

May 17, 2020 Sixth Sunday of Easter Tim Leitner, SAM

+Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ.

I know that it is an understatement, but our lives are much different than a year or even a few months ago. For instance, I still go to work but now instead of a 30-minute drive to the north side of Peoria, my commute is up a flight of stairs to our spare bedroom/sewing room/office for now. Leslie and I still make regular trips to church but instead of going for worship or committee meetings, it is to record Pastor Barnes' messages and to count the offerings mailed in. I hear people refer to all this as the 'new normal', but I don't see this current life as anything normal. Reading information from the ELCA and our synod, it is not known when some of our 'old normal' worship activities will be safe to resume. Our current life situation is not where anyone wants it to be; though some want to push more quickly to try to return to normal, there are so many uncertainties and risks involved. All this builds anxiety and stress.

Sorry for stating the obvious but as all that weighs on my mind, it caused me to struggle with writing this message. Finally, I realized I needed to look at today's reading from John's Gospel differently than I had in the past. Looking through my prior messages on this portion of John's Gospel, I had been tough on the disciples, those listening to Jesus in this section referred to as Jesus' farewell discourse. I saw those followers as overly concerned about their future after Jesus is gone. In this farewell discourse, Jesus foretells what will happen to Him, He reveals that Judas will betray Him and Peter will deny Him. He alerts the disciples that His remaining time with them is short. Most importantly, Jesus gives directions to the disciples, stating how they should carry on when He is no longer with them. In my old messages I saw those disciples, who were full of questions, as simple minded and self-involved. They refuse to understand the importance of Jesus' words, too worried and wrapped up in fear. Then it dawned on me that I'm sitting here with similar attitude and concerns. Life is changing and I am full of questions and worried about myself and living in fear of what the future will bring. If I had been with the disciples at that time, I would have struggled as they did. The advantage we have today is the written words of Jesus and the ability to reread His words over and over until we can change our mindset from self-concern, worry and fear into finding comfort, strength and direction in Jesus' words and His actions.

This farewell discourse reads from chapter 13 through 17, so we need to look at prior verses in order to better understand this portion of Jesus' message in today's text. Earlier in this discourse after Jesus states '***I am with you only a little longer***'. Then He tells the disciples: '***Don't let your heart be troubled***'. My initial reaction to these words is how can these followers' hearts **not** be troubled!

Many of them had spent the last three years with Jesus, witnessing His signs, hearing His teachings, just being in His presence in so many difficult situations. They have grown to need Jesus in their lives but now He says He is going away. These disciples had to be confused and devastated. They did not want their time with Jesus to end. But that was out of their control.

We today know Jesus had not come to live a long earthly life. Jesus came to relay the important messages from God His Father. He came to turn the lives of His followers away from only earthly living. Jesus came giving new commandments. First from the end of chapter 12, Jesus states: ***“the Father who sent me has given me a commandment about what to say. And I know that his commandment is eternal life.”*** Then in chapter 13, Jesus states another new commandment: ***‘that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another’.***

Our knowledge of those new commandments is important to fully understand today’s reading from John, which begins with Jesus saying: ***“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”.*** Jesus is speaking of the new commandments of eternal life and loving one another. Without the benefit of these written words allowing me to reread them over and over, I, like the disciples, would have missed Jesus’ direction, too busy still trying to make sense of Jesus’ statement before today’s text: ***‘the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these’.*** No wonder the disciples weren’t following along with Jesus’ words. I would be baffled too at the thought of doing works greater than what Jesus had done. Not a surprise that message went over the disciples’ heads. They were bogged down in worry, concerned about their future, and to be honest I would have been right there with them.

But setting aside all our self-concerns, and able to re-read and ponder Jesus’ message: ***“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”*** reveals that by obeying Jesus’ commandments, we show love for Him, for He is one in the Father, the Son of God. Twice in today’s reading Jesus ties loving Him with keeping His commandments, those commandments of eternal life and loving one another. Those commandments are more than we can handle on our own, especially without Jesus’ presence. But Jesus’ next words gives us hope, actually a double amount of hope. ***‘I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth’.***

These words of hope from Jesus have to sink in to clearly see Jesus’ promise. First, Jesus will ask for an advocate/a *paraclete* in Greek. Some translations use helper. But there is no single English word that covers all that *paraclete* contains. It is a complex word meaning not only advocate or helper but comforter, intercessor, aide, guide and counselor. It literally means ‘one called to be alongside’, one coming to help us believe, one that will encourage, comfort and console. Jesus asks His Father for a *paraclete*, this complex thing, that will aid us in being faithful in showing love for Him.

The second important point is in the entirety of Jesus' request. He asked His Father for "**another** advocate". This reveals that Jesus has been a paraclete for the disciples. Jesus has been that whole, complex being for the disciples. He was a helper, counselor, advocate and consoler. He had brought comfort and healing. The Holy Spirit, this other Paraclete, will be in a form different from Jesus but will do all the same things that Jesus has done for the disciples. And this Spirit of Truth will be with us forever. That's Good News. That is hope for us!

This other advocate is why Jesus can say '**do not let your hearts be troubled**' and '**I will not leave you orphaned**'. The disciples were not left alone and we are not left alone. It is only by the presence of the Holy Spirit that we are able to love Jesus by keeping His commandments. It is only through the Holy Spirit that we believe in the eternal life that God has provided us and only through the Holy Spirit we are given the strength to love one another as Jesus loved.

We have the Holy Spirit with us, bringing us strength and comfort. Encouraging us in our human relationships. The Holy Spirit is with us giving us hope and guidance to live our faith.

But even with the Holy Spirit, we struggle in keeping the commandments, showing our love for Jesus. We sin, and that's why Jesus continues on His path to the cross. In knowing our human weakness, God sent His Son not only to be our Paraclete but to be our Savior, to go beyond teaching and healing, continuing on to suffer and die on the cross for us, bringing us forgiveness for our sins. Then Jesus, rising from the dead, fulfills God's promise of eternal life. What a wondrous and loving gift from God. All for His children who struggle to show our love for Him.

It is with the strength of the Holy Spirit that we are able to live out Jesus' words: "**the one who believes in me will do the works I do and in fact will do greater works**". Our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, is lived out in our daily actions toward one another. Our life of faith shows our love for Jesus.

We show our love for God by following His commandments, to love one another with our arms outstretched, although for now at a safe distance. We comfort those who are suffering in these times, whether from sickness, loss of livelihood, battling loneliness and those who have lost loved ones for any reason. We are to comfort and care for all of God's creation. We are to spread this Good News of our relationship with God; using our words and also displaying it in our actions.

Strengthened and guided by the Holy Spirit we are able to share Christ's love with all others and in that we show our love for God. **Let us pray: Healing God, we thank You for our family and friends and all Your creation. We are so grateful for the gifts You provide for us, especially the Holy Spirit that gives us strength, direction and truth. And we thank You, God, for the gift of Your Son, Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord. For this we are eternally grateful. Amen.**