

Easter 6C 2022 Sermon

May 22, 2022

John 14:23-29 *Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.*

This past Wednesday, the Canon City High School Class of 2022 received their diplomas.

Now, most of us know the mixture of feelings which can rise up within us when we graduate from high school. There is the excitement of accomplishment: After 4 years of study and learning, we have our diploma! There is the self-satisfaction of knowing that we are entering a new, more adult stage of life. All that we have learned has prepared us to take the next step on our life's journey.

And yet *part* of us may not *want* to take the next step on the sometimes-frightening path of growth. Once we graduate from High School, we cannot go back and be a student there ever again. There is no return to the familiar old way of life.

I think that Jesus' disciples must have felt some of the same feelings in the scene described in our Gospel reading today, in which Jesus says farewell to his disciples on the night before he will be crucified. Jesus has been their teacher and mentor in the school of Life, the school of the spirit; and now he tells them that he is leaving them! There will be no return to the way of life the disciples have experienced over the past three years with Jesus: following Jesus, day in, day out, sitting at his feet as he teaches them.

What in the *world* will they do when he is gone?

Jesus perceives the sense of loss his disciples are already anticipating as he tells them of his impending departure; and so, he reassures them that they are not *losing* him – they are, in a sense, *graduating*. For, God's ultimate will for them has *never* been that they live their whole lives dependent on Jesus' *physical* presence. God's will for them—and for **all** of us followers of Jesus—is that we

become the presence of Christ in our world, today; that we *embody* the words and wisdom and love of Christ, each in our uniquely-gifted way. St. Paul said, in his letter to the Ephesians, that our goal as Christians is that we all come “to *maturity*, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Eph. 4:13)

And yet, maturity can be a frightening thing; life beyond graduation is not always easy. We must use the knowledge and skills we have learned from our teachers, parents, and coaches to make a living on our own. We must use the values we have learned to live a life of integrity. Maturity means that we no longer simply *talk* the talk, but *walk* the talk. And this is true not only for those graduating from High School, but for each of us who desires to be a mature Christian, growing in faith, in love, and in God.

In 1987, Franciscan priest Richard Rohr moved to Albuquerque to start *The Center for Action and Contemplation*; and countless Christians, myself included, have grown through Fr. Richard’s books, his talks, his teachings. The strength of his personality, his gift for communicating spiritual truth in accessible language, his warmth and love and humor have deeply touched – and transformed! – hundreds of thousands of his followers, including myself and many of us here at Christ Church. But Fr. Richard is now 79 years old, and he has suffered significant health problems. In recent years, the staff at *The Center for Action and Contemplation* have worried about what would happen when their founder, Fr. Richard, dies. How could they go on without him? But then, one of Richard’s colleagues, James Finley, said something that addressed those fears and worries about Richard’s dying and leaving his followers bereft. I don’t have the direct quote, but in essence, what Dr. Finley said was, “Richard has never been *about* Richard. Why don’t you, his followers, decide to be about what Richard himself has been about his whole life?”

And we might say the same thing about Jesus. Jesus *himself* was never about Jesus. “The Father is greater than I,” Jesus says in today’s Gospel. And Jesus is clear that the words he has spoken, his teachings, have not originated with him. “[T]he word that you hear is not mine,” Jesus says, “but is from the Father who sent me.”

The disciples in today’s Gospel are concerned about who will keep the word of God alive once Jesus is no longer physically present with them. And Jesus’ answer to them is: *They* will. **They** will keep that word of God alive! And today’s Gospel speaks of 3 ways that this might happen. First, the love that the disciples have shared with Jesus does not end with Jesus’ physical departure, any more than the love that **we** have for a loved one ends when she or he dies. The love the disciples have for Jesus keeps them **connected** to Jesus even after Jesus has physically left to “go to his Father.” “Those who love me,” Jesus says, “will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” That’s the *second* way that today’s Gospel tells us the word of God will be kept alive after Jesus’ physical departure: Jesus and his

Heavenly Father will come to the disciples and make their home with them.

