

Sermon Easter 6A - Drive-in Worship

All Saints, Mt. Pleasant

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John 14:15:21

[Jesus said to the disciples:] “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

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“Parting is such sweet sorrow” Who said it? Was it (a) Hamlet, (b) Romeo or (c) Juliet? You would be correct if you answered (c) Juliet. As a kid, that line always puzzled me. Sure, parting is sorrowful, but why is it sweet? Well, as I grew up and learned about romance, I began to understand the roses that can blossom amidst the thorn of bidding adieu.

We all have our own ways to say goodbye. The Juliets among us like to linger, cherish every moment. Some of us like to get it over with quickly, rip the bandaid off. Some of us like to prepare for departure by talking about it, others don't want to even think about it till it's really time. And of course it makes a difference whether we're leaving friends, colleagues or loved ones. When it comes to parting with those nearest and dearest to us, Each individual approach to leavetaking could be categorized into Chapman's famous “Five Love Languages.’

Some of us may value choosing the right Words, others may need that one final Touch, others leave Gifts, focus on spending Quality Time or part with a meaningful Act of Service. Well, according to the Gospel of John, when he gets ready to leave his disciples and return to the Father, Jesus' love language is to do all five. He leaves his disciples with Words - chapters and verses full of words, left for us to savor throughout the years. He spends time with them, at the table, in the garden Teaching, singing, praying with them. He kneels before them, and washes their feet in loving service, And he invites Thomas to reach out and touch his wounds. Then, he leaves them with gifts. Nothing they'll have to worry about carrying on their person, but gifts of peace, encouragement, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This Thursday is Ascension Day, when we commemorate Jesus' return to the Father after remaining for a time among his disciples after the resurrection, and today we hear about one last gift Jesus leaves for his disciples. Ahead of the Ascension, the Gospels describe the post-resurrection encounters Jesus shares with his disciples: greeting Mary Magdalene in the Garden, appearing in the house where the disciples met, visiting with Thomas after he had missed seeing

him, walking with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, even cooking one last meal for them on the beach beside the sea of Tiberias.

In the days following the resurrection, the disciples revelled with joy in the presence of their risen Lord, just bursting with the good news that Jesus Christ was raised. But as he told Mary in the garden, 'Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.' He knows that this time of celebration must come to an end, and that soon they will have to continue this journey without him present in the flesh. "In a little while the world will no longer see me," Jesus tells his disciples today. He is preparing them for the time when the Drama of the Passion and the Wonder of the Resurrection begin to fade, and they have to take those first steps beyond the locked doors and continue on in faith.

"I will not leave you orphaned," he promises them. Even though I am going away, you will not be alone. I have one final gift to give. "I will ask the Father," Jesus assures them, "and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." Jesus, the Word of God, who was in the beginning with God, knew that the time was coming for him to return to his dwelling place before the incarnation. But the Breath of God that moved over the waters of creation, the Holy Spirit's work was just getting started. Upon his Ascension, Jesus said, he'd just have to ask his disciples to sit tight for a little while, and wait for the day of Pentecost when they would start to get an idea of what the wild and wonderful Spirit could do!

When Jesus introduces the Spirit to the disciples in our reading today, he chooses a descriptor that is difficult to define. Throughout the Bible we find slightly different wording among versions in how they translate the original Hebrew and Greek into English. But this one word Jesus uses here may win the award for most widely varying translations. In this version, we read it as Advocate, but other translations choose the words Counselor, Helper, Encourager, Intercessor. The name Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit doesn't really have a good translation outside of the Greek: Parakletos. It literally means "One called to stand beside." That's a little awkward, so biblical scholars over the years have chosen a multitude of words to try to encapsulate the meaning of this term: Mediator, Comforter, Friend.

The one called to stand beside, The one called to speak on behalf of, The Advocate, the intercessor, Mediator, Counselor. Does anything come to mind when you hear these words? I hear legal overtones - do you? Someone called forth to plead your case. one who places themselves in between two parties. The saving work of Christ has often been described in judicial terms. That Christ stands in place of the guilty, That because of his saving actions, the accused avoid punishment and instead are granted pardon. Does any of that sound familiar?

Well if the Spirit is given, as Jesus says, to be for us another advocate, another one like Jesus is for us, then the gift of the Spirit is also gift of that same saving grace, despite our fault, that same abiding mercy "with us forever." Jesus knows that after the season of Easter he must leave them, and go to the Father. He knows these joyous days together will come to an end. But he does not want them to feel abandoned. "I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus promises. I will intercede on your behalf, and for my sake, the Father will send you another intercessor, to be with you forever. "The Spirit of Truth."

You know, I often hear people ask, "Pastor, I understand God and Jesus, but what about the Holy Spirit?" The Spirit is difficult to grasp, and I guess intrinsically so, being spirit, not flesh. The idea is hard to wrap our minds around. We know the Father, the creator of all. We know the Son, our friend and redeemer. But how can we know the Spirit? How

can we see, feel, encounter the one Jesus sent to be present in his absence? By nature, the presence of the Spirit is going to be harder to pin down, but Jesus says, despite our uncertainty, “You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

Jesus tells us that even if it is difficult to perceive, the Spirit of Truth already resides within us. So that when we find ourselves in what feels [right now] like a swirling whirlwind of questions, opinions, speculations and political posturing, we can trust that through our Baptism, we have each been gifted with the spirit of truth: the the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. We may not always see it, we may not always feel it, but we can trust that this gift is within us. If we feel like it’s locked away, the key to access it is prayer.

A colleague in ministry used to describe his time serving as a hospital chaplain, and some of the difficult and heartbreaking situations he would have to walk into as he made his rounds on the floors of the hospital. So often he would feel at a loss of what to say, especially in the midst of bad news or in times of loss. So often, he shared, he had no idea what he was going to say to a patient or a family, even as he walked down the hallway to their room. Whenever he reached a room, as he placed his hand on the doorknob to enter, he said this prayer: “Lord, fill this room with your Holy Spirit, so that when I breathe in, I would breathe in your Spirit, and that when I breathe out, my words would come from you.”

If the Spirit is, as Jesus says, the one who intercedes on our behalf, as well as the breath of God, as we read in Scripture, then one way we can encounter the Spirit is to pray and invite her to inhabit our breath and form our words. When we need the courage to speak the truth in love, when we need the strength to speak in times of crisis, and when we need the humility to fall to our knees in prayer. And, as St. Paul writes, even when “we do not know how to pray as we ought... that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words”

In these times, when we are faced with unspeakable tragedy, or when relationships are experiencing the strain of distance, when we don’t know what to say, or know we shouldn’t say what we want to say, we, like the chaplain, can invite the Holy Spirit to fill the spaces where we are, to fill our lungs with every breath, and by the spirit of God, blow away the fear, uncertainty, or anger threatening to creep in.

“The world...neither sees him nor knows him.” But “You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” The Spirit of Truth is here, within us, Christ’s parting gift to be with us forever: the gift of peace in the storm, the gift of strength when we are weak and to be even the very gift of faith when we’re not even sure how to believe. Thanks be to God.