

Easter 6A 2017 Sermon

John 14:15-21

Jesus said, "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."

Jesus' disciples have been following him for 3 years. It is likely that they have spent every waking hour with him during that time. And I think it reasonable to suppose that during that time, Jesus has become the most important person in their lives. He has performed miracles; he has taught them; he has given them a purpose; he has loved them; he has changed them. But now he is about to leave them; and you can imagine the concerns and worries and questions Jesus' followers have in their minds and hearts about his departure. While he was with them, they felt alive with an abundant life that they had never felt before. They felt his powerful love for them, and they loved him in return. Will all this evaporate when he is gone?

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus addresses these burning concerns and worries. He reassures his followers: "I will not leave you orphaned... I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

What does he mean by "another Advocate?"

In order to answer that question, we need to look at the Greek word John uses which is translated "Advocate." Most of you have heard me say many times that the Gospel-writer John loves to use words with multiple layers of meaning, and that is *especially* true in **this** case. The Bible translation we use on Sunday mornings is the New Revised Standard Version, which uses the word "Advocate" to translate the Greek word John uses here – the Greek word *paracletos*. But in other English Bibles, *paracletos* is translated as "Helper," "Counselor," "Friend," "Comforter," or "Companion." All of these are valid translations, but each defines only one level of meaning of the word; and John, as we have noted, wants his readers to hear the **many** levels of meaning behind the word *paracletos*. The *New Jerusalem Bible* solves the problem by doing what many scholars suggest: it doesn't *translate* the word at all; instead, it uses the word "Paraclete," which is simply an anglicized version of the Greek word *paracletos*. And I like that approach, because it forces us to struggle with the many levels of meaning behind John's word. And when we delve into the origin of the word *paracletos*, we find that it comes from a combination of two Greek words which, when put together,

literally mean, “to call to one’s side.” The “other Paraclete” that the heavenly Father will send will stand beside Jesus’ followers, just as Jesus – the *first* Paraclete – stood alongside his disciples. This “other Paraclete” that the Father will send is the Holy Spirit, who will help, counsel, comfort, befriend, stand alongside, and advocate for Jesus’ followers in Jesus’ absence. Professor David Lose puts it this way: the Paraclete “has our backs.” The Holy Spirit walks alongside us, just as Jesus did.

This theme of “standing alongside” or “walking alongside” is a theme which I have encountered more and more in recent months. Dee Dee Clement, the Executive Director of Loaves and Fishes here in Canon City, often tells people that while Loaves and Fishes gives out, on average, 25,000 pounds of food and 12,000 items of clothing each month, the real mission of Loaves and Fishes is not to give away food and clothing, but rather to walk alongside our neighbors who find themselves in situations of poverty, addiction, homelessness, loneliness, illness, or abuse which they can’t seem to climb out of on their own. It’s the same with our Laundry Love ministry: yes, we wash people’s clothes; but the real impact of the ministry is getting to know people and treat them with the kindness and love of Christ. We hear comments from some of them: “I can’t believe how nice everybody is!” Many of these people are not often treated very well. As my homeless physician friend tells me, “Mark, the worst part of being homeless is that everywhere we go, we know people don’t want us there. Nobody wants us.” Laundry Love was started in California some 16 years ago when a pastor approached a homeless person and asked, “How can we come alongside you in a way that will make a difference in your life?” And he responded, “I think if I had clean clothes, people would treat me more like a human being.” That’s what we try to do at Laundry Love, living out the promises we made in our baptismal vows “to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself;” and to “respect the dignity of every human being.” And I think the Laundry Love volunteers here at Christ Church will tell you that we receive far more than we give.

But there seems to be a strong tendency within us human beings – call it our sinful nature, our false selves, our ego selves, or whatever – there seems to be a strong tendency, even among those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, to objectify other people, to reduce them to labels, or categories, or statistics. Rather than seeing and treating people as human beings, we see them as “Refugees.” “The homeless.” “Muslims.” “Gays and lesbians.” “Addicts.” “Immigrants.” “The unemployed.” We tend to see them as faceless groups, rather than flesh-and-blood human beings – beloved children of God, each and every one of them – our neighbors whom Jesus commands us to love as ourselves. And we tend to further dehumanize them by making their plights into “issues” or “problems.” We have an “immigrant problem.” We have a “homeless problem.” We legislate about the “refugee issue,” and we in the church debate the “gay and lesbian issue.” Lost in all the labeling, categorization, and “the issues” is any compassion

for these people as neighbors, fellow children of God whom Christ loves and for whom he poured out his life, just as he did for you and me.

