

May 21, 2017
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

Never Orphaned, Never Alone

John 14:15-21
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore MD

“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.”

There are times in your life when you know the right thing to do; and though you may not want to do it, you take a deep breath, brace yourself, and do it anyway.

And after doing it you feel much better. You’ve done the right thing. You’ve helped someone; you’ve stood up for what was right.

But you didn’t do it alone. We, in the Christian tradition, don’t point to ourselves alone as the source of what is good and right. We acknowledge that it is not we on our own who are the source of what is good, but God. It is not us alone who discern or do the right thing, but Christ in us. And the closer we stay to Jesus, the more often it is that we can do the right thing, for ourselves and others.

In much of John’s Gospel, Jesus says things over and over, the same thing with different words, to make one point, at the center of which is something that we can experience but can barely begin to explain. It’s a tug at our conscience, an urging to do what is right.

It’s an experience that John and his friends knew well and experienced daily. (Maybe you do, too.) Although Jesus was not physically with them, he was still very much present. Though they could not see him or touch him, his influence still filled both the room and their lives with meaning, joy and hope. Jesus was the ‘elephant’ in the room- the absent friend who, in this case, everyone talked about, and on whom everyone could and did depend on, for life, and more.

John wrote these words some time after Jesus was gone, perhaps 50 years after Christ’s ascension. The entire gospel is then written backwards, from the end to the

beginning, from the Word who existed before all time to the One who was raised from death to reign forever.

John's Gospel speaks words of living hope, written to a community for whom Jesus was a holy memory.

Those in John's community had never met Jesus. Most, if not all, the first disciples were dead. This was a different time and a different place than the village of Capernaum or by the Sea of Galilee where Jesus had ministered and taught.

The huge temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed- the focal point of worship and religious life was gone: a sign for many that the end-times would soon come. But the end-time didn't come.

Life went on- and that was, in some ways, the hardest part of all. What some thought would happen, that the end of the world would come, then and there, didn't happen (obviously). Jesus hadn't returned even when all the signs seemed right. This gathering of believers with John as their spiritual leader felt pushed to the edge of despair, and despair could defeat them. John knew the dangers of despair.

Those who followed Jesus still wanted to be close to him; as close as they could- but they had every reason to feel alone, abandoned, forsaken, rejected- left behind... get it?

So it was that John pulled together many of the things Jesus said into this portion of the Gospel known as "The Farewell Discourses."

Set in the Upper Room gathered with his disciples, Jesus shared wisdom beyond words, beyond understanding, but not beyond experience. His words are organized by inspiration, not by dictation.

"If you love me you will keep my commandments. A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

Now, if the disciples were at all human, they must have been left wondering what all these pearls of wisdom meant, strung together by Jesus' holy breath.

"How can we live up to all this?" the disciples said. Knowing they had a hard time following faithfully even while Jesus was with them, how could they stay in step when he wasn't even around anymore?

You know how it is sometimes that you hear what it is you want to hear- and not

actually what was said?...

What the disciples likely heard Jesus say was, "I am leaving you."

What he did say was this: "I am coming to you." and he went on..."*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ... he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

(again) "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.... the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

It seems like Jesus could not have been more clear about what would happen after his departure, but it left his hearers- and leaves us, scratching our heads...

What does it mean that *he was going/but not going.... that he would be absent, but still present/ that he would no longer be seen teaching and healing, but his teaching and healing would continue... in them — in us.*

Perhaps it's the historical distance we have between John's authorship and our hearing - 2,000 years of changing styles of readings and writings can make a difference- and to gloss that over doesn't help us.

Underneath it all is the truth that Jesus freely acknowledged the contradictions of this world; the fear and the hope, the promise and the pain, the already and the not yet...

Jesus didn't ask the disciples to revere his life as memory but to live with him present and alongside; not as nostalgia- but as a guide for living today and the next day and the next after that.

There is a great church historian, a Catholic scholar whose writings I've read for a long time, named Rosemary Radford Reuther.

She says there are two things the church must do. (Which we are all about today.) One is to pass on the tradition from one generation to another, to tell the story of Jesus to our children and our children's children. But that's not all, she says.

There is a second thing the church must do. Be open to the winds of the Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation. That is different than words alone, deeper than memory. It is something that needs to be filled by the Spirit, with the Spirit, upon whom Jesus relied, as well.

Jesus said to his disciples, "The Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of all that I have said to you." That is, "You

don't know everything yet. You have more to learn. In every generation you will be faced with new questions and perplexities, contradictions and promises.'

Questions have indeed arisen throughout the ages that will continue to be asked. Jesus knew there were questions scripture didn't address. *Does the sun revolve around the earth or is it the other way around? Is the world flat or round? Is there life on Mars?*

Should nuclear weapons ever be used against an enemy?

Can cancer ever be cured?

What is the best way for a society to bear one another's burdens?

Jesus clearly acknowledged that there were some things he had never talked about. "The Spirit will be your tutor," he said, "guiding you into all the truth."

So we are not left alone. Jesus speaks of the Spirit as an Advocate, one who stands alongside us as in a court of law. Sometimes he says Helper, sometimes Spirit of Truth. When Jesus said, "I am coming to you," he didn't mean he would return like a friend from a long trip away. Jesus arrives among us in a different way. He comes to us as we join together.

I need to end with a story. A week and a half ago I visited Yosemite National Park in California. I've never been there before. It is incredible; the sheer cliffs are beyond what you can imagine, you have to crane your neck all the way back to see the top of them; immense walls of rock- straight up, that people love to scale, for real. As I wandered around the visitor center, I happened upon some folks who looked like climbers, with the right shoes, gnarly hands & signs of chalk still on their pants and under their fingernails.

I just had to ask one of them about a quote I've had rolling around in my head for years about mountain climbers...which has always sounded rather odd: "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home."

Although I knew well that these folks climbed solo, I guessed that at least one of them knew something about this reference, from experience. One guy, Ryan, was ready to chat for a minute about it.

He confirmed what I thought, that mountain climbers are tied together –not on cliffs so much but on larger expeditions to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But he shared another piece of the story, too. When things get tough up on the mountain,

when fear sets in, when a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home," they know they are physically connected and committed to one another- and can't just turn around and go home. So they all travel step by step by step, carefully, surely, getting there together.

... To you confirmands- and really, for all of us- this is what church is about. A life of faith can take us up mountains, at times too daunting to scale on our own. Sometimes the whole notion of trusting in Jesus seems crazy. Jesus knew this well. So he reminds us that we're tied together like branches on the vine- or like climbers tied to a rope- linked together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is greater, more loving, more just than we can understand, keeping us moving on the journey of faith, encouraging us when believing seems absurd. "I will not leave you orphaned," said Jesus. "I am coming to you."

The Spirit ties us to Jesus and one to another. We feel a tug on the rope whenever we are tempted to settle for answers that leave us more selfish than generous.

So, confirmands, linked by the group text messages you have (and Snapchat, Instagram- and whatever other apps you use to stay connected)- you will grow and share together in your High School years here.

Many of us have many, many more years together on this journey of faith.

May God continue to bless you and all of us- through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, today and always... in Jesus' name. Amen.