

OPENING SENTENCE:

There is no greater love than this; to lay down one's life for one's friend.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION:

Living God, help us so to hear your holy word that we may truly understand; that understanding, we may believe, and believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Sermon: He Abides with You

Scripture: John 14:15-21.

"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."

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

Though the Last Supper is often pictured as a serene meal among friends, the Gospel John presents Jesus as consoling the chaos, confusion, and concern among the disciples. The scene begins with John's announcement that "Jesus knew the hour had come for him to pass on from this world" and had "loved them to the end" (13:1), and the scene grows more ominous as Jesus informs the disciples of his pending departure (13:33), sends Judas out to betray him (13:21-30), and predicts Peter's denial (13:36-38). The Disciples' panic is clear in their constant questioning of Jesus (13:36; 14:5,8). The Farewell Discourse (13:17) announces the coming departure of Jesus but consoles those who remain on earth to continue God's work.

John 14:15-21 is one such comforting text. Jesus has just emphasized that he is the way to the Father, and in verses 15-21 he addresses how those who remain on earth continue to access this way. "I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you" (v.18) Jesus emphasizes continued access to the Father, even after his departure from earth.

In the surrounding verses, Jesus describes how his followers will continue to access the Father (vv. 16-17, 19-20), so long as they love him by keeping his commandments (vv. 15,21).

"In" is a tiny word. It seems as if it should not matter all that much. Nevertheless, here is Jesus, promising to be "in" the people who keep his commandments, his earliest disciples, and promising also that those disciples will be "in" him. So here we are, who may think of ourselves as the heirs to those disciples, and maybe we are wondering about that "in" too. Is Jesus actually "in" us? How would we know?

The key may be that Advocate, that Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, who Jesus has promised will be with them – who will be with us – forever. It is easy for us to hear "Spirit" and immediately think of warm, personal feelings – feelings of security, of connection with God.

In verses 16-17, Jesus promises the Paraclete to sustain the community after his departure. Though this term for the Spirit literally refers to a legal advocate or assistant, most important here is the similarity of the Gospel John's language about the Paraclete and Jesus.

Jesus calls the Spirit another Advocate. The earlier Advocate is Jesus himself, and Jesus was most certainly a force on the move. Think of the meals with the outcast and sinners. Think of the money changers in the Temple. Think of the healing and the preaching, the travels between Galilee and Jerusalem. The story of Jesus is a story not of private feelings and comfort, but of action.

This Paraclete, this Advocate, Jesus promises, will be “with you ...in you”. Jesus himself will be “in the disciples, as he is “in” the Father, and as the disciples will be “in” him. Is it enough to imagine some kind of mystical union? Is the indwelling of Christ or the Spirit of Truth like a sense of warmth or a feeling of confidence?

Remember that scene of Jesus standing before Pontius Pilate in Pilate’s headquarters? Pilate asks, “What is truth?” Jesus stands there in silence. Why does he not answer? The answer is right there. You are looking at it, Pilate. The truth is standing in front of you. Watch him, and you will find out what truth is. We cannot see Spirit, but we can see Jesus.

We can see him healing, and teaching, and dying in his faithfulness. Draw an outline around that picture of Jesus, and you have a framework for recognizing the truth Pilate was asking about. You have a framework for recognizing the Spirit of truth, the Advocate, Jesus himself dwelling in us and among us. Readers should not overlook Jesus’ promise of “another Paraclete”; Jesus describes the Paraclete as his continued presence. Both Jesus and the Paraclete are sent from God, are rejected by the world, are known by Jesus’ followers, and represent the truth. In chapter 16, Jesus acknowledges that the Paraclete, like himself, speaks God’s word instead of its own. The Paraclete also bears witness to Christ. It is Jesus who is the first “Paraclete to the Father” (1John 2:1). However, while Jesus is departing soon, the Paraclete will “Be with you forever”. (14:16)

In verse 15 Jesus shows that the coming of the Paraclete depends upon the disciples’ loving Jesus, and love is demonstrated by keeping his commands. Jesus does not simply offer moral exhortation.

John’s Gospel describes the appropriate human response to Christ in a number of ways, including believing, loving, abiding, and keeping the commands. In all of these ways Jesus demands that believers share with him a full identity with the Father. This total devotion is made clear in the identification of keeping his commands as an act of love, demonstrated by Jesus in washing the disciple’s feet. (13:1-20). Later in the discourse he teaches that “no one has greater love than this; that someone would lay down his life on behalf of his friends” (15:13). Jesus commands the disciples to love, and he demonstrates this total love in his self-sacrifice for them. Jesus commands an active love, as he tells Peter at the end of the Gospel, “do you love me more than these... feed my lambs... tend my sheep... feed my sheep.” (21:15-17).

On the other side of verse 18, Jesus ties the promise of his continued presence to the anxious situation the disciples will face. In verse 19 he acknowledges that he will soon depart from them but reassures them that they will continue to see him, though the world will not.

Jesus does not give them hope of a distant future in which he will return, but immediate hope of continuing to know him, even though he is not physically present on earth. This ability to see when the world does not, comes from the life that is made available in Christ. The final phrase of verse 19 indicates how it is that they see and yet the world does not; “And you will see me because I am living, and you will be living”. True life, made available through Christ, allows the community to continue to see Jesus even after he has gone. Seeing Jesus is equated with knowledge that just as Jesus abides in the Father, so his followers abide in him and he in them.

Jesus closes verses 15-21 by essentially repeating what he said in verse 15; finding continuity between the time of Jesus’ earthly presence and the time of his absence depends upon loving him, demonstrated through keeping his commands. In verse 21, Jesus repeats this emphasis on love, “The one who has my commands and keeps them, this one is the one who loves me.” Anxiety in the face of life without Jesus on earth does not belong only to the disciples in the upper room, and appropriately Jesus’ response addresses not only the disciples, but all of us as well.

STORY: Mother Teresa of Calcutta famously left her record of a lifetime of struggle – struggle with the darkness that plagued her because, for more than half her life, she did not feel the presence of Christ. (How could Christ allow such poverty, sickness, starvation.) Nonetheless, among Christians she has been generally accepted as a modern saint. Some consider her an even greater saint because in spite of

the dark she continued to be faithful. Even though she had not been gifted with spiritual certainty, she steadfastly pursued the mission to which she believed she had been called, and the Christian community recognized and affirmed that mission.

The Gospel of John likely took its final shape at the end of the first century CE, in a community where most of the members never knew Jesus on earth. This community saw itself in the telling of the story of the anxiety of the disciples facing life without their teacher. The community addressed its own anxiety by repeating the calming words of Jesus, reminding them that access to the Father continues in the community's adherence to his commands and the promised Paraclete. Regardless of time or place, Jesus' message stands; "I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you."

CLOSING PRAYER:

O God, you have prepared for those who love you joys beyond understanding. Pour into our hearts such love for you, that, loving you above all else, we may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION: Jesus clearly promises his presence of the Spirit to those who keep his commandments to love and serve one another. The love Jesus commands is not about feeling – not even feeling of certainty about union with Christ. The love Jesus commands is about a master washing the feet of his disciples, and a king dying the death of a criminal. What if we were to understand Jesus' words this way? What if we were to recognize that Christ is truly present among us when we keep his commandments to love and to serve one another? Look around you in your community – your church community as well as the greater community in which you live and serve. See where, in the familiar life of this group of people, you can discern the presence of the Spirit of truth. GO IN PEACE!