

John 14:15-21

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

18 “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 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.”

## LOVE AND CHANGE

I try to resist using love as a reason to get somebody to do something. “If you love me, you would ... (fill in the blank).” In the movie, Love Story there was a famous line, “Love means you never have to say you’re sorry.”

In other words if you truly love someone you love them just as they are. You don’t try to change them.

I sometimes wonder how many people go into a marriage thinking that they can change their future mate. That doesn’t work so well. In a marriage bad habits are only magnified.

But, today we’re not talking about love on the human-to-human level. We’re talking about love on the divine to human level. And that makes all the difference.

The love of God can change the leopard’s spots. And the love of God as revealed in Jesus can enable us to walk a different path.

## JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

I think this is an important point. Many Christians understand that salvation is by grace through faith. In other words God in Christ forgives us. God saves us.

It is not something that we can do for ourselves. Only God can do this for us. The theological word that we use for this process is justification.

But, fewer Christians understand that the ability to do the right thing is also a gift from God. We dare to follow the commandments of God as revealed in Jesus not because we think that we are so strong that we can do it on our own.

We dare to follow the way of Christ because we believe that His Spirit will enable us to keep his commandments. We call the process of seeking to do the will of God as revealed in Jesus the process of sanctification.

And when we say that we are saved by grace through faith, that means the Spirit of God in Christ enables us to know forgiveness and a new way of living. The Bible tells us if we are in Christ, we are a new creation. The old is passing away and the new is coming.

### A HARD THING TO DO

That's easy to say. It's not so easy to do. The old still has a strong hold on my life.

I don't know about you but I'm not so sure I can love my enemies, do good to those who persecute me and live a life of service on my own.

There are some people that I just don't want to forgive, and there are some I just don't want to serve.

And sometimes I don't want to sacrifice what I want for the cause of Christ. Let somebody else take up a cross and follow Jesus.

I'm just being honest. And I bet some of you feel the same way.

Last week we noted that in John's gospel it took the disciples a long time to understand and accept this challenge to follow the commandments of Christ. Even after seeing the risen Christ and being filled with his Spirit what did those disciples do? They returned to their old way of life.

Instead of proclaiming the gospel, instead of fishing for men and women, they went back to fishing for fish. It took an appearance of the risen Christ to interrupt their settled lives and send them in a new direction. And often the same thing needs to happen to us.

We cannot live in a new way on our own. But, God can change all that. God helps me do what I cannot do on my own.

### THE ADVOCATE

Jesus did indeed tell his disciples that their love would be measured by the extent to which they followed his commandments. But, they would not be alone in their efforts. Jesus would ask the Father and He would send them another Advocate who would be with them forever.

Jesus of course is our first Advocate. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the One who cries from the cross, "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." But, the call for forgiveness did not end on the cross or for that matter with the empty tomb and the risen Christ.

The call for forgiveness continues to echo down the corridors of time and space, and this second Advocate makes it happen. The word translated Advocate in the NRSV means literally, "someone called alongside as a source of help".

Coming to faith is like falling in love. We can't fall in love in the abstract. We can only fall in love with another person.

The same is true with faith. Faith is a relationship with the living Christ and the living God who sent him. Faith only comes when we come to know God in Christ.

And it is the Spirit that makes this presence known. The Spirit is the Advocate who comes alongside us and befriends us and enables us to do what we could not do on our own.

There are many modern examples of this.

When we are in trouble we have an advocate (or a lawyer) who speaks for us and seeks to protect us in a court case. If you are trying to navigate the maze of health care rules and options, there are people who serve as advocates. They come alongside us and help us make wise choices.

If we think that certain laws are unjust, we may support those who speak for us before the legislature. They are our advocates. They seek to protect us and further our cause.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is our Advocate in heaven. He is the great high priest who atones for our sin and yet at the same time knows what it means to be weak and human.

That's a nice image. It is comforting to know that the throne of God is also a throne of grace. It is comforting to know that when that final trumpet blows the one who is in a position to judge is also the one who died for us, who rose for us, who reigns in power for us.

## BASIC TRUST

But, where do we find help here and now? Who can help us live faithfully when the pressure is on, and we feel all alone?

