

## Easter 6A 2020 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."*

Perhaps you saw the Facebook post which has been making the rounds recently. It simply states: "Most useless purchase of 2019: a 2020 planner."

It's so true! Any plans we made in January for the coming year have gone out the window. The future, right now, is so very uncertain, unpredictable. In recent phone conversations I've had with some of you, a few of you have asked me, "When are we going to be able to get back to worshiping in our church building?" And the only *honest* response I can give is, "I don't know." And let me tell you, I *struggle* with the magnitude, the **enormity** of unpredictability that lies ahead – and I imagine that many of you do, also.

In a recent blog post, my "niece," who is a model of vulnerable faith, quoted a psychiatrist, who wrote: "Right now... the unpredictability of the *future* is causing great anxiety in our *present* day lives... [P]redictability is a function of our brain's 'time management system.' It is something we depend upon for survival in most situations in life." (unquote) In other words, predictability is something that we humans have developed as a means of *surviving* in this world. So, it is no **wonder** that the extreme *lack* of predictability at this time has caused many of us **profound** anxiety. I think this is one of the reasons that there are, at this time, people who are wanting to re-open everything, to get *back* to the predictable (and the seemingly controllable). Being able to predict what is coming in our lives is a survival mechanism.

Today's Gospel lesson follows immediately upon last week's Gospel. It is after the Last Supper, the night before Jesus will be crucified, and Jesus is in the midst of a long "Farewell Address" to his disciples. He tells them that he will be leaving them; and the unpredictability of their future causes no small degree of anxiety in his disciples. In last week's Gospel, Jesus tried to assuage that anxiety, saying, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ [But] Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do **not** know where you are going. How can we know the way?’” (John 14:1-5, NRSV) Thomas, like many of us in **today’s** unpredictable world, wants a roadmap for the future.

But there is none.

In **today’s** Gospel reading, Jesus is *still* trying to reassure his worried and fearful disciples. They are *overwrought* about their unpredictable future. And what is Jesus’ answer? “... I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever...

“I will **not** leave you orphaned...”

My friends, like those first disciples, we, too, are facing an unknown, unpredictable future, and the very way our brains are wired means we have a biological predilection to try to recover predictability in our lives.

But **Jesus’** *answer* to the fear of an uncertain future is *not* to tell us what the future is going to be. Jesus’ answer is, “Trust in God, trust also in me...” He promises that he will remain *with us*, through an Advocate who lives *in us* – *in the very midst* of uncertainty, unpredictability, danger, and fear.

My niece, in her blog post, writes: “Could it be that the struggle with unpredictability is part of our human experience? And what if it’s a **necessary** step towards a life of faith, because unpredictable circumstances provide a gateway to trust?” What if it’s a **necessary** step towards a life of faith, because unpredictable circumstances provide a gateway to trust? An *opportunity* for us to learn to trust God amidst the *inevitable* uncertainties of life?

My friends, I *know* that this is the lesson that God is trying to teach me at this time. To trust, in this unpredictable time, in God’s presence, love, and power – power, not to do what **I** want or ask, but power to bring good, even out of this terrible pandemic, in ways that I may never see. God is trying to teach me to stand, in the Present, in the midst of this Reality, and put my whole trust in God.

In recent weeks, Richard Rohr, in his daily emails, has been speaking about what he calls “liminal space,” threshold space, the space between this room and the next, or between the *inside* of our house and the outdoors. In this threshold space, this liminal space, we are neither here nor there, but in-between where we *were* and where we *will* be. Quoting Brandan Robertson, Fr. Rohr writes:

In moments of transition, we are simply to *be*. We are to pause and acknowledge that a transition is taking place. Instead of seeking to abruptly pass through a threshold, we are to tarry. . . . A new reality is emerging, but we cannot see beyond the threshold. All we know is that we exist in this

moment, where everything is in transition. We may experience a new way of being, but we cannot yet sense what it will look like.<sup>1</sup>

And therein lies a rare and precious opportunity. When we are so firmly anchored in our familiar routines and habits and mindsets and prejudices (and we all have them!), God has little chance of coming into our lives and transforming them more into the image and likeness of his Son, into our True Self. But if our routines and habits are taken away from us, as they recently have been, we find ourselves on more shaky, unfamiliar ground – threshold space, liminal space, between the old way of living and whatever new way of living will emerge in the future. And it is **now**, when we are in that liminal, in-between space, that our hardened habits and attitudes and mindsets and prejudices are softened; the roots with which we have been clinging so tightly to that same spot of hard ground *forever* are loosened, and we are susceptible to being changed: to grow in love of God and one another.

Jesus speaks of sending “another Advocate.” Now, I had always thought that the role of this Advocate was to intercede for us before God, to plead our case before God, to be our defense attorney, so to speak. But Dr. David Lose points out a *problem* with this point of view. He writes, “[T]he picture of God this implies – God as needing to be persuaded to love and forgive us – feels so foreign to John’s confession that ‘God so loved the world that God gave the only Son...’ (3:16).

“So perhaps it’s actually the other way around,” Dr. Lose suggests. “Perhaps it is the Spirit who intercedes on **God’s** behalf before *us*. That is, perhaps the Spirit is the one who comes to remind **us** of our identity as children of God, as sheep who recognize the voice of our shepherd, those for whom the good shepherd lays down his life. Because, Lord knows, that can be a hard identity to hold onto, a hard identity to believe is really ours, especially when we are stressed or frightened, unsure about our future, and it feels like everything has been turned upside down.”<sup>2</sup>

My friends, during this liminal time, when we are between a predictable past and an unpredictable future, when our lives have been softened, our roots partially uprooted from the hard ground to which they have clung for God knows how long, during this “thin time,” the Advocate has an opening to our souls. “You are not who you think you are!” he seems to say (and perhaps, for once, we will listen?). “You are not a Republican or a Democrat;” the Advocate tells us; “you are not white or black; you are not American or Mexican; you are not Episcopalian or Baptist. All of those identities will disappear the very second you die. Who you *truly* are – eternally are - is God’s child, *infinitely* loved and cherished by God, and called to *live out* that love in this world, to **be** that divine love for one another!”

And, my friends, there is evidence that God’s Advocate **has** been at work during this liminal time! Health Care workers, grocery store workers, and those who

work in other “essential” jobs have literally put their lives on the line for you and for me. People donate their stimulus checks to Loaves and Fishes, they make masks for others, run errands for those who are particularly vulnerable. All of these are signs that the Spirit of Truth is at loose in the land; and that Spirit, that Advocate of God’s love, *can be trusted*, no matter how unpredictable the future may be.

At least, that is the lesson God is trying to teach me.

AMEN

1 Richard Rohr’s email devotion, “Seeing Beyond Ourselves,” Friday, May 1, 2020 <https://cac.org/seeing-beyond-ourselves-2020-05-01/>

2 David Lose’s blog, “In the Meantime,” Easter 6A: Spirit Work <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/05/easter-6-a-spirit-work/>