

GOD'S DEPENDENTS

Text: John 14:15-21

(Acts 17:29-31)

LHUMC 5/25/14

I. Introduction

- A. Does anyone here do your own taxes? (I do because I'm too cheap to pay someone else to do it. So far that's worked out okay in that I haven't been audited.)
1. One of the difficulties I've had in doing taxes over the past few years has to do with our kids.
 2. Specifically, they have reached that age when I have to figure out if they should still be listed as dependents.
 3. When your kids reach that age, where they are sort of independent and sort of not, how do you figure that out?
 4. I've read the 1040 instruction book, where it talks about how to determine that, and like most of that book, my eyes glaze over pretty quickly.
 5. So basically, over the last couple of years, I've done what I've done and hoped for the best!
 6. In all of this, I admit to some mixed emotions.
 - a) On the one hand, you want your kids to be independent, financially and otherwise.
 - b) On the other hand, I'm bummed to lose those deductions.
 - c) For I, like most of you I'm sure, am perfectly willing to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but I'm always trying to render as little as possible!
- B. I share this because any time I read the gospel of John, particularly the 14th chapter, I start to think about what it means to be a dependent.
1. As Jesus shares these words with his disciples about what will happen when he is gone, his real concern seems to be that they will consider themselves still to be dependents of his.
 2. Today we hear him remind them that when he is gone some day, "I won't leave you like orphans."

3. A little later, he says, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”
 4. And it has been said that the theme of the entire book of John is that Jesus is preparing the disciples for when he is no longer going to be personally with them.
 5. And with that theme in mind, unlike we earthly parents who try to teach our kids to be independent, to me it sounds almost like Jesus is teaching his children, these disciples, to stay dependent on him, even after he’s gone.
 6. You could even say that he is defining what a dependent looks like in the Kingdom of God.
 7. As I’ve pondered this, and read over the gospel of John more this week, one of the things I’m realizing is that sometimes we are as confused by Jesus’ definitions of what it means to be a dependent in his kingdom as I am when I read how the IRS defines dependents in this earthly kingdom.
 8. I’m realizing that living as we do in this culture that teaches and celebrates our own personal independence, it’s hard to grasp what it means and what it looks like to be completely dependent on God.
 9. As we all have experienced, so many times as we go through life, there are so many times when we have to make choices, and it seems like so often we are pressured to make decisions that put our personal independence first at the expense of being God’s dependent.
- II. And as I’ve read and re-read today’s passages and others, particularly in John’s gospel, I can see why it’s difficult sometimes as Jesus lays out fairly specifically, what it takes to be dependent on God. Based on what we’ve heard today, here is a part of that list:
- A. First, we need to remember that as we go through life, there is this part of God that dwells within us—it is called the Holy Spirit.
1. When Jesus says to his disciples that when he is no longer physically with them, the Holy Spirit will come and remind them of everything he had taught them, that resonates with me and probably with any parent that has sent a kid out into the world.

2. As a parent, your greatest hope is that your son or daughter, when out on his or her own, is faced with some choice to make, will remember what you taught them.
 3. At those critical moments, you just hope that they will hear that little voice that is yours reminding them of what is important in life.
 4. When your child does that, it is a sign that however independent they may think they are, they still are dependent on their parents.
 5. For any of us, hearing that little voice of God at those moments when we have a choice to make, is a sign of being a dependent of God.
 6. Actually, you could say that that little voice is God, in the form of the Holy Spirit.
 7. So call it teacher, counselor, advocate, any of those great Biblical names for the Holy Spirit. Call it “little voice within” if that’s how you’ve experienced it, call it the “go between God”, which is what I once heard someone call it-- whatever you call it, the Holy Spirit is that which dwells within us that we might be fully dependent on God, even when we are out there in the wild, wild, world that so tempts us to be independent.
- B. A second key as Jesus unpacks what it means to be a dependent of God has to do with obedience.
1. Which seems like a no-brainer, to say that when we are dependent on someone, we are obedient to them.
 2. But as we live life, struggling with staying obedient to the one we claim to be dependents of, we know that sometimes talk is cheap.
 3. Two things to know about John, whether it’s in his gospel or the letters that he wrote.
 - a) The first is that for John, “obedience” and “dependence” are pretty much the same thing.
 - 1) To claim to be “dependent” on God on Sunday morning and then being rather “disobedient” to God the rest of the week, doesn’t cut it for John.
 - 2) He would call you a hypocrite at best if that’s the way you are trying to live.

