

“Orphaned?”
John 14:15-21
First Presbyterian Church
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Before the Passover festival, the time had come. Jesus was leaving, headed to the Almighty. This section in John just before his betrayal and crucifixion is one of the most poignant parts of the gospel.

Jesus washes his disciples' feet. He commands them to love one another. He announces his departure.

His announcement causes quite a stir. Where I am going, he shares, you cannot now follow. “Wait just a minute, Jesus,” Peter responds. “Where are you headed? Why can't I come with you, right now?”

Peter responds the same way we do as young children when our parents announce an upcoming move around the block or across the country. He responds the same way we do as adults when the hospital or sheriff calls to say our father has died unexpectedly. He responds the same way we do as older adults when we sit with our wife as her physician quotes all kinds of statistics and terribly long odds about chemo and radiation.

Jesus speaks into the heart of our fear. “I will not leave you orphaned,” he says. I will not leave you alone.

Anne and I have been married now for almost eighteen years. Well, seventeen years, six months and twenty-eight days, but who's counting? It's amazing to me. I wake up in the morning, and she is right there, lying beautifully in the bed next to me. I get to the house in the evening, and she greets me with a kiss. She welcomes me. She holds me. She smiles at me. It is such a gift.

But life is not always like that. Life also means enduring my dad's long illness over decades and my mother's disappearance into dementia. It means enduring the shock of the midnight phone call from the Indianapolis police, telling of Anne's sister's death. We lost each of them.

This is the voice of our fear. Will our cherished one go away? Will they leave us?

Is death just death, nothing more, nothing else, nothing after?

So we lean forward when Jesus begins speaking. If you love me, he says, you will keep my commandments. God will send the Spirit of truth, the advocate, the comforter, the helper, to give you encouragement and strength. Because you love me, you will be loved by my Father Almighty and will be filled by the Spirit. You will be in me, and I will be in you, even as the Almighty and I are one.

Three things:

First, if you love me, he says, you will keep my commandments. Larry Bouchard taught religious studies at the University of Virginia, and he points out the difference between the indicative and the imperative. Jesus doesn't say, “You ought to keep my commandments.” or “You really should do what I say.” Instead his language is declarative and aspirational. “As you live in my love, you will keep my commandments. As you grow deeper, you will keep my commandments.” As you breathe, you will keep living – not because you ought to, but because that is life itself.

The further we go in the Christian walk, the more we discover the commandments and directives of the Bible are not “oughts” to be shoehorned into our schedules. Rather, they flow from the grace for which we give thanks, from the faith which comes as a gift.

We keep the commandments because we love Jesus. As we love Jesus we obey the commandments. First we inhale, then we exhale. After we exhale, then we inhale.

The longer we center our lives on love, the more we are able to release anger, to let go of lust, to put aside our jealousy, to allow our disappointments to dissolve.

The further we go in this direction, the more we invite Christ to become a part of us.

Second, God gives us the Holy Spirit, to be with us and in us forever. You and I are only two weeks away from Pentecost Sunday, June 4. What a celebration that will be! Don't miss the congregational photo on the front steps of the church at 10:30 and the bagpiper-led processional at 10:50. We will gather in the labyrinth.

But that's not all we will celebrate. We will also give thanks that God does not leave us alone. God sends us the Holy Spirit.

What does that mean? What does it mean that the Spirit abides with us and in us? Is it like a cherished photograph of our father? Or a locket of hair our mother kept from her mother's childhood? Is the Holy Spirit a memento?

No, the Holy Spirit is much more. The Spirit is lively.

The Spirit is power and initiative and umph, spilling out of hearts and flowing into the people and community around us. The Holy Spirit is the quiet of God's peace, deep, deep in our hearts, tender and true – and it's also a low hum, just beyond our hearing, guiding us, blessing us, nudging us as we love others in Christ's name.

God does not leave us orphaned; Jesus does not leave us alone.

Third, Jesus' promise is direct. Because I live, you also will live. You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

I have always been fascinated by all this interrelational language in Jesus' farewell to his disciples. He doesn't miss any opportunity to emphasize the spiritual connections within and around us. In John 17, when Jesus is praying over his disciples, he says, "All mine are yours, O God, and yours are mine. May your love, O God, be in them, and I in them."

To be filled with the Spirit is to follow Christ and to live out the promises of the Almighty.

To be a child of God is to know the love of Jesus and the power of the Spirit.

To embrace Christ as Savior and Lord is to honor God's commandments and be filled with the peace and power of the Spirit.

What does it look like to be embraced by God's Spirit, to live out the commandments with joy, to trust that the Spirit of God in Christ lives within us and empowers us? What does it look like to dwell in the Spirit?

Psalms 66 paints a beautiful picture. To live in Christ is to sing praises ("I cried aloud to God," the psalmist proclaims, "and God was honored with my tongue."). To live in Christ is to tell our story of gratitude and faith ("Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what the Lord has done for me."). To live in Christ is to offer our best gifts, of time and talent and treasure ("I will come into your house with burnt offerings, O Lord"). To live in Christ is to commit ourselves to love and forgiveness, peace and justice ("I will pay you my vows"). To live in Christ is to turn away from evil ("I refused to cherish iniquity in my heart").

Michael Battle teaches at General Seminary in New York. He calls this a life of embodied prayer. It's easy, he says, for me and you to "form habits in which our apparent love for God is merely our own love for ourselves." But in God, he says "we are brought into community. We are given an identity constituted by our relation to God and to one another. In God, we experience a divine socialization process that transforms us into someone not of our choosing" – but of God's choosing.

Oh, it's not always easy. The psalmist is straight about the challenges we face.

You, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.

You have brought us into the net; you have laid burdens on our backs.

You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water.

And in the midst of it all, we may have felt that Jesus had abandoned us.

But God's refrain is sure and strong.

You have tried us, O God, but you brought us out to a spacious place.

You have laid burdens on our backs, O God, but you brought us out to a spacious place.

We went through fire and water, O God, but you brought us out to a spacious place.

And so our song is clear and strong:

Blessed be God, because the Lord has not rejected my prayer.

Blessed be God, because the Lord has not removed from me God's steadfast love.

Blessed be God, for the Lord has not let our feet slip.

Blessed be God, for God has brought us out of the darkness and into the light.

That was the message of Kate and Emily and Rogers just a few weeks ago on Youth Sunday. I couldn't see God, they testified. I wasn't sure the Lord was there. But then, I discovered God had been with me all along the journey.

Just now, for you, the way may seem dark. If so, Kelly or Steven or I, or any of our deacons or elders, would be glad to listen to you and pray with you. Just now, the way forward may feel overwhelmingly difficult. Just before his betrayal, it was that way for Jesus. Dark. Difficult. Overwhelming.

But over and over, as we live into the promises of God, we discover not easy answers or always perfect endings, but love and joy and peace and power to give us the strength to sing and testify, to give and commit, to turn away from evil and serve with open hearts.

So blessed be God, the One who never forsakes or abandons us. Blessed be God, for God has brought us out of darkness and into the light.