

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Absent Yet Present

John 14:15-21 – *Jesus commanded us to love one another.
Here is his promise to those who keep that commandment.*

In his message, our minister offers an informed but personal interpretation of a passage from the Bible. This interpretation is intended to assist, not replace, our own creative engagement with the Bible as a means through which God may be communicating with us.

The month of May always reminds me of my mother. May contains Mother's Day of course, but May 26 is my mother's birthday and May 3 was the day she died, six years ago now, a few weeks before her 84th birthday. On Tuesday, she would have turned 90.

I am still coming to terms with how profound a shift in my life her death has been. I didn't live with her, so it isn't as if her absence changes my life day to day. And it isn't as if I don't trust that she is in a better place; I do; I don't grieve for her, but for myself, and that I will miss her. And it's not that I don't have good memories; I do, and I cherish them.

But I grieve that she will no longer be physically a part of my life, and that is real. Sometimes people tried to comfort me by saying that she will always be with me in Spirit. I have probably said something similar myself, but I won't say it again. Because although I knew it was intended kindly, I didn't find it comforting. I found myself irritated by it because it seemed to denigrate and diminish the extent of my loss. And that loss was real and deep and profound: I will never see her smile or get her warm hug. She won't speak any more her wise encouraging words. Yes, I will never forget her. Yes, she will always be a part of me, but her physical presence is a huge loss and I need to grieve that.

In the same way, I miss you these days. I miss my community of faith that I am used to seeing week by week. I miss hugging those who want hugs (yes Jane, yes Doris, yes Mary, yes Gerry, I am talking about you!). I miss the hand shakes and the fist bumps and the belly bumps (well, maybe not the belly bumps!). I miss the way that the choir's harmonies offer a glimpse of a paradise in which human diversity blends into beauty. I miss the chatter of children, and the silver crowns of elders, the easy banter of friends and the chance to meet the stranger who could be the angel in disguise. I miss the anticipation of waiting for the microphone to reach someone with a celebration to share, and I miss the small collective sympathetic sound the congregation meets when someone shares something really painful or tragic. I miss gathering with you week by week, and while it is amazing what we can do through the internet and Facebook and Zoom and YouTube, it just ain't the same as being together.

We humans are not disembodied spirits, we are spirited flesh and en fleshed spirits, and our flesh is important. It is essential to who we are. And when someone dies, or our ability to gather in the

flesh to support and strengthen and encourage one another is interrupted, something important has happened, and we need to grieve that loss.

The apostle Paul wrote that we shouldn't grieve without hope, but we still grieve, because something important has changed. We grieve with hope when we mourn the loss of someone or something important, offering that loss to God in hope and faith. So we don't grieve without hope, but we still grieve with hope.

To deny or diminish the reality of loss is also to deny or diminish the importance of the incarnation of Jesus. At the heart of Christian faith is the conviction that God became flesh in this one very real, human person. There were some in the early church who claimed that Jesus wasn't really human, wasn't really a physical being, but that he was a kind of disembodied spirit. That idea was called docetism, and it was rejected by the early Christian church. They were right to do so: to deny that Jesus took on our flesh would be to deny that he became fully human, to deny that he could become fully human, to deny that our human flesh is important, to deny the importance of our bodies to our humanity.

The importance of Jesus becoming human meant that his death also was important, and his death is described and meditated on at great length in the gospels, not least in John's gospel, from which our Scripture reading was drawn this morning. Chapters thirteen through seventeen of John's gospel are one long speech, set at Jesus's last supper, and usually called the "Farewell Discourse" because in this speech Jesus is saying goodbye and preparing his followers for what it will mean to live without him.

The Farewell Discourse begins with haunting words, "... Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." And then it describes how

- Jesus washed the feet of his disciples as a model of servant leadership
- predicted how Judas would betray him
- and gave them a new commandment, that they love one another, as he had loved them.

