

John 14:15-21
A Sermon for Every Sunday
May 14, 2023

Emotions were running high that evening, as Jesus gathered the disciples together. He knew his days on earth were numbered. And so, he gathered those closest to him to share a meal around the table. As they finished eating, Jesus stood up, gathered a towel and a basin full of water. Then moving to kneel at the feet of one of his friends he began washing their feet clean with water and drying them with the towel. Then moving on to kneel at the feet of another, repeating the washing and drying. On and on this went until he had served them all, even the one he knew would betray him. He shared a gentle, caring, and intimate moment with each of them. It was hard for some to accept while others were stunned by the beauty of the moment. Some were overwhelmed with affection for their teacher. Some felt unworthy. Still others had no words, only tears. “Having loved his own...he loved them to the end.”ⁱ

You see, things for Jesus and his disciples had gotten especially difficult over the last couple of weeks. All of the rumors, the hopes and the fears about who Jesus was had been building and building over the time of his ministry and were coming to a boil. Just a little more than a week ago Jesus had visited his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus in their home the town just outside of Jerusalem. But when Jesus arrived in Bethany, he learned that Lazarus had unexpectedly died just days before. Through his own tears, he went to his friend’s tomb and commanded

Lazarus to live. And his friend rose from the grave, walked out of his tomb, and carried on living. A few days later, Jesus returned to Lazarus, Mary and Martha's home for one last visit before going to Jerusalem.

Jesus had started to increasingly talk about being away from them, hinting at his impending death. His visit was overshadowed by a growing sense of urgency and grief. Everyone knew there was a bounty out for him. Mary could see death coming for him so she poured out an expensive bottle of perfume and anointed his body in preparation. The end of his life was coming fast now, and as if that wasn't terrifying enough for his disciples and friends, there was a bounty out for Lazarus too. Not only was Jesus seen as a threat that needed to be silenced, but those who witnessed and testified on his behalf were now considered too dangerous to let live either.

The sadness and fear must have been palpable in that room that evening as Jesus washed their feet. Their emotions swirling, their fight-or-flight reflexes kicking in, their minds racing. Each of us who have sat alongside someone we love, as they stare down death, know these feelings.

I've been struck by the beauty of the Rev Dr Jacqui Lewis reflecting on how she experienced the death of her mother, and the continued experience of that loss on her. The month of April not only marks her mother's birthday and wedding anniversary, but also the day of her death. Mix in there Easter and Mother's Day,

and, Jacqui has been especially mindful of her mother. She talks about this time being super painful and also she talks about how she has never felt more faith in the resurrection than she does now. She says, “I feel like I feel her all the time. She’s here. Not, wait till heaven or Reign of God, but, I feel her all the time. And, I feel also the absence of her. I can smell her and almost feel the arthritis in her hands. It’s strange. But, it’s true.” At first, Jacqui made sense of this for herself thinking that with all the hurt in the world she must be trying to get back to the security of the womb. But that didn’t quite fit her experience. It isn’t that she’s going back to when her mother was alive, it is that Jacqui is going forward with her mother in a new way and in an intimate way. Her mother is accompanying her as she moves forward with life. As difficult as her grief is over her mother, she also appreciates that she knows her in a new way – in a way where there is nothing between them. What a blessing this is for Jacqui.ⁱⁱ

Having shared those final moments of personal connection with them, Jesus says, “Do you know why I have done these things? I’ve done them to show you by example how you are to serve others in love.” He won’t allow them to be overwhelmed by their fear. He calls them back to love. On this last night with them he is doing what he has been doing all along – like what he was doing when he dined with Nicodemus, or took a drink of water from the Samaritan woman, or healed the man born blind, or fed the unprepared crowd, or taught in the temple, or

raised Lazarus from the dead, or welcomed Mary's extravagant gift. In every question answered, in every truthful word spoken, in every meal shared, in every boundary crossed in order to know and welcome someone into the pasture of God's love and provision – in every single moment of his life and work, he has been teaching by example just how those who follow him are to live.

In case his example wasn't clear enough, he states it simply and clearly when he says to them, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another."ⁱⁱⁱ

Love is the beginning of this scripture passage. And love is the ending too. The same can be said for the life and ministry of Jesus: Love was the beginning, and he lived the way of love right up to the very end. And that love didn't just disappear when he was no longer living alongside his disciples.

Knowing he didn't have much time left with them, Jesus spends the rest of that night before he was arrested talking with them. He says all the last bits of things he wants them to know before they face what is ahead. He leaves them with two core messages.

The first core message is that message of love: "If you love me, you will keep my commandment to love one another just as I have loved you." He is telling them to carry on what he has taught them, and shown them, and told them – to keep on loving with the kind of fierceness that frees people to experience firsthand

the abundant life of God – to keep on loving others across boundaries and barriers, in a way that sees, honors, and welcomes the *other* into the fellowship – to keep on loving even in the face of betrayal, bending down to wash the feet of the very one who would destroy us. And this is how the world will know we are followers of Jesus, the one who taught us to love, they will know it by *our* love. Facing the end of his life, love is what he wants to live on after him. Love is the message Jesus gives them. Love is his legacy.

And because of his love, he will not leave his disciples to carry on alone. His second core message is one of comfort and of promise – he tells them that he is sending another Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, to be with them. In the original Greek language this scripture was written in, the word translated here as Advocate is *parakletos* – a funny word in its English form, Paraclete. It is a word that is notoriously difficult to translate because it in fact holds within it a whole multitude of meanings. Advocate isn't a bad translation, it just doesn't capture all of it. Paraclete means Advocate, but also Comforter, Counselor, and Helper. This Holy Spirit is one who comes alongside us to teach us, remind us, abide with us, and to testify about Jesus. Like Jesus, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit deals in truth. Which makes sense, since Jesus says he's sending another Advocate to be with them. He was the first to come alongside – teaching, reminding, abiding and testifying.

He will not leave them abandoned, the Holy Spirit will come alongside them. While this is good news of comfort to our hearts, this is where our minds can sometimes start to struggle. Volumes have been written about the Trinity, about the role and relationship of God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. We try and rationalize and understand the trinity – striving to determine how much they are the same, and, how much they are independent of one another. It is difficult stuff. So, forgive me, I may really be adding a layer more to this than your mind can receive. So, I invite you to listen with your heart: the Holy Spirit isn't only with you. The Holy Spirit is *within* you.

Jesus says to those who follow him that they will know the Spirit of Truth because the Holy Spirit abides with them *and* will be in them. Jesus says, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”^{iv} Or a few sentences beyond our scripture for today, Jesus says it this way: Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”^v

Beloved ones, those first disciples nor any of us who follow Jesus, walk this way of love alone. For he walks alongside as the Spirit of Truth. As painful as it is to grieve his death and feel his absence, we do not have to wait until heaven, or Reign of God, to feel him with us because his spirit, the Spirit of Truth is with us, within us, even now. And perhaps, like Jacqui is experiencing with her mother, we

might feel his presence in a new way as he accompanies us as we move forward together in life – nothing in between us – a world to love before us. His death wasn't the end of his love revolution. We are called to continue it this day and each of our days. May we be faithful in following his way of love. Amen.

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ⁱ John 13:1b

ⁱⁱ While Jacqui talks (and writes) about this dynamic, this story is represented from her podcast Love Period episode with Paul Rauschenbusch from Sept 7, 2022. The podcast title is "Practicing Resilience in a Divided World"

ⁱⁱⁱ John 13:34

^{iv} John 14:20

^v John 14:23