

A Sermon on John 14:15-21

By Chuck Currie©

“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.”

Each Sunday night around seven o'clock in the evening I turn to Liz and say something like: “If you love me, you'll run down the street and get me some desert from Serendipity Homemade Ice Cream.” Liz responds with something like: “If you love me, you'll scratch my back.” When we are at our best as partners we both get what we want on a Sunday evening.

Love is about being in relationship with other people. There are, of course, different levels of love. We often say as Christians that we love our neighbors without really knowing who they are. There is also the kind of love we feel for friends, for children, for spouses, and even a type of love we reserve for things – like ice cream and back scratches.

The love that God shows for humanity is a love without bounds. Our God is the God of Creation who brought order out of chaos, our God is the God of Israel who brought slaves into the promised land, our God is the one who when we have gone astray from God's principles has sent prophets to call us back to justice, and our God is the one who is also Jesus – our teacher, prophet and savior – who tells us that love is not reserved for the powerful but is also for the least of these.

In this passage from John we find ourselves back in time before the death and resurrection. Jesus is telling the disciples that tragedy awaits him, that one of them will betray him, and that there will soon be a time where he is not with them in the same way he is now. All this bad news is set, however, in the context of reassurance. Jesus tells the disciples that they will not be abandoned by God as events unfold. They are told that God will send a new advocate that will help the disciples and future generations discern the will of God as new issues and problems emerge. The advocate – The Holy Spirit – will be the voice of God, of Jesus – and we will never be alone.

Jesus asked no small thing of the disciples when he said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” There seems to be a sense in so many of our churches – regardless of denominational affiliation – that following Jesus’ commandments is a relatively easy task to accomplish. Like Christians of all ages, we even confuse our cultural and social norms with Christian values. Slavery, wars, and even environmental degradation have all been justified by people claiming that their actions are Christian. Being a Christian and following Jesus’ teachings is a struggle.

Several of us in this congregation have been reading Marcus Borg’s book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. In another of his books on Jesus, Borg writes that:

To be a disciple meant “to follow after.” Whoever would be my disciple, Jesus said, “Let him follow me.” What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? It means to take seriously what he took seriously, to be like him in some sense. It is what St. Paul meant when he said, “Be imitators of Christ.” What Jesus was like as a figure of history becomes a model of discipleship, illuminating and incarnating the vision of life to which he called his followers.¹

How can this advocate or counselor, the Holy Spirit, help guide us today in our quest to be disciples?

The Holy Spirit is the one of the most difficult theological concepts in Christian tradition to explain. The Rev. Dr. Clint McCann, who teaches Biblical theology at Eden, often jokes with seminarians that if parishioners ask you to explain what the Holy Spirit is you should give them a serious look and say simply “it’s a mystery” and then get out of the room before anyone can ask a follow-up question.

The Nicene Creed is one of the most ancient of early Christian documents. Many churches repeat it to describe what they believe it means to be Christian. It is certainly apart of our tradition. In reference to the Holy Spirit it reads:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

When we repeat these words we are asserting that we believe they are true. But do we know what they mean? Or is the Holy Spirit really just a mystery? Jesus even seemed to struggle with an explanation when he said: “The Spirit blows

¹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1984), p. 193.

where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes (John 3:8).”²

Earlier this year I was asked to speak with our confirmation class to explain to them what the Holy Spirit is. I turned then to the words from a sermon given by The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest, who has described the Holy Spirit this way:

When Jesus let go of his last breath – willing, we believe, for love of us – that breath hovered in the air in front of him for a moment and then it was set loose on earth. It was such a pungent breath – so full of passion, so full of life – that it did not simply dissipate as so many breaths do. It grew, in strength and in volume, until it was a mighty wind, which God sent spinning through an upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. God wanted to make sure that Jesus’ friends were the inheritors of Jesus’ breath, and it worked.³

It was that breath that we read in Acts 2 that allowed the disciples to speak in languages they had never known before – and therefore to be able to spread the message of the Gospels across the world.

But it would be a tragedy if we thought of the Holy Spirit as being something that worked just through the first disciples. God uses the Holy Spirit to speak through us still, to challenge us to think in new ways, and to move the church in new directions. When the United Church of Christ says through our advertising that “God is still speaking” we are saying that through tradition, reason, and experience – through our on-going encounters with the Holy Spirit – we can learn to be faithful disciples of God in new and exciting ways. In Acts, the promised advocate sets the world on fire and the Church is born. Taylor says:

The question for me is whether we still believe in a God who acts like that. Do we still believe in a God who blows through closed doors and sets our heads on fire? Do we still believe in a God with power to transform us, both individuals and as a people, or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests but anyone we really expect to change our lives?⁴

If we love Jesus, we have to constantly be taking stock of our lives and our church and asking how it is we are faithful to Jesus’ commandments. How do we let the Holy Spirit guide us on our spiritual journey?

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), p. 145.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

We read in Matthew 5:17 that Jesus says: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill (NRSV).” Jesus, who was Jewish, preached the lessons of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament) and interpreted those lessons for a new age. He applied the teachings of the Torah and of the prophets to his own time and place. Part of our faithful response to God should be to do the same thing.

Just over a week ago was Earth Day. Earth Day was first celebrated in 1970 and is an event held to “draw world attention to problems such as poverty, environmental degradation, chronic diseases among children such as asthma, and other environmental health issues such as polluted air in inner city neighborhoods and the lack of clean drinking water.”⁵

There was a time when Christians turned to their Bibles and read Genesis and thought that because God had given humanity dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26) that we were free to use it in any way that benefited humanity. Now there is a growing realization among all Christians – evangelical, mainline, Roman Catholic – that dominion of the earth requires good stewardship to protect the creation God has given us oversight of. Over 1,000 religious leaders recently signed a document produced by the National Council of Churches that states: “To continue to walk the current path of ecological destruction is not only folly; it is sin.”

In the sermon from Barbra Brown Taylor that I quoted from she asked if we still “believe in a God with power to transform us, both individuals and as a people, or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests but anyone we really expect to change our lives?” But just look at how religious leaders are changing their theological tune on what the Bible has to say about our responsibility to defend creation and you can see that the Holy Spirit is at work and that God is very much active, involved, and still calling us to do justice.

If we love Jesus, we will keep the commandments. If you’re like me and not always sure what the best way to do that is take a breath and do what Taylor suggests: Pray “Come, Holy Spirit”⁶ and be open to letting God transform your life in unexpected, unsettling, and blessed ways.

Amen.

⁵ Earth Day Network, Environmentalists Around the World Prepare to Honor 35th Anniversary of Earth Day, available from http://www.earthday.net/resources/2005materials/press_release.aspx; Internet; accessed 20 April 2005.

⁶ Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p. 145.