

The Spirit of Truth

John 14:15-31

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As we celebrate, this Easter season, the risen Jesus and God's revelation of power over sin and death, the lectionary calendar takes us back, this week, to an experience with the living, pre-risen Jesus, in the gospel according to John.

The gospel according to John was probably written in the early 90s (not 1990s, that's the original 90s) in Ephesus of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). At this time in Ephesus, the early Christians still considered themselves Jews, but met in people's houses to talk about Jesus. Well, the synagogue did not take kindly to that splintering that was taking place, and this new theology, so they began to evict the house churches from the synagogue. At the time John writes, hostility is high, and suspicions reigned. House churches for Jesus the Christ were keeping distance from synagogue on the one hand and Roman temples on the other hand, and taking the time to clarify their identity.

There is a long section in the gospel according to John, which includes our text for today, devoted to clarifying the way things will go, straight from the mouth of Jesus. This section of John is referred to by scholars as the Farewell Discourse, and consists of Jesus' answering disciples' questions, while they're at table together. Jesus tells them he is only with them a little longer, and that where he is going, they cannot come until afterwards. For a while, says Jesus, you're gonna have to be around without me. While you do, Jesus goes on to say, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

John 14:15-31 (NRSV)

15 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 17This 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.

18 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21They 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.' 22Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?' 23Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

25 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. 28You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. 30I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; 31but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

What's gonna happen to us? Asked the disciples. They had given up everything, family and livelihood, to follow Jesus, and now it is becoming clear that Jesus has to die. What's gonna happen to us, when our Lord and savior, keeper and teacher, is gone?

What's gonna happen to us? Asked the house churches in Ephesus, to whom John writes his gospel account. They too had given up everything, family and livelihood and social standing and now synagogue,

they were being thrown out of Judaism, had no place in Roman culture surrounding them, the walls were closing in on them, the walls of religion and state, and there was nothing to do.

What's gonna happen to us? Asked the north shore Presbyterians who picked up the bible together today. Sometimes, when we're alone and don't know what's going to happen, things can feel desperate. You get dropped off for college, having never known life on your own, and you watch your parents drive away from the dorm and your life as you knew it. You've lost your job in a down economy, and have no idea whether your skills can be remarketed these days. Your spouse seems different and distant and turning away. You are sick, really sick, and can't figure your way around it. You feel abandoned, desperate, orphaned, and cannot imagine anything good for yourself. These are very real, truly human, moments when we find ourselves struggling to make sense of our destiny. How do we take care of ourselves in such moments? Who takes care of us? This question was on the lips of the disciples, considering their lives without Jesus, and on the lips of the house churches listening to John, and it's on our lips, too.

Our text for today is Jesus' answer to that very question, that there is never any uncertainty for those "left behind" by Jesus because God's love tolerates no orphans. There is no uncertainty because Jesus gives the disciples a commandment to love, an assurance of presence, and an assurance of destiny.

Love one another, as I have loved you, says Jesus. Love, agape love, says the Greek, which means a self-giving, going-to-be-with kind of love. We need to find the words and the times to say and do the acts of love which cannot be left unsaid or undone. God's kind of love, that goes to be with and loves actively, is the love we are called to, the love we are commanded to practice with our lives, according to John. This is the love we celebrate today, on Mother's Day, the giving love of those who have lived for us and for our children. That is how they will know you are my disciples, says Jesus, they will know by your particular kind of love for one another.

This past Friday, many of us here heard testimony from an impressive young man named Matt. Matt grew up in hardship, and one day found himself a homeless boy. That was when he came across Good News Partners, a mission partner of this church. He recalled being a boy in an empty room, afraid to go outside, afraid to go to school, afraid to be himself in any way. That's when he met the marvelous Good News community, and Rev. Bud Ogle, and experienced a giving, Christ-like love. He couldn't have gotten by without the shelter they provided, but it was being LOVED in that place, that place that this church has worked for 40 years to make possible, is what Matt says gave him the courage to go out, to be himself, and to make a life for himself. It was moving testimony, that you should hear, about the transformative power of love in a young boy's life.¹ That is how they will know you are my disciples, says Jesus, by your love.

Jesus also offers assurance that God's presence will be with the disciples even after Jesus leaves them. God will give you an Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, to teach and remind you of all that I have said. Jesus' departure will bring a new presence to the community, the Holy Spirit, so that the community will have help keeping Jesus' word. We encounter this spirit of truth in our lives, and have eyes to see it once we know what we are looking for.

A boy named Jake once said his own version of the family prayer at a crowded restaurant, his mother tells. "God is good, God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would thank you even more if Mom get us cake for dessert. And liberty and justice for all, amen." Most folks within earshot laughed, except one guy in the next booth. "Pray for cake? What's this country coming to?" Jake heard the old curmudgeon and saw the mean in his eyes, and began to cry. Then a woman who had seen the whole thing came by, and leaned over to the boy and said, "I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer. Too bad that guy never asked God for cake, it can be good for the soul." So of course this good mother bought her family cake for dessert, the answer to their prayers. When Jake saw the cake in front of him, he did something, the mother tells, that

¹ For more information about Good News Partners in Rogers Park, Chicago, see www.goodnewspartners.org.

I'll remember for the rest of my life. He picked up his cake and walked over to the old angry man and placed it in front of him, saying, "Here, this is for you. Cake is good for the soul, and I want you to have mine."²

Jesus also offers the disciples assurance about their destiny, that Jesus is coming back for them. My father and I will come to you and build a home in your midst, says Jesus, we will dwell in your lives here, if you stand firm in your faith.

I am leaving you for a while, but I will not leave you orphaned. The Father will give you another Advocate, the spirit of truth, who abides with you, reminding you of my commandment to love one another. May we witness the Spirit of truth this week, as well as the love that the spirit reminds us to do, and the blessed world that the spirit assures us is on its way.

² Story told by mother Teresa Parker.