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John 20:19-31
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[19]When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked because they were afraid, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." [20]After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. [21]Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." [22]When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. [23]If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." [24]But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. [25]So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."
[26]A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." [27]Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." [28]Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" [29]Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." [30]Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. [31]But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

When I was in high school, I started going back to church.

I had stopped when I was about 12 because that was the age I could finally speak up and tell my mother that it really wasn't for me. My older brother Jeff wasn't going, my father didn't go, so why should I? I couldn't see how spending a couple of hours at church added anything to my life.

And even more, it didn't make sense to me. I guess I was a pretty classic Doubting Thomas.

But then, when I was a sophomore in high school, some friends had invited me to their youth group and that had actually been fun. After attending youth group a few times, they invited me to join them at church on Sunday morning.

I was doubtful, I didn't have any great expectations that my view of church would change. But these guys were my closest friends, I liked spending time with them, so I was tempted. It was only when they

invited me to come to their Sunday school class that I finally gave in.

“Ok,” I said, “I can do that.” They told me where the class was held and on Sunday morning, that's where I went.

And there was nobody there.

Of course, I had gone early. Those of you who know me know I subscribe to the “If you’re on time; you’re late” club. So, I started walking about the church, and as I was walking down one of the halls, a young man in his twenties walked toward me and as he passed me, he asked, “Can I help you find something?”

I later learned that this was the associate pastor in charge of youth and… in the years to come… he would help me find lots of things.

His name was Bob Sanders. He was a recent graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary.

And the church I wandered about aimlessly in that morning was the First Presbyterian Church in Boulder. Bob was my first pastor, well the first with whom I had any meaningful relationship and, I suppose, a lot of things I've done were modeled after Bob.

My first mission trip was led by him; the first time I ever preached on a Youth Sunday, it was Bob who helped me with my first sermon; when I was trying to decide about where to go to college, it was Bob who advised me. Naturally, when I started thinking about seminary, it was Bob who guided me to Princeton.

When Bob was at Princeton, he had met a young woman from Westminster Choir College and married her before moving to Boulder. So, when I met a young woman from Westminster Choir College . . . well… I probably had a lot more reasons to marry Erin than Bob… but you get the idea.

Had I not met Bob that day, I may never have gone to Princeton, which meant I likely wouldn’t have

applied to the job in Kansas, and it was, in part, the job in Kansas that led to my call here.
So, as you can see, that invitation to Sunday school was an invitation to a lifetime I might never have lived.

Bob retired a few years ago from the Lake Oswego Presbyterian Church is suburban Portland, and then, earlier this year, he passed away from cancer.

And there are things that Bob said years ago that still echo in my mind. That might surprise him, as it does me.

It has happened to me more than once that one of you has come up to me and said, "Remember when you said in a sermon about five years ago . . ." And I may have no memory of saying that at all. But I do trust that at times the Holy Spirit uses my words, imperfect as they are, to speak to you.

One of the concepts that I learned from Bob is about being "**independently dependent**."

When we are young, we are dependent on our parents and on others for our life and support. Our parents give us food and clothing and shelter. They take care of us and in a very real sense we are dependent on others to survive. We are children. But eventually we grow up. And one of the characteristics of adulthood is independence. I remember well when Brandon came home after his freshman year of college and made the decision that he didn't want to go back. He didn't like the restrictions of college life. He didn't like professors telling him what he was supposed to study, he didn't like having to get up at a particular time for class, go eat at a particular time. He told me "Dad, I just want to be independent." So, he moved out and moved into a friend's basement in Kalamazoo and got a job cooking and waiting tables. But he would come home occasionally to do his laundry and get

a meal. But one time he came home with a big load of laundry needing to get it done. But Erin and I were in the midst of doing laundry for the rest of the family and we weren't willing to stop so he could do all of his. And he asked, “Well Dad, can you do it for me.” And I said, “No I can't. There are laundromats all over town. I'm sure you can do it there. This is part of what it means to be independent.” He was so mad. But he was learning to be independent. In a couple of weeks, he’ll turn 35, and he does a pretty good job at being independent. He doesn't ask us for money, he makes his own decisions about jobs and time and money and relationships. He will occasionally call me and ask my advice on something, but he's pretty independent. But sometimes although he may not really need me and his mother, he wants us to be involved in his life. He will ask for help on his taxes or advice about his car or his job. He's more than independent, he has become “independently dependent”.

