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Who are these nearest neighbors? Well, you know well the story of Jesus. He is the only begotten Son of God. He loves Maggie and he loves each of us more than any of us can love one another. His heart breaks when we suffer and he means to fix it, even if he must labor for a long time ahead to do so. His heart breaks when he sees us doing wrong and he appeals to us to forsake sin, which drags us down so low. He loves us so much he died for us and would do it all over again, as he promises us in the Blessed Sacrament.

But is not just this Neighbor, the Son, Jesus, who loves us. Being a father, I am stunned and humbled perhaps even more by the love of the Father and the Holy Spirit for us. Listen again to that Gospel verse we love so much. It is from this morning's Gospel Lesson, John 3:16:

¹⁶For God so loved the world that *he gave* his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

We are speaking of a mighty love here. It is not just that Jesus loved you and me enough to die for us, but also that the Father and the Holy Spirit consented to this. Such love for Maggie and for us must be deep and profound, that the true God would give his only Son for her, for us.

Your nearest neighbors are God the Father who created you, God the Son, who died for you and would do it again, you mean that much to him. And I mean the Holy Spirit who is at work in you, appealing to you, tugging at your heart, crafting you toward saintliness, indeed drawing the whole of creation toward the goal the Father had in the beginning that we should live in a world of peace and health and joy with sorrow and mourning fleeing away.

Be reckless then in your adventures, Maggie and each of us. Be reckless in the sense that you should be reckless in your loving and in your striving for the good. Be entirely carefree and unconcerned in any ultimate way about what will happen to you if you spend yourself on love after the manner of Christ, for you have good Neighbors to bear you up on their mighty wings.

Next, let us consider those who are at the end of their travels. As I earlier mentioned I am thinking now of Donald Hazel and Pastor Glenn Stone. But it is easy to recall others who have died, including our member Alan Hoffman who died so recently.

Sometimes, things work out that we have some warning that death is drawing near. If so, I hope to be there at your bedside to say the final prayers.

I was out of town when Alan Hoffman was dying, and so Carol said the final prayers for Alan and comforted Christine and Abby. The thing about those final prayers is that they say one last time what has always been true for us, that we living and move and have our being in the Triune God, who has been with us so far and will shepherd us all the way into the Kingdom.

Let me read for you two of the final prayers, and as I do so, note the reference to our nearest Neighbors, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let us imagine saying the prayers for Donald Hazel. I could not do those prayers, for he died in his home town of Oaks, North Dakota. But if I had been there, I could have said these prayers:

P Donald, our brother in the faith, we entrust you to God who created you. May your return to the one who formed us out of the dust of the earth. Surrounded by the angels and triumphant saints, may Christ come to meet you as you go forth from this life. Christ, the Lord of glory, who was crucified for you, bring you freedom and peace. Christ, the High Priest,

who has forgiven all your sins, keep you among his people. Christ, the Son of God, who died for you, show you the glories of his eternal kingdom. Christ, the Good Shepherd, enfold you with his tender care. May you see your redeemer face to face and enjoy the sight of God forever.

C Amen.

4. The minister lays his hand on the head of the dying:

P Donald, child of God, go forth in the name of *God the Father* almighty who created you; in the name of *Jesus Christ*, Son of the living God, who redeemed you; in the name of the *Holy Spirit* who was poured out upon you. May you rest in peace and dwell forever in the paradise of God. Amen.

I think that is the best and the kindest thing we can do for a brother or sister Christian: to calmly let the names of our nearest Neighbors sound forth as we take leave from this world.

Such confidence is compatible with deep grief at the passing of the loved one. Why, think of the St. Paul's farewell conversation with the elders at Ephesus. He is on his way to Jerusalem, mindful that he might well die there or elsewhere. He seems to feel that death is soon upon him:

²²And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, bound in the Spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there; ²³except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God... ³⁶And when he had spoken thus, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷And they all wept and embraced Paul and kissed him, ³⁸sorrowing most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they should see his face no more. And they brought him to the ship. (Acts 20:22-28, RSV)

Note that this is the same Paul who teaches us in today's text to be brave, to not fall back into fear, and to trust in our status as children of God. Aye, that is all true. But also it is true that God has given us human hearts. We are not sticks nor stones that we should remain unmoved by the loss of our loved ones, even though in the background there is the great comfort that our loved ones travel on in the company of their nearest neighbors, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And let me conclude now by speaking of those of us who are stuck in the middle. We are neither setting out on some adventure, nor are we near to death as far as we know. We are simply living, trying to fulfill our duties, trying to carry our responsibilities as best we can.

Still, no matter how stable we are, there are moves and transitions for us. Some of you might be starting a new job, with all the hope and nervousness of that. Some of you might have just received troubling news about your health or might be in the midst of medical battles few of us know about. Some of you might be falling into or

out of love. Some of you are setting off for college. Some of you are steeling yourself for the empty nest. Some of you are in a midlife crisis, grieving that you are not the young person you once were.

Whatever the quiet journeys we now face, even though we might travel nowhere at all, but simply stay and continue in our present course, let me commend to us the example of that old spy Caleb. You can read about this in Joshua 14. Caleb was one of two brave and faithful spies who brought back the strong message that though Canaan was filled with mighty enemies for Israel, nonetheless, Israel could dwell there, fight her battles if need be, and prosper, because the God was Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was with her.

In the particular passage I want to now lift up, Caleb is an old man. His days as a spy are long past. Yet, Caleb remains strong -- strong in body and strong in spirit. He is ready and eager for each new day lying before him. Listen to his testimony:

⁷I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadeshbarnea to spy out the land; and I brought him word again as it was in my heart. ⁸But my brethren who went up with me made the heart of the people melt; yet I wholly followed the LORD my God. ⁹And Moses swore on that day, saying, 'Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance for you and your children for ever, because you have wholly followed the LORD my God.' ¹⁰And now, behold, the LORD has kept me alive, as he said, these forty-five years since the time that the LORD spoke this word to Moses, while Israel walked in the wilderness; and now, lo, I am this day eighty-five years old. ¹¹I am still as strong to this day as I was in the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war, and for going and coming. (Joshua 14:6-13, RSV)

Eighty-five years old and he says that he is still as strong as ever. Now, Caleb's wife, bless her, might disagree. She might note the ways in which he has become more frail, how he is not as limber as before, cannot lift as much as before, moves more slowly, and that his hair is now thin and grey. But no matter to Caleb! His spirit is still strong! He still believes that his nearest Neighbor is close at hand, and he means to live each day before him with gusto!

This is what I have wanted for Maggie and for each of us. We are all moving on in life, one way or the other. We are like birds in flight. We are moving. But if we be birds in flight, then it is my joy to close with the promise of one of our nearest Neighbors. And so Jesus says this:

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. ³⁰But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31, KJV)

It is the promise of our Lord Jesus that as we go, remember that we go with God, even the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever, world without end. Amen.