- b) And the other thing is that if you were to ask John “what love has to do with it” when it comes to obedience, he would say “everything”.
 - 1) In John, Jesus always links obedience (and therefore dependence) to love. He always emphasizes that the most authentic and powerful way to show your obedience and therefore your dependence to him is to love your neighbor.
 - 2) And here is what John writes in his first letter: “God is love. If we keep on loving others, we will stay one in our hearts with God, and he will stay one with us. (That’s dependence). If we truly love others and live as Christ did in the world, we won’t be worried about the day of judgment. A real love for others chases those worries away...If we say we love God and don’t love each other, we are liars...The commandment that God has given us is: “Love God and love each other!”
 - 3) It’s kind of interesting that John boils down the two greatest commandments of Jesus into one, or even to one word—that word being “love”.
 - 4) So if you don’t love, you aren’t obedient. And if you aren’t obedient, you aren’t a dependent of the one who loved you first.
- C. And then the other point Jesus makes is that as dependents, we really are fully dependent on God for all of our sustenance and support.
 - 1. And again, this seems pretty obvious.
 - a) Even though I don’t fully understand the IRS definition of a “dependent”, in a sense I know one when I see one.
 - b) If I have paid the majority of the freight for my kids the previous year, then I feel pretty confident in listing them as a dependent at the top of my 1040 form.
 - c) And we would say the same thing about being dependents of God—we’d say that if we truly rely on God, if we truly owe everything we have to God, if God is our sole means of support, then we are His dependents, right?
 - 2. And that argument works great until we take a look at our lives to see if they really reflect that.

- a) If we make all of our financial plans and decisions based on the fact that it all came from God, then the argument works okay.
- b) If we understand that if we really are God's dependents then everything we have we owe to him, and we live accordingly, then that argument works okay.
- c) Like it or not, while I may not understand what a dependent is according to how the IRS defines it, the Bible gives a pretty clear definition of what a dependent is. A couple of examples:
 - 1) A rich young man comes up to Jesus and asks him what it takes to be one of his dependents, and Jesus says, "Sell everything you have and give the money to the poor." And we think, "If that's what it takes, how much of a dependent am I?"
 - 2) Another time he says, "Don't store up treasures on earth...your heart is where your treasure is." And we think, "If my treasure isn't in my bank account or retirement account, but in my heart, how much of a dependent am I?"
- d) Say what you want about Jesus, but what is abundantly clear is that his definition of a dependent is far simpler than the IRS. Not easier, but simpler.

III. Conclusion

- A. Willimon makes this observation: "The human animal is dependent upon its parents longer than any other animal on the face of the earth. We humans are born as frail, vulnerable, needy, and dependent creatures. Other animals are born with a more robust set of instincts. Within a few days after birth, a few hours for some, other animals are up and about. But not humans. We remain dependent, needing parental instruction for just about everything, at least everything that makes us human in the first place. We were created to be dependents." (*Pulpit Resource*, April-June 2008, p.19)
 - 1. "We were created to be dependents". How counter-cultural is that? We who work so hard to make our children independent, who so often buy in to the notion that independence equals success.
 - 2. How against the societal grain is it to understand that God never removes us from his list of dependents.

3. And the great irony in all of this is how freeing it can be when we finally realize that no matter how old we are or where we are on our faith journeys, that we are all fully dependent on God, not just for the material things, but for other even more important things like forgiveness and grace and love.
- B. So today we give thanks that we because Jesus did not leave us as orphans, that makes us children of God. This God who created us to be dependents. Which makes us not just children of God, but God's dependents. Thanks be to God for this gift of dependence.