

Readings for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Sermon for the 6th Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2020

Jesus said, "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." John 14:15-21

I have stopped counting the days since the quarantine began, mostly because I am no longer always sure which day it is. I have to stop and think sometimes. When I wake up in the morning after a night of tossing and turning, I have to think with some effort to realize what day it is, and what I am supposed to do that day. In his weekly Habits of Grace message this week, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, "this pandemic has been sort of a discombobulation or a confusion about what time it is and what day it is." Even the Presiding Bishop is discombobulated!

I imagine that the disciples were feeling much the same way in their final days with Jesus before he was crucified. In our Gospel we are reading part of what is called the final discourse, where Jesus is telling the disciples what will happen and what they will need to know. He's reminding them of all that he taught them even as the authorities were tracking down Jesus, and in all this intensity the disciples finally came to understand that things were about to change, that nothing was going to go as they had planned, and that the future would look very different.

This might sound familiar to us in this pandemic as we fear the unknowns of the COVID virus. We hear new information every day about what might happen, and what can no longer happen, and how things are changing and will be changed forever. It's a lot to absorb, process, and accept. Like the disciples we may be fearful, confused, and anxious. We might be angry or sad or in grief over the loss of some very important events, routines, social gatherings, and perhaps even the loss of life of someone dear to us. Suddenly life has changed and the future is uncertain.

Like the disciples, our world has been discombobulated, turned upside down, and we may be feeling like orphans, left alone to make sense of this strange new place where we find ourselves. With the disciples we hear Jesus say, "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 am pretty sure that the disciples were more discombobulated than ever when they heard Jesus say that. Maybe we are too. It's a lot to take in on top of everything else that's going on around us.

It might be helpful to know that while our translation says "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" this is not really a conditional statement. Jesus isn't saying, "If you really love me, you'd better keep my commandments." He is simply stating a fact. A more accurate translation would be "Since you love me, you will instinctively keep my commandments." In this love that is given, not earned, we live lives of goodness, revealing and sharing this love in the world.

You may remember what Jesus said to the disciples in chapter 13, when he fed them and washed their feet. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you,

you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

John’s text is dense, it calls for attention, thought and prayer and yet, it is so simple, this giving and receiving of love. The closest thing I know of to describe it, is the love between a parent and newborn. An unconditional love that is not required, it just is. Perhaps that’s what Jesus is getting at when he then talks about being orphaned. There is not much that is more heartbreaking than losing a parent or losing a child. Even when we are older, and we reach that milestone when we no longer have a living parent, there is an existential change that happens. Jesus understands this and so he promises not to leave us orphaned.

In the moment when you feel most like an orphan, most abandoned, most lost and alone, Jesus promises to be with you. On that day, Jesus says, you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. This promise to be with us, within us, is the most amazing gift. It’s pure love.

This gift of pure love can be especially comforting to us right now if we will receive it, if we will allow it to fill our being and direct our life. Because life is pretty overwhelming right now. Even if we are physically okay – safe and in good health with our basic needs met, we are witnessing the pain and suffering of so many others. We are uncertain about what tomorrow will be like, never mind the future. We find ourselves unmotivated, forgetful, anxious, tearful, exhausted. These are real and valid experiences and emotions resulting from life during a pandemic.

When we don’t know what to expect or where the truth really lies, when we no longer have a parent to tell us the truth and make things okay, when our social structures are not working and we no longer feel safe, we begin to feel like orphans. Who is going to fix things and who is going to tell us the truth, and then comfort us in the reality of that truth? Jesus has given us the answer. The Advocate, also known as the Spirit of truth, the Comforter, Counselor, and Helper will be with us, and within us, connecting us to the love of God. Jesus has asked the Father to give us this gift which we receive as we live our lives with love.

This giving and receiving of love is so simple and yet it is the hardest thing we ever do. This is why we need the Advocate, to comfort, help, and show us how to love. Jesus does not leave us orphaned and promises to come to us and be with us, though not always in the way we imagine or even in the way we want. He comes as the great I AM, the one who was and is and is to come, the one who reminds us to love one another as he has loved us.

We are all orphans, trying to make sense of a very unpredictable time, trying fix things we cannot control, and yet we are not alone. The great and divine mystery is that we have been given a gift from God through which we experience the love of Jesus, love for one another, and the indwelling of the Spirit. Following Jesus in the way of love reveals this gift to our very discombobulated world. Amen.