

Our (Not So) Secret Weapon

A sermon on Galatians 2:19-21 for Graduation Sunday

by Nancy Raca, Covenant United Methodist Church, June 12, 2016

Graduation Sunday.

Ah....memories! Please turn to your neighbor and share with them where you went to high school and, if you wish, the year you graduated (or hope to graduate). I'll go first....I graduated from East High School in 1985.

How many of you moved out of the home you grew up in after high school graduation?

Where did you go? To college? To a job or marriage? To the military?

Graduations are a milestone. They are a time of transition – of leaving the old behind and striking out into something new. Even if you don't actually do something radically new, the pattern of life you're used to changes. No more lockers, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks.

I was thinking about this recently – about my own transition from high school to college and college to career, and about my own daughter's upcoming graduation – as I was reading this book: *Walk Through the Valley: A Spiritual Journey of a Vietnam*

War Medic. This book was written by our very own Bruce McDaniel, a member of this congregation, and it's not only a riveting and inspiring look at Bruce's Vietnam experience, but it's also a coming-of-age story. It's a look at what happens when a nice young Christian man ventures into the darkest part of the human experience and lives to tell the tale.

Bruce volunteered for the United States Army in 1967 after graduating college. He wanted to understand the Vietnam War firsthand, and he wanted to be present as a Christian in a place of conflict. In joining the Army and going through the rigors of basic training, Bruce quickly learned what it's like to leave one life behind for another, especially when that new life is leading us into a war. A *huge* transition.

Here's what Bruce writes about that time:

"College was not my life anymore. I was part of something different now, something exciting and yet terrifying, something that had been my own choice, yet which meant that my life was now being determined by forces beyond my control...I felt a strange combination of feelings – joy, anxiety, anticipation, grief, aloneness, the fear that I might get so sad that I couldn't handle it anymore – feelings that I could neither understand nor communicate and that caused me to drift farther and farther from my family and friends...I was counting the days until my departure, realizing the awful finiteness of that part of my life that was still predictable, still my own – only so many more chances to do something with my friends, only so many more

dinner at home with my family – only so many more days until the Army, and Vietnam, and the unknown would swallow me again.”

Our graduates here today – Carolyn, Kelan, Alix, Kelsey, Addison, Angelique, Mike, Savanna, Lili, Kristin and Laurie – are setting out on their own journey. For most of them, that journey will never lead to active duty in an overseas military conflict. I pray that wherever they go next in their lives, their physical selves, their emotional selves, and their spiritual selves will be safe and happy.

But every transition comes with a risk. When we leave the safety of our old ways, we *will* encounter difficulties. As we heard in the 118th Psalm today, we *will* face tight circumstances. We will feel surrounded by enemies. We will be pushed so hard that we feel like giving up.

Today, even as our United States service men and women risk their lives in dangerous parts of the world, most of us remain here – in the relative safety of our homes. But even though we here today are not fighting with AK-47s and Army fatigues, we as Christians *are* in fact fighting a war. We are combatants in the *most important battle* ever fought.

Every day, as followers of Jesus Christ, God calls us to resist evil, to fight for justice, to defend ourselves against the temptations of this world and to bring about the Kingdom of God. Every day, secularism advances on our position, drawing us farther

and farther away from the Church and from God. But God calls us to prove that love wins, that grace wins, that *God* will have the ultimate victory.

So as we send our young people on their way from school into the big, wide world, we are in fact sending them to the front lines of this war.

Graduates, as you go forward into your lives, you will be tempted and tried. You will be asked to bargain with the devil. You will have choices – to do the easy thing instead of the right thing, the self-serving thing instead of the generous thing. You will have your heart tell you one thing and your head tell you another. You will be hurt and disappointed and discouraged and you will want to give up.

But here's the good news: you are prepared. You have been through basic training and you are ready to test yourself. You have been taught by Pastor Ann, and this congregation, and your parents, and by the Holy Spirit. Your foundation is solid. You have Jesus on your side. Your *faith* is your weapon and your shield. It is the armor that will repel everything from bee stings to bullets.

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul reminds us that we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God. Our *faith* does that. Paul tells us that when we empty ourselves to be filled with the spirit of God and accept Christ's life as a model for our own, our ego is no longer central! *Christ lives in us!* We are for God, and *God* is for *us!*

This time in your life is the time to go out and see what that really means! Bruce, in describing his own experience of going from the safety of Sunday School to the dangers of war, writes,

“The years I had spent in high school and college hearing and reading about different religious ideas and becoming familiar with the Bible had been preparation. But now there was a war on, and the time was past for books and sermons. I had to explore what being a Christian meant by seeing what I did when shot at and by looking into the faces of dead men, by sharing life with men who walked up and down hills, who slept in the rain, who had to kill or be killed. It was too late for me to sit in comfortable dormitory lounges or church parlors discussing the meaning of sacrifice; I had to learn what that word meant by eating my meals out of cans and by owning nothing but what I could carry on my back.”

We don't all have to go to Vietnam, or Iraq, or Afghanistan, or wherever, but *all* of us – not just recent graduates! – come to a point where we have to put our faith into action. A point where we have to see whether the right and the wrong, the promises and the hope that we learn here in church hold true in the world outside these doors.

Our faith is what helps us through these times. Paul the apostle in Galatians chapter 2, verse 16 tells us that we are made righteous by faith *in Jesus Christ*.

But what happens when our faith falters? We are human, and there are times in our lives when our faith ebbs and flows. Maybe some of you today are sitting wondering if you can truly put your faith in Jesus Christ.

Well, you can. And I hope you will.

But even when your faith wavers, I want you to know that you still have a secret weapon.

You see, our translation today of Galatians tells us that we are justified by faith *in Jesus Christ*. And I believe we are; we are saved by our faith. But, as it turns out, the original Greek is a little ambiguous on this point. Another – equally valid – translation here is that we are justified by the *faithfulness of Jesus Christ*.

We are saved by the faithfulness OF Jesus Christ.

If we prefer this translation, then justifying faith is not a human work – it's not reliant on us, on our imperfect humanity, to save ourselves. We are saved because of the work of Jesus. Because *Jesus* lived according to God's will. Because *Jesus* endured, all the way to the cross. Even when we don't feel we can choose Jesus, Jesus chooses *us*. Jesus chooses *you*.

Jesus, by his faithfulness, has given us the only weapon we need: righteousness before God. And no one, no matter where you go or what you do, can take that away from you.

Bruce writes that "Evil is real, but evil is not the final reality." "Through it all," he says, "something had attracted me to Jesus, had drawn and held me irresistibly. I had not found him; he had found me."

Graduates, and friends of all ages and all life stages, *God is faithful. God chooses you.*

Always. And *that is your secret weapon*