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Remember that's how the disciples felt when Jesus told them that he was going to leave them. They depended totally upon him, but now he tells them that he is going away to a place where they cannot follow.

There is a basic human fear that we all share, the fear of being abandoned. Psychologists tell us that one of the first tasks of childhood is to develop a sense of trust. The infant needs to learn that if momma goes away she's coming back.

Children want a feeling of security. They want to be reassured that someone greater, stronger, and smarter is not only present but in charge. They want to be reassured that someone loves them.

In a healthy family this basic reassurance is provided. And over time children develop a basic sense of trust. We become more self-reliant because we have this innate feeling that we will not be left alone.

Now if that doesn't happen, people can be stuck in an early stage of psychological development. They may not grow to their full potential, and they may experience emotional problems due to their lack of basic trust.

I think the same is true in our spiritual development. Somewhere along the way we must learn to have a basic trust of God. We must learn to believe the "steadfast love of the Lord never ceases." We must learn to believe that God is with us and for us each and every day. Each new day is a day that God has given us. (See Lamentations 3:22-23)

And each new day the promise is renewed. The Spirit of God in Christ, the Advocate will be with us. He comes alongside us. And our Scripture for today teaches us some very specific things about this Spirit.

## THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

First of all, the Spirit is the Spirit of truth.

The great lie of the modern world is the notion that truth does not exist. Truth is reduced to a preference. A common way of putting it is to say, "That may be true for you, but it is not true for me."

This is not a new philosophy. Do you remember when Jesus was on trial before Pilate? Jesus told Pilate that he came into the world to testify to the truth. And Pilate responded, "What is truth?"

In other words that ancient ruler had a very modern philosophy. He thought that ethics were situational. He believed in the golden rule, he who has the gold makes the rules. He was saying very cynically, "You can take your flashlight and search for truth all you want. In the darkness of this world truth cannot be found."

That's why Jesus tells his disciples that the world cannot see or know the Spirit of truth. The world doesn't believe in truth.

The world believes in power. The world believes that "might makes right". The world believes that all truth is relative.

The disciple called by the power of the Spirit believes that truth does exist and that Jesus is the epitome of the truth. He is (as our Scripture put it in our lesson last week) "the way, the truth and the life." (See John 14:6)

Jesus is the definitive revelation of the will and work of God. He is truth.

### SPIRIT ABIDES IN US

And the second thing that we learn about the Spirit in our lesson for today is this. The Spirit lives in us. God abides in us. One of the most common phrases in the New Testament is the phrase in Christ. We live in Christ and Christ abides in us.

That word translated "abide" is a form of the word used in last week's lesson. It is that word translated "rooms" or in the KJV "mansions". "In my Father's house are many rooms or mansions or places to stay."

Jesus goes to prepare a place for his disciples. One day we will go to that place. But, today God comes to us. God takes up residence in our lives. God chooses to live in us.

The gospel of John emphasizes the glory of the incarnation. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) And in this passage the glory is expanded. Not only does God come to us in the humanity of Christ. God also comes to us through other disciples who are filled with the Spirit.

Mainline Christians feel a little uneasy about the third Person of the Trinity. We can talk about God. We can talk about Jesus. But, we're not so sure about the Spirit. It all sounds a little nebulous to us. What exactly can we say about the Spirit?

Well, this passage teaches us that the Spirit abides in us and enables us to do God's will. It turns out that the Spirit and things spiritual are not the domain of the religious extremists or those who have strange new age ideas. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ living in us.

In this way spiritual things take on a very "earthy" human form.

We meet the Spirit of the risen Christ in the form of brothers and sisters who believe in the way of Jesus. And we can experience the work of the Spirit in our own lives as we too seek to follow the one who is the way, the truth and the life.

To put it another way, the Spirit brings the truth of God's love and life to the people who live in this time after Easter. The Spirit of God's truth in Jesus makes faith possible.

It is the Spirit that assures us that we are not alone, that God has not left us as orphans. Quite the contrary, God has made us part of a family of faith that stretches throughout the world.

## OBEDIENCE AND FAITH

Those promises are all well and good, but what can we do when we feel far from the Promised Land? What can we do when we are not feeling so spiritual?

