

“Love Always”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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John 14:15-21 Sermon
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI
For Private Distribution Only

Today’s scripture reading is a continuation of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, which we explored a bit last week. Perhaps it goes without saying, but this is a very long good-bye—5 chapters in all. Although not as long as Moses’ good-bye to the Hebrews, which could be said to comprise the entire book of Deuteronomy! These sorts of formal final farewell speeches were traditional in bible times, offering not just flowery rhetoric, but authentic words of comfort and instructions to the survivors of a departing leader or teacher. And so here we do indeed find Jesus, with great sensitivity, both reassuring and directing his disciples about how to carry on after his death.

The thing is, though, that the longer he talks, the more confused and anxious his friends seem to become. And why shouldn’t they? They had left their old lives behind to follow Jesus, and now he was going to *leave them*? They’d taken inordinate risks in his company, openly breaking Jewish law and offending religious officials in the process. He had taught them, walked with them, blessed and broken bread with them. Yes, of course they’d become very fond of him, but they’d also come to rely very heavily upon him...and even to recognize him as the Messiah... And now he was telling them that he was going away for a grand reunion with his Father. Not only weren’t they invited, but he was leaving them in charge. Little wonder they were beginning to feel abandoned, like orphans. Reality—and separation anxiety—were setting in... If you’ve ever lost a wise mentor from your life, you may have some sense of what the disciples were experiencing...

But hold on! Not so fast! They would *not* be left alone to fend for themselves, nor are we! No, part of the good news of Jesus' departure was that it would make way for the arrival of *another Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit, who would be with them *always*, not only when Jesus was physically present...which means that even for us, who were born far too late to encounter the earthly historical Jesus, his Holy Spirit is present, active, and available.

Paraclete is a strange word, isn't it? It appears only five times in the bible, and in many English translations the word "Advocate" has been substituted. But this is a limiting choice, for the original Greek *parakletos* is a multi-faceted word. And the author of the Gospel of John intended *all* of its meanings, not just the single aspect of advocacy... The verb form of *parakletos* translates as the very open-ended "to call to one's side." While neither parakeets nor cleats factor into this broad definition, Comforter, Advocate, Counselor, and Helper do. More specifically, according to John, the Paraclete comes to abide with us and to speak on Jesus' behalf; to teach and remind us of all that Jesus has said to us, to reveal truth and testify on Jesus' behalf, to keep alive all that Jesus said and did.

Quite the job description, right? And yet, in our denomination, we tend not to focus overly much on the Holy Spirit. Which is a little counterintuitive, given that we *are* the "God is Still Speaking church." Perhaps the New England roots on the Congregational side of our UCC family have a little something to do with it. If we have come to conflate the Spirit's work with hand waving, speaking in tongues, and dancing in the aisles, well, we're just a tad too dignified for that now, aren't we? Well, yes and no. Exuberance in church is something we actually might want to strive for. But certainly in ways which feel authentic to who we in this particular congregation are. But I would also like to suggest that the realm of the Holy Spirit may extend far beyond such narrow,

stereotyped images and into our intellectual pursuits, into our peace, justice, and environmental pursuits; into our artistic endeavors, into our goals and aspirations, and into our interpersonal relationships. Anything that has anything to do with love and truth, which, come to think of it, is just about everything.

But, for the introverts among us, I would also like to suggest that the Holy Spirit works *not only* in ways that are loud or boisterous or extraverted. In II Kings we encounter the Spirit as “a still small voice,” and in Romans 8 the apostle Paul tells us, “that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” But don’t get me wrong. Some people believe the Spirit’s interactions are best relegated to one-on-one encounters in private prayer and meditation or in solitary walks in nature. Here Jesus is announcing the Paraclete’s arrival *in community*, for, although she works within each of us individually, it is among, between and through us that her most powerful and important work is accomplished. And perhaps that is where we most need her, for our lives in community have been known to present some of our greatest challenges.

This very formulation, the trinity, provides us with a model for our relationships. Creator, Christ, and Spirit each have their specific roles to play, even as they help and support one another. They love each other and us completely and unconditionally. Yet they respect boundaries: They respect the boundaries around their separate roles. And they respect *our* personal boundaries. They invite us to join them in divine communion, in relationship that has been called a *quattrinity*. And so they are readily available to us and waiting for us through the Holy Spirit. But, while the Holy Spirit may seek to *prepare* our hearts, she does not force herself upon us.

Perhaps that is why it can sometimes be so difficult for us to discern the Spirit's presence in our midst. As our baptisms affirm we are born of water and the Spirit. The Spirit has been with us since birth. We may never have known what it was like to physically walk the earth with Jesus, but, like the air that we breathe, we have never been without his Spirit at our sides. How would we even know what *that* feels like? Which reminds me of an exercise we did in my first year of seminary: We were broken into small groups and had to figure out how to explain water to a fish. Try it some time. It's not as easy as you might think!

So then how *do* we identify what is of the Spirit in our lives? I would return to two key words in the text: truth and love. But these too can be elusive concepts at best. And, in the post-modern world in which we now live, truth can be defined either too *narrowly* as fact, or too *broadly*, as in the truth is relative: Everyone has their own semi-legitimate version of the truth, which arises out of their own personal experiences and social location in the world. I don't think either of these is what is intended here. If we go back to the Greek word the author used here for truth, it is *alethea*, which derives from *Lethe*, the river in Greek mythology that the dead drank from in Hades in order to forget their past. The "a-" prefix is like our English "un-." "And so '*a-lethea*' - truth - has the sense of: waking up, remembering, overcoming oblivion and stupor, being alive and vital, not being deceived by false ideas or desires or scams, but SEEING what is as it actually is."¹ And, like Jesus and the prophets, when clearly discerned and called by the Spirit to do so, speaking the truth in love and speaking truth to power.

Defining love, too, can be a little "squishy." We can perhaps apply it too liberally, as in, "I love Ben and Jerry's ice cream," which I might add, I do. Or too specifically, as in only in a romantic context. And so we must again return to the text's images of the spirit: her helping and

¹ David Ewart: www.hollyscriptures.com.

comforting, her truth-telling and abiding, her supporting without enabling or violating boundaries. The unity she makes possible, so that Jesus can confidently say that, “I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you.” The unity in diversity represented in her relationship with the Creator, Christ, and us. And finally the obedience to Jesus’ two commandments that is required of us--to love God and to love one another as ourselves, which is also a way of saying to love our own selves.

I remember in high school and college I used to sign cards and notes to my closest friends, “Love always,” perhaps the equivalent of today’s version, “bff” or “best friends forever.” I tend to reserve that for my family now. Over the years I have learned that, as we grow and change, as we relocate, as our life’s circumstances change, our friendships inevitably change and some do not last.

This is often not a realization that is easy to digest. It can be quite painful, not entirely unlike the disciples’ learning to accept and live into their teacher’s departure from their lives. Not unlike the grief that comes with death. And yet, even as we change and drift apart, even as we age and die, our love for one another need not also die. It lives on in the Spirit who is with us and within us always.

Truly, we are never orphaned or abandoned or alone. “I will come back to you,” says Jesus. And he has. And he will continue to do so. Through the Spirit and the love and the truth we embody-- love for God and love for one another.

Amen.