

7-11-21
Pentecost 7
Ephesians 1:3-14
Communion

I Didn't Do It!

It's happened to any of us who have ever had kids at home. If we've had our kids and some of their friends, it's probably happened more often. You leave them alone for the briefest of times so you can go check on the laundry or something in the kitchen, and you come back into the den to find it strangely quiet there. Then you round the corner and find a huge mess in the middle of the room. Maybe it's relatively simple. The chips and salsa you had brought in for them to eat while they watched a movie. Good, quiet ways to entertain themselves. But you round that corner and see chips and salsa all over your new couch and all over the rug in front of it. They see the look on your face before you can say a word. "I didn't do it!" one of them insists. If it's siblings in the room, they probably point the finger at the most defenseless one of the bunch. "I didn't do it. It must have been him!"

Sometimes the damage is more serious. Things get broken. Things get destroyed beyond repair. Sometimes valuable things. Sometimes things of sentimental value. But, sooner or later, mom and dad come home, and the day of reckoning comes. "I didn't do it!" is the first response, but everyone involved knows it's not so. Who else was here? And, of course, knowing you're not supposed to have company when your parents are not home, you can't go any further down that road. How did this happen? Then, of course, you go to your next line of defense: not only did I not do it, but I don't have a clue who might have! I don't know!

Bill Keane was a cartoonist who spent most of his career drawing and writing a cartoon in the Sunday and daily paper called The Family Circus. That cartoon features a family with several kids, not unlike the family of the guy who drew it for years. The adventures and misadventures that happen in that strip day after day are pretty much the same ones we've all had in our own experience. His son draws new versions of it these days, and the second generation picked right up where his dad left off. Every so often, something gets toppled, a lamp gets broken, things get scattered, and the response is always the same: "I didn't do it!"

I'll leave you to reminisce about whether you got away with that or not. I never did. But I've already done enough confession for one service, so I'll say no more about it. "I didn't do it" in that context is, hopefully, a phase we've grown through. I can think of several adult situations in which grownups try to use that youthful excuse, but they rarely get away with it.

I'd like for us to think about that clause in a more positive way, hopefully, a way that helps us recognize and be thankful for God's providential care in our lives.

There is a small, Presbyterian College up in rural West Tennessee that most of you have probably never heard of. We called it Bethel College for years. It, like many other schools, achieved University status a few years ago, so, while it's technically Bethel University now, it is still Bethel College to many who know it. It is not large, but it serves a role in its part of the country. Like a lot of schools its size, it has struggled many times. But it continues and will, hopefully reopen for some kind of normal school year in a few weeks. When students arrive on campus next month, they will be greeted by the official seal of the school. It features a picture of a log cabin which is where the school started. It also features another picture—of a current central building on campus, not new by any stretch, but a step up from that cabin. And the motto of the school arches above both. It says, "On the faith of our fathers we have risen!" This is their way of affirming, as people walk through campus and leaf through

catalogues and class schedules and make plans for futures based on the education they will receive there, that whatever good comes from what happens there is not by accident, and it is not only because of the efforts of the faculty and administrators and students who will gather there this term. In short, they are saying, "We didn't do all this! What happens here is directly tied to those who went before us, those who worked and sacrificed to hold things together during difficult times and to pass this ministry on to us. We didn't do this. We received much from those who went before us, and we will build on that and try to leave something for those who come after us.

Writing to Christians in Ephesus, some wise and faithful guide, probably Paul, brings the same message to them and to us. The words we read from Ephesians this morning seem to overflow with thanksgiving and praise to God for all that God has done for those people way back then, and, by extension, all the things God continues to do for us. Listen to some of that list again:

God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. He chose us before the foundation of the world. This was all because of his own good pleasure, not because of anything in us that made us worthy of such gifts. God has made his will known to us. We don't have to wonder if God is for us or against us. God has clearly shown that his will is to save us and to live in relationship to us. God has marked us with the seal of the Holy Spirit to assure us that we are his people in this life and that we will be his people in the life to come. The list goes on of all the things God has done and continues to do to make it possible for us to live lives of peace and hope and contentment. That list is so effusive, so grand and glorious, that it makes us wonder if the writer is going overboard trying to convince someone that what he says is true.

This is most likely exactly what he's doing. It was not an easy thing to be a Christian in a place like Ephesus, or anywhere else, in those days. The Romans were in charge of daily life for people then, and they could care less what they believed about

Jesus or about God's grace. Their Law required loyalty to the Emperor, and anything that tried to replace or circumvent that was against the law. So many early Christians practiced their faith in secret to avoid conflict or punishment. And then there was the ongoing struggle between Christians and Jews. Our Christian faith came out of the Hebrew tradition, and hoped to convince those whose faith they had shared that this was God's plan, God's way to bring hope and peace to everyone. But many would not and could not believe. So families divided. Communities divided. Many who followed Jesus and those who taught about him in these early days did so not only in threat of Roman authority, but in the threat of family rejection and alienation. Churches that met in secret didn't conduct evangelistic campaigns or recruitment drives. They struggled, but they remained faithful in the midst of their struggle. It was not uncommon for early Christians to decide that even though they believed what they heard and drew strength from it, sometimes it was just too much to expect of them, and many didn't stay around. It is to these Christians, tired and weary and unsure of their future, that the letter to the Ephesians tries to speak hope and confidence, assurance and hope.

Reminding them of all that God has done for them and of all God continues to do, there is nothing in today's text that indicates that these people had achieved any of their station by their own effort. Never does it say, "Don't lose heart. Look at all you've accomplished. Now suck it up and keep on keeping on!"