Let me share with you some incidents in my life in just the past few weeks when this theme of “treating people as human beings rather than categories, objects, or issues” has arisen right in front of my face.

This past week, I attended our annual Diocesan Clergy Conference. At one point in the conference, a priest stood up and gave an impassioned speech. His name is Father Oja, and he is a refugee from the Anglican Province of South Sudan, and for several years he has pastored a group of Sudanese refugees in the Denver area. In his heartfelt speech to us, he asked – with deep frustration and grief in his voice – why it is that the world seems not to care about the genocide being perpetrated in his native Sudan? After he sat down, Chris Johnson (the rector of St. Rafael’s in Security) stood up and said, “The reason we don’t raise our voices against the genocide in Sudan is that we don’t see them as our neighbors, our sisters and brothers. Until we can see that other people in this world are our neighbors, human beings just like us, beloved of God, we will not notice them or walk alongside them.” We will not have their backs.

The previous week, I attended a “wellness conference” in Indianapolis, sponsored by The Church Pension Group. There were speakers on nutrition and exercise, mental health, vocational focus, financial health, and spiritual health. The Spiritual director for the week was a man who is an Episcopal priest, is bi-lingual, holds dual citizenship in the U.S. and Mexico, is a professed member of The New Benedictine Community, and is married to a Mexican husband. I had the opportunity to ask him about his experience as a gay priest in the Episcopal Church, and how I might have constructive conversations in this parish around the issue of gays and lesbians in the church. His answer? “Forget about the ‘issue.’ It isn’t about an issue; it’s about people. How many people do your parishioners know who are gay or lesbian and who are no different from any other person? Unless people meet fellow human beings *as* human beings, as our neighbors and not as an ‘issue,’ there will be no understanding or compassion.”

Recently, I finished a book entitled *Welcome Homeless: One Man's Journey of Discovering the Meaning of Home*. Alan Graham, the author, is a successful real estate developer who, motivated by his strong Christian faith, started making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and handing them out to the homeless on the streets of Austin, Texas. What he discovered was the humanity of the people who were homeless, and some of the reasons for that homelessness. In the book, he shares the stories of 11 of these people, and it is enough to break anyone’s heart. One homeless man shares with Graham that when he was a young boy, his father punished him by holding a hot iron to his forearm until the stench of burnt flesh filled the air. Others whom Graham befriends were born into incredibly unloving and dysfunctional situations. Graham deduces that what causes homelessness, more than any other factor, is the loss of family – or never having had a family where one was loved and cared for. Alan Graham has used his business

knowledge and connections to start a tiny house community for the homeless in Austin, which he has named "Community First Village," since he is convinced that the solution to the devastation of homelessness is having a supportive community. Dawn and Jeff Ward, husband and wife pastors of The Wellspring Vineyard Church in Florence, are building just such a community on their church property, modeled after Alan Graham's Community First Village.

I recently asked a homeless person here in Canon City about her family of origin, and she said she was beaten by her father as a child, and now has no family connections. I inquired about another homeless woman's family, and was told that her mother was a "crack-head." She, also, has no connections with family today. I couldn't help but wonder: What would I have been like if my father had beaten me, or held a hot iron to my forearm, or if my mother had been a crackhead? Why is it that my life has been so blessed? And what responsibility do I have toward those whose lives have not been so blessed, whether they be the homeless here in Canon City or abandoned boys on the streets of Honduras or those whose lives are threatened by genocide in South Sudan?

I cannot solve all the world's problems, of course. But I can open the eyes of my heart to see people as human beings and not categories or issues. And just as the eternal Christ emptied himself into human flesh and came alongside us in the person of Jesus, and just as the other Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, comes alongside us and has our back, so can I come alongside at least some of my neighbors, my fellow human beings, beloved of God, and share the love of God with which I have been so richly blessed. Is that not what Jesus means in today's Gospel when he says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments?"

AMEN