Thirdly, today's Gospel tells us that the Heavenly Father will send the Holy Spirit, who will teach the disciples everything, and remind them of all that Jesus has said to them.

Now, when we read that Jesus and the Father will come and make their home with the disciples, we understand that this is not meant in a literal sense. Jesus and the Father will not build a home out of brick and mortar; rather, they will make their home in the *hearts* of the disciples. And when we read that the Father will send the Holy Spirit to teach the disciples everything, we don't envision the Holy Spirit coming down to earth physically, in the guise of a high school teacher, to instruct them. Rather, we understand that the Holy Spirit will come into their hearts, and wordlessly guide them from within.

Just as graduating high school students must leave behind the physical presence of their teachers and coaches and parents and *internalize* what they have been taught, so we followers of Jesus must *internalize* what we have been taught through teachings and sermons and reading and studying the Bible and other spiritual books. And yet, many of us Christians fail to take this step, content to keep our faith *outside* ourselves, or restricted to our mental thoughts and concepts *about* Jesus and God in our heads, isolated from our hearts. I know – because I'm *still* tempted to constrain my faith to my head, where I can control it. It's less risky; I don't have to open my heart and become vulnerable.

I have shared with some of you an insight that I once received from Richard Rohr. I had been taught in my Episcopal Confirmation training that one should bow or genuflect whenever one passes before the mystical presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine on the altar or in the tabernacle behind the altar. And so, it had always been my practice, after receiving communion, to turn and bow to the presence of Christ in the bread and wine left on the altar before I processed out during the final hymn. But Richard brought to my attention the fact that this practice misses the whole point. The whole purpose of Holy Communion is for us to receive Christ into our very bodies and beings so that Christ might transform and strengthen us within, that we might *become* what we receive: the Body of Christ, the Presence of Christ in this world. If I have just taken Christ into **myself** by receiving Communion, I should no longer be focused on the presence of Christ *outside* of myself – in the sacrament on the altar or in the tabernacle. It is now *in me*, to strengthen me to go out into the world as a "little Christ" to love and serve the Lord.

My friends, it is so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that Christ remains forever *outside* ourselves: in the sacrament on the altar or in the tabernacle; in the text of the Bible; in a beloved teacher or preacher; or in some **idea about** God that we mistake for the True, Living God. I sometimes look at people in the news who are loudly and vehemently propounding some belief or cause that they are

convinced is God's righteous will. And I ask myself, "Is what they are espousing *really* God's will? Or is it their **own** will that they are *mistaking* for God's will?" I can usually come to a fairly reliable answer to that question if I can step back from thinking about whatever cause or belief is being so vehemently asserted and try to discern the **spirit** *behind* the person's loud words. Is it a spirit of Love? Compassion? Hate? Bigotry? Self-righteousness? It is often the state a person's interior that is the *true* measure of whether what they are propounding is of God or not.

And it is the state of a person's interior that determines whether they are truly at peace or not. "Peace I leave with you," Jesus tells his disciples; "**my** peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." "The peace of the **world** comes and goes," notes John Shea. "It is dependent on outer circumstances... [But we] are in an unbreakable relationship with the transcendent Source [capital "S"]. As we allow this **foundational** relationship [with God] to reach out and repair all our earthly relationships, we grow in peace and it stabilizes our lives. When Jesus leaves his disciples peace, he is leaving them both the [assurance] of the non-abandoning love of God *and* the **task** of restoring peace on the war-torn earth."*

When you and I can live free from our dependence on outer circumstances, assured in the depths of our being of our unbreakable relationship with God, we have come into the peace of Christ, and it can be said that we have graduated. Christ lives within us. Then it is our task to be the continuing presence of Christ, and do our part to restore peace on this war-torn earth.

AMEN

*John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 141