Chapter fourteen begins with the familiar words:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

Those are comforting words for those who worry about what happens after we die, which is why they are read at so many funerals. Like in my parent's home, in Edmonton, there was lots of room; there was always a place for me to stay when I want to visit. And just as my mother would always make sure there were enough beds for whoever was coming, and that the beds were freshly made with clean sheets, Jesus is the host who has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. There will not only be lots of room, but there will be a place specially prepared for us. And not

just a place, but a host, a host who will welcome us, and spend time with us, because he wants to be with us, and he wants us to be with him.

All that is comforting, and reassures me that my mother is in a good place. It helps me to grieve with hope. It doesn't really address the root of my grief, however, which is my mother's death and absence. That comes later, in the passage we read this morning, in which Jesus says, "You are not alone. I will not leave you orphaned. I will send you another *paraclete*."

Paraclete is a Greek word that is sometimes translated Advocate, Comforter, or Helper. A *Paraclete* could be a character witness called in to testify on your behalf in a trial, or a legal advocate called in to defend you in a trial, or an expert called in to give advice, but it was always someone called in to help in time of trouble or need.¹ Today we might think of a *Paraclete* as a consultant or an advisor whom we call on to help us to deal with a problem to which we do not have the solution. The *Paraclete* is the Spirit of Truth whom those who follow Christ's way can call upon in time of need.

This *paraclete* is another advocate, because Jesus is the first advocate, and the new advocate continues the work of the first. The *paraclete* is the Spirit of Jesus, the ongoing presence of the one who took flesh, lived and died as one of us.

John's gospel says that those who believe in Jesus will also do the works that he did and, goes on to make the audacious claim, that they will even do greater works than Jesus did. That is quite an astounding claim, until you start adding it up. Jesus' ministry lasted three years at most, and in that time he did some pretty impressive things, according to the gospels. But in the nearly two thousand years since his death, believers have in fact done much more than he ever could.

Just to take one example, there are a several stories about Jesus feeding impressive numbers of people: three thousand according to one story, and five thousand in another. But just think about how many people are fed by soup kitchens and food banks and the Foodgrains Bank, and you start running up some extremely impressive numbers. I don't think it is exaggerating things to suggest that Jesus' followers, around the world, feed hundreds of thousands of people, maybe millions of people every day. In other words, his followers feed many times more people, every day, than Jesus did on even his most spectacular day. And beyond the work of feeding people, there are so many other things that Jesus did, that his followers do as well. His work of healing is carried on by hospitals and people in many kinds of healing ministries. His challenge to injustice is carried out wherever Christians speak out on behalf of the impoverished and oppressed minorities. His proclamation of God's unconditional love is continued wherever, however imperfectly, people in prison, alcoholics and drug abusers are ministered to in his name. And I could go on and on about the ways in which his works are continued in his followers.

In other words, the Spirit of Jesus lives in us, when we do the things he taught us to do, when we keep his commandments. It is his Spirit that empowers and inspires and directs us to do what Jesus did. And it is our openness to doing what he did that allows the Spirit to enter us and empower us. It is a bit like a chicken and egg kind of issue. Does our keeping his commandments

¹ Barclay, *John: Daily Study Bible*, p. 167

allow the Spirit to abide with us and in us, or is it the Spirit abiding within us that empowers us to keep the commandments? I don't know. But I do know that while Jesus' body was important and his death was a great crime, and a profound loss, his Spirit continues to live on in a very real way, among those who remember and follow him. And because he is no longer with us in the flesh, his Spirit is not limited to one place or one time. Because he has gone to his Maker, his Spirit is unleashed to be at work in every place and every time.

I don't mean, in any way, to equate the Spirit of Jesus with the spirit of my mother. She would be the last person who would want me to do that. She was a believer too, and tried to live her life as best she could according to his teachings. She tried to do his commandments, and I really believe that His Spirit lived within her. But perhaps I will discover, in a somewhat similar way, that the nearer I live the way she taught me, the closer I will feel to her, and the more I will feel her spirit, living in me and with me. It doesn't diminish the importance of her death, or the pain of her absence, but it does empower me to grieve with hope, the hope that although she is absent, she continues to be profoundly and powerfully present in my life. Amen.