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Another Advocate to be With You Forever
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church
The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A
May 17, 2020

John 14:15-21

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."

At several points in my life, I've had the honor to help people prepare for their death. Preparing for death isn't something we talk a lot about outside of the church. Even within the church, it's something we focus on seasonally, during Lent. But when people are brave enough to face the fact of their own mortality, they're often driven to do things to prepare. My mother had a file with her will and a handwritten note saying who should get which of her beloved possessions. As she got older, every time she would go in for surgery to treat her cancer she'd take me into her study, open the drawer, and say, "Here's what you need to know."

In today's gospel reading, that is exactly what Jesus is doing. "Here's what you need to know." This reading is part of a very much larger reading within the gospel of John, called Jesus' Farewell discourse. John 13 through 17 are devoted to Jesus preparing his disciples for his impending death, resurrection, and ultimately his ascension.

As Jesus talks about his death and dying, he speaks about Love and grace. This isn't something unique to Jesus. It happens time and again. In Christian pastoral care training there are two classes people anticipate with a sense of anxiety. One is usually called "Death and Dying." The other is almost always called "Love and Grace." What happens is that in Love and Grace, we talk a lot about death. And in Death and Dying, we talk a lot about love. It happens over and over again. In the times surrounding death, there are quite often enormous acts of love.

Today's reading shows us this connection. Jesus is looking toward his death. He talks to his disciples about it by beginning with love and grace. In last week's reading, Jesus prepared for his death by telling his disciples what was important for them to know. He was going to prepare a place for us, so that he could come and take us to himself, so that we could be with him. He also said that we know the way to the place where he was going. Thomas responded, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?"

The disciples are anxious. Jesus is talking to them about his departure and death, and they are facing an unknown future. It is becoming more and more clear to them that something unknown and frightening is going to happen. "Lord, we do not know where you're going? How

can we know the way?" How can we know where we are supposed to go? and what are we supposed to do to follow you there?

Jesus, The Way, The Truth, and The Life, begins his response by talking about love. If you love me you will keep my commandments. It's important to see this story within its larger context to understand what Jesus means by "my commandments." This discourse is in the context of the last supper. John tells about that event without talking about the meal, the bread, or the wine. At the last supper, as told by John, Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a towel around himself, poured water, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with a towel. Then he said, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done you. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Within the gospel of John, this is what Jesus is saying: Love one another. This love is not a passive, feel good feeling, it's a way of being in the world. An active way of loving. This love is a verb, not a feeling.

Jesus' love for his disciples continues in God's gift of the next Advocate. Jesus, Immanuel, was the first. The word translated here as Advocate was originally Greek, not English. It has many different translations – advocate gives you some sense, but not all. And in order to understand the gift, we first have to name it well: Advocate, Helper, Sustainer, Comforter, and Holy Spirit. The original Greek word is *paraclete*, which literally means one who comes alongside.

Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, was one who came alongside of us to live life as one of us. That is the gift of Christmas. We're approaching the gift of Pentecost. The next Advocate to come alongside of us will be the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, the Holy Comforter, the one who advocates on our behalf, is the one who will help Jesus' disciples through their most difficult time.

After the last supper, the disciples' entire world will change. Nothing will be the way that it was before. They cannot go back. They can only go forward, into the unknown. Their lives will be forever different.

In many ways, we as the church are in the same kind of liminal space. We are between being church as we have been, and about to begin a new way of being church. The churches and rectors of the Diocese of Virginia have been having discussions about how to safely re-open churches to communal worship. One thing has become very clear. It won't look like what it did before. Our world as church is changing. We cannot go back. We can only go forward into the unknown. Priests, deacons, and vestries across the diocese are working to figure out what that will look like. The best answer I can provide you with right now is this, "We don't really know, but we will begin with love."

This is what I do know. Over the last eight weeks, we have been church. We've been connected even though we haven't been able to physically gather. I know something else. It isn't ZOOM that's been connecting us. Zoom is a tool for communication. What's been really connecting us as St. Peter's is something much deeper. We aren't in this alone. We aren't

orphans, living alone without the body of Christ. Along with being an Easter people, we are Pentecostal people. When we love Jesus by following his commandments, by loving each other and doing so physically, by distancing ourselves, by making and wearing masks, by caring for each other through phone calls, by providing diapers to Matthew's Haven, and donating food to food banks ... When we do these loving things we are loved by Jesus, and also loved by God. When we commit ourselves to acts of love, our eyes are opened to the Spirit who is in our midst, right here alongside of us.

We're still trying to figure out what church will look like going forward, but we've done this before. The people of God continued to be the people of God when they were exiled to Babylon in 597 BCE. The people of God continued to be the people of God in 70 CE when the temple was destroyed. The people of God continued to be the people of God when their Lord and Savior was crucified on a cross. St. Peter's has continued since 1679. We've been the people of God through the Revolutionary War, through the Civil War, through the Influenza pandemic of 1918, through the Great Depression, and through polio. Through all those difficulties, we have loved one another and reached out our arms in love to others.

When we regather, church won't be as it was before COVID-19. But no one will be orphaned or left behind. We will love each other and care for the most vulnerable among us. Our practices will be different. Our lives will be changed. But we're not in this alone. We have an Advocate, a Holy Comforter, a Spirit of life who is eternally present alongside of us. This is the gift of Pentecost. Do not let your hearts be troubled. God is with us.

Amen.