What can we do when God seems far from us? What can we do when despite the promise that God in Christ will not leave us as orphans we feel like (as the old spiritual puts it) a motherless child?

I think there's a reason that this passage begins and ends with the same charge. Jesus told his disciples, "If you love me, follow my commands." The disciples who do this will experience the love of God in Christ in a new and deeper way.

The great theologian and martyr for the faith, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that sometimes his parishioners would come to him because they were worried about their lack of faith. They would say something like, "I just don't know if I believe any more."

But, instead of reviewing the doctrine of the Trinity or the tenets of the Apostle's Creed, Bonhoeffer would ask, "Is there some area of your life in which you are being disobedient? Are you doing something contrary to the will of God?"

Usually this was the case. And then Bonhoeffer would tell them, "Act as if you have faith and perhaps you will find that you do."

Many people try to believe their way into right action. They study the Bible and know the Scriptures by heart. But, sometimes despite all their study and effort their life still feels cold and empty. Why?

Maybe they need to act more and study less.

Learning faith is like learning a sport. I can study all I want about how to play golf. But, if I don't put that study into practice I will never learn how to play and enjoy the sport. The same is true in the walk of faith. Sometimes we have to act our way into believing instead of believing our way into acting.

If we act like a person of faith, we may find that we do indeed have faith.

Charles Cousar, my New Testament professor in seminary put it this way,

“The relationship between disciples and Teacher is not to degenerate into sentimentality or into a wistful nostalgia once he has gone, about ‘how wonderful things were when Jesus was with us.’ No, instead love expresses itself in obedience, in keeping Jesus’ words.”

I’m afraid that much of what passes for faith these days is sheer nostalgia. We talk lovingly about the Jesus of days gone by, but we say very little about what that means for us here and now. If we really love Jesus we need to follow his way and do what he commands us to do.

### CHANGED BY THE RESURRECTION

In our Scripture lesson for today, Jesus talked with his disciples about what they would be able to see versus what the world would be able to see.

Jesus said,” In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.”

Jesus, of course, was talking about the resurrection. When the disciples “saw” the risen Christ, they were totally changed. No longer were they afraid of anything, not even death itself. They had seen the truth of God for themselves and that changed everything. They had a relationship with the risen Christ.

The Spirit of Christ enlivened them and enabled them to be more than they ever imagined. I really like the way John Peterson paraphrases this verse. He translates verse 19, “In just a little while the world will no longer see me, but you’re going to see me because I am alive and you’re about to come alive.” John 14:19 (MsgB)

Those first disciples encountered the risen Christ. No wonder they were enlivened in a new way. But, how can we “come alive” to the presence of Jesus? How can we have a relationship with Jesus in his absence? How can we “see” him today?

We can have a relationship with Jesus in his absence by being obedient to his command. How does the old hymn put it? “Trust and obey; for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.”

### UNTHAWING FROZEN FAITH

One preacher talked about it this way. He wrote, “It’s the keeping of the commandments; not professing them that will lead us to the fullness of Christ.

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I can profess to have a frozen turkey in the fridge but that doesn't sustain me. I can cook the frozen turkey and eat it by myself but that only brings a selfish satisfaction of my needs.

However, the moment I serve it to family, friends, those who are hungry or alone; that frozen carcass brings sustenance, joy and community ... Is my relationship with Christ frozen in a profession of faith or has it moved to obedience?"

The preacher goes on to say, "Living in rural Washington we have saying about cowboy-wanna-bes. We say that they are "all hat and no cows?"

I think that's a great way to think about the problem. Many of us who profess to be disciples of Jesus are "all hat and no cows."

There is often no reality to the profession we make. We profess to follow the one who is epitome of grace and friendship, but we do not show that grace and love toward others.

Knowing God requires that we put faith into action.

Faith moves us to obedience.

Knowing God requires that we do what faith requires. Knowing God requires that we try on that lifestyle ... that way, truth and life as revealed in Jesus.

And if we do that, we will find that the Spirit of the Risen Christ is indeed with us. We will know the reality of a hope that abides forever.

Amen.