Everything they know in the way of hope and security comes from God. It is God who has blessed them with spiritual blessings. It is God who accepts them as children. It is God who sent Jesus to redeem them and us by the faithful witness of Jesus. God who forgives. God who lavishes grace upon grace on us. It is God who promises us everlasting life and a share of the inheritance that belongs to all the children of God.

In short, they didn't do it! As bleak as their condition might appear when this letter seeks to encourage them, there is hope

for better days, a future not based in their own effort, but in the faithfulness of God.

The people from Ephesians are our spiritual ancestors, and we share a spiritual DNA with them that connects their struggle with ours and our struggle with theirs. Most of us have been living this life of faith for long enough that we've come to terms with how we got here. We didn't do it! Whether we have always known the faith as a foundation for our lives or we came to this life in a more dramatic way, most of us know that even the decision to turn to Jesus was not one we made all on our own. Somehow God's Spirit found its way into our lives, rebellious or apathetic as they may have been, and that Spirit sparked a need in us that only God could meet. However we found our way into God's family, and regardless of how many branches of it we've experienced, we know the truth of the hymn we sometimes sing: Surely it is God who saves me. So we will trust in him and not be afraid.

For most of us the Church has always been a place and a source of security and hope, a place where we knew we belonged even when life got hard.

The past year and a half has given most of us pause. The Church, like most other things we thought we could depend on to support us, is different as we emerge from the strange events we call pandemic. Recovery is slow. Just about the time we think we're done with all that, then comes this variant and that one. Now there are new warnings about gathering in groups. Just about the time we had convinced many that it was safe to return and to do the things that add meaning and purpose to our lives, now Dr. Dobbs says those of us of a certain age need to be careful again. Alabama and Mississippi find ourselves competing again, but this time not on the football field (that'll come again in September) but in our competition to see who can be at the bottom of the vaccination numbers. So it appears that it will be a while yet before we see everyone back among us, before we experience the things we depend on to sustain us and to keep us growing in faith.

The Ephesian reminders of God's faithfulness, then, are for us as much as they ever were for them. As we sit and wring our hands about what the future will be, we need to be reminded of all that God has done and continues to do. God continues to bless us with spiritual blessings. They just in different packaging than we're accustomed to. We continue to ground or worship and the life or congregation in God's Word, which is always a Word of grace and of truth and of hope. As we look longingly on how things were and think surely there ought to be something we can do to get back to that, God reminds us that however good those days might have been, we didn't do them. God did. And God will guide us into whatever the future will be. Like many of you, I hope that comes in forms we know and understand, but I also struggle to be faithful enough to remember that this is God's world and God's Church, and that even my life belongs to God. And that God knows how all this will end, what the Church will be. And God will guide us to participate in it, maybe even in ways we haven't experienced yet.

These are not easy things to consider. We all want what we want the way we want it. But we also need to remember who's in charge here. I learned a long time ago that God is far better able to handle my life and our life together than we are.

Today is not the day we normally come to the Table. We've adjusted that schedule because I wasn't here last week. It always amazes me how God moves and acts among us. There are few places where we experience the truth about ourselves more clearly than at the Table. Most of us know that, by our own effort, we have no right to be here. But God looks past our failings and invites us to come to this table, unworthy as we are. And when we come, just as when we gather at other tables with beloved family or friends, we know we belong. We also know that getting here is nothing we did on our own. I didn't do it. You didn't do it. But God did. And just as we learn to trust that welcome, God invites us to trust him to guide us through these uncertain days to a future we have not yet imagined. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Loving and Faithful God, we gather here in hope. Some things are beginning to look and feel like things we know: people are traveling, families are gathering, we see each other without masks. But there is still threat and danger around us, so help us to continue to be vigilant and hopeful as we move forward. We remember where we have been in the past months and now years, and we trust in you to guide us from this point forward. Help us to celebrate gathering with friends and family, with our congregation and with those who come our way. But keep us mindful of many who still suffer: some physically, some from fear and uncertainty, some with uncertainty about jobs, and some with uncertainties we don't know. Help us to remember what we have learned in all this, to be thankful for grace and mercy we have received and given, for renewed confidence in and dependence on your mercy. We give you thanks for the faith you instill in us that gets us through these and all the things we don't understand. Remind us that you are always with us, and help us to be thankful.

Help us to be here for one another. We pray today for Jon Turner and his family in the loss of his mother, our sister, Phyllis, in recent days. We pray for others who have lost ones they love. We rejoice with June Moak in the birth of a great-grandson, and in the promise of more to come. We are mindful of many who struggle with health issues of various kinds. Guide those who plan and deliver their care. Give those who suffer confidence in those who treat them, but, even more, give them confidence in your healing presence in them.

We pray for our community, our nation, and the world as we continue to try to heal division, to find common ground that allows us to live together in peace, and to try to make this world a better place for us to bring children into the world and see them thrive and flourish.

We pray for all who live in institutions of long term care and for those confined to their homes. Let us never forget them. Help us to include them in our circle of concern.

Be with those who travel. Give the refreshment and hope and bring them back ready for renewed service in your Church and wherever else you call us to serve.

We pray for your Church, O God. Keep us faithful and attentive to your call so that we can follow wherever it is that you call us to be and to serve.

We pray all these things through Jesus Christ, who came to show us your love and didn't stop until he had shown it to us in ways we can understand and believe. Amen.