

6 Easter A 2020
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
A sermon by The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
May 17, 2020

Acts 17:22-31 Psalm 66:7-18 1 Peter 3:13-22 John 14:15-21

Jesus' farewell discourse in the upper room continues.

If you love me ... and we fill in the rest. If you loved me:
You would let me stay up until midnight
Or let me stay out past the curfew you set
You would have said "I'm sorry;"
You would make coffee in the morning
Or leave the toilet seat up ... or down
Or not squeeze the tube of toothpaste from the middle
Or you would load the dishwasher in the way that I know is the right way;

If you love me.

We are not supposed to say that, are we? That "if you love me you would do this" phrase. Counselors and therapists, experts, tell us that the thinking is wrong. Of course, loving our children means giving them rules to keep them from harm, whether the rule is "brush your teeth" or "come home on time" or even "because I said so." We expect our children to abide by our collected wisdom in the form that we try to express it in words and rules.

Jesus' words here sound much more like "because I said so," don't they? If you love me you will keep my commandments. Yes, we will.

Let's look at this. Why do we have commandments? Commandment is a tough word for us; we hear "command" and its negative connotations. Commandments are part of God's grace, God's gift to us. Commandments tell us how to live with one another, how to order our lives. Have no other gods before me. Remember the Sabbath; keep it holy. Honor your father and mother. Do not kill, commit adultery, or steal. Keeping these commandments will not be easy, but in keeping them you will remember me and I will be with you. Following the commandments comes from the love that we have. It is a "when you love me you will naturally [or with difficulty try] do these things."

And the child part of our mind interrupts and voices our fear. This is the voice in us that says “I can’t do these. Following your commandments is too hard, and even when I try I mess up.” And so that voice insists on asking the question:

Will you love me when I don’t keep your commandments? Will you love me, Jesus, when I fail?

You love your children when they fail, right?

And you love your spouse, your companion, even when the toothpaste is squeezed in the wrong place.

God loves us no less than how we are able to love one another. God loves us much, much more than we can ever imagine. Jesus knows that at some point the disciples will feel like orphans. Jesus is gone, and while we expect him to come back immediately, months, then years, then decades then millennia go by and we do not see him. Maybe our yearning hearts are saying even now: “if you loved me you would have come back by now. If you loved me, you would not have left.

We feel orphaned. Jesus left us. We are not sitting behind locked doors in fear of being crucified today. But I would bet that many of us have felt orphaned, left, by great losses in our lives. As a culture we do not deal with loss very well. We have phrases about “pulling up our bootstraps; get over it;” and worse. Jesus does not shy away from our feelings of abandonment. Jesus faces our realities when he reassures us that we are not alone and that he is sending another advocate for us. In fact, we have not been left at all. Even though the Holy Spirit will be sent upon us, we are to remember that the presence of the Holy Spirit has been in existence all the way back to before time, to before there was anything, “when the earth was without form, and void.”

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” The Spirit has been with us since the creation, making order out of nothing, out of what we might call the primordial sea, not the sea of science but of mystery and wonder, creation and the presence of God.

We have never been alone.

We are called to the commandment – there’s that word again! – that John mentions in this gospel: to love one another. Jesus said “love one another as I have loved you.” Remember that this is Thursday night, Maundy Thursday, the night before the crucifixion, the night of the new mandate, law: to love one another.

And in case we think that we will never see Jesus again, he comforts us by letting us know that he is sending another advocate to be with us.

who we try very hard to describe in words. This Spirit, Advocate is: comforter, helper, “have my back” person, stand by me, wisdom, aid in court, counsel, counselor, intercessor, witness, promise, a presence, and is remarkably “Jesus-shaped.”

And so he tells them that he will not leave them orphaned, abandoned, or alone. Instead, he will send to them an Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

And here, dear Working Preacher, is where we might tarry for a moment and offer some good old-fashioned teaching. Because the word employed by John in this passage -- *paracletos* -- and often translated “Advocate” can have several overlapping meanings. It can function in a legal sense, meaning literally one who advocates for you before a court of law. And it can function more relationally by designating one who brings help, consolation, comfort, and encouragement. All of these however, derive from the most basic meaning of the word to “come along side another.”

Two things briefly as we think about how this sense of the Spirit’s work might operate in our congregations this weekend. First, Jesus describes the Spirit as “another advocate” -- Jesus was the first! Jesus, that is, came along side us in the Incarnation that we might come to know and see the otherwise invisible God. (John begins his Gospel just here in 1:1-18.) Second, and as I wrote about at greater length last year, when we come along side each other to comfort and encourage and when we act like Jesus, we living into the Holy Spirit’s invitation and very being.

Which brings me back to my main question: might we function as *paracletes* to each other by coming along side one another not only in times of celebration -- though that is important, too -- but also and especially during times of loss? Might we, in this way, become communities of the Spirit? Might we, in fact, recognize that in coming along side each other to be each other’s advocates we are loving Jesus most fully by conforming our lives to his and keeping his commandments?