He has made the choice that he wants us in his life, that he wants us involved, that he wants a family, that he doesn't want to be alone. He's independently dependent. The idea that Bob taught me years ago is that faith is like that. We grow up being dependent on God. We believe because we are told to believe, and we do not question it. Other people have told us that God loves us, that Jesus was the son of God and died for our sins and that church is important. And so, we believe them. We are dependent on others to tell us about our relationship to God. But there comes a time when we become independent. We may stop believing. Or, at least, we may stop believing what others tell us about God and we begin to think for ourselves. We decide whether church is important, whether prayer is important. Whether we do any of those things is now up to each one of us. We are independent.

And the funny thing is that God wants that, God wants us to be independent. He wants us to think and believe for ourselves.

Like the parents of independent thinking teen-agers, we are at once exasperated and proud when our

child’s fierce individuality can challenge us and reassures us that they will always have a strong sense of who they are.

So, back to our friend Thomas. He gets a bad rap. Jesus calls him out a bit. How much better is it to just have faith! But I’m willing to loosen this up a bit, not see it as an indictment of Thomas who questions everything.

God doesn't want us to just believe because others told us that this was what we should do. That’s being dependent, God wants us to grow and become independent. But then, if we are independent, then a time may come when we make the decision for ourselves to believe, when we decide to put ourselves in God's hands, not because others have told us that this would be a good thing, but because we love and trust God. We are independently dependent on God. This is Christian maturity, this is what God wants from us, for us to have a relationship with him. He doesn't want us to be unthinkingly believing, he also doesn't want us to be alone, he wants us to be in a mature loving relationship with him. That's what we are growing into, that's Christian maturity.

In a way, Thomas is actually the hero of this story. He’s the one who thinks for himself and makes the decision to worship Jesus, and isn’t that what God wants? He wants us to grow up into the fulness of Christ. To independently put ourselves in his hands because we have experienced his love and have chosen to love in return. I think God wants us to be like Thomas.

That's the idea that Bob taught us in his youth group all those years ago and it's just recently that I think that I'm deciding that Bob was wrong. Well, maybe not wrong, because I do believe that God wants to have a loving relationship with each one of us, a growing mature relationship characterized by communication and trust. But I don't think Bob went far enough. I was struck in reading this passage

from John this week. And this is a passage that I have read many times, and many of you who know the story of my own conversion know that it was these words of Jesus “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” that the Holy Spirit used to strike my heart. But I have always focused on that part of the passage and not on the first part. And I think that the Holy Spirit is key here. We don't talk too much about the Holy Spirit in Presbyterian Churches. We like to talk about God and about Jesus and about faith and love and how to live our lives in the light of our faith. We like to talk as if all of this makes a great deal of sense. And the Holy Spirit doesn't always make sense. We think the Holy Spirit is emotion and not reason. And that makes Presbyterians nervous. We think everything should have a rational explanation, we don't like mystery, things we cannot explain.

In John,’s gospel Jesus comes into the upper room on the evening of the day of his resurrection and he breathes on them. He breathes on them, and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” I said before that I didn't think Bob went far enough with his idea of being independently dependent. This is the step that needs to come next. It is true that God wants a relationship with each of us, but he also wants a relationship with all of us. The next step is interdependence. The first thing Jesus does for the disciples after showing them that it is really him is that he gives them the Holy Spirit. And he doesn't give it to each one of them, that's the point, he gives it to all of them. The Holy Spirit does not just bind them to God, but he binds us to one another. God wants us to have a loving trusting relationship with him, but also with one another. As Christians we don't just have a relationship with God, but with all the rest of God's family. Thomas Merton once said, “Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone, we find it with one another.” The Holy Spirit does not just draw us to God, he draws us together. There is no relationship with God without relationship with that which God loves. And God loves all of us.