

Sunday, May 14, 2023
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year A)

John 14.15-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/259713986564023>

(Sermon begins at about 19:00)

“In Him We Live and Move and Have Our Being”

As one who spent my first career in the planning profession and who still seeks to meticulously plan both my personal and vocational lives—which with the way the church operates, can at times be, shall we say, challenging—I appreciate what Jesus is doing in today’s Gospel reading. That he is essentially laying out his plan for what is going to happen moving forward. Letting his disciples know what to expect down the road, primarily as a way of assuring and comforting them in what he knows has to be a difficult time for them.

Today’s Gospel reading is a continuation of the portion of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse that we heard last week. This occurs on Maundy Thursday, mere hours before Jesus will be arrested, put on trial, found guilty, and put to death. He has already informed his disciples that he will be leaving them. They are naturally distraught. Not only because he is their beloved teacher and a dear friend. Also, because they have come to recognize him as the Messiah, and these things are not supposed to happen to the Messiah. So not only are they saddened by the impending personal loss, they are also confused and uncertain about what they had believed up until now. What they had believed, at least about Jesus and about his role as Messiah, have been turned upside down. How are they going to pick up the pieces, how are they going to ever make sense out of this latest bombshell, if Jesus is gone? If he is not there to guide them to the truth.

Jesus has that covered. He has a plan. Which he hopes will make his disciples feel a little better—less confused, more assured that they will ultimately be okay. Since the disciples are understandably feeling like they are being abandoned, Jesus seeks to assure them that this is not the case. As he puts it in the follow-up to the laying out of the plan, trying to convince the disciples, Jesus tells them, “I will not leave you orphaned.”

So what is the plan? Pretty simple, really: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” I can almost hear the disciples’ response: “Thanks, Jesus. We’d rather keep you, but if that is not an option, an Advocate will do nicely, thank you. By the way, what is an Advocate?”

The original Greek word we translate as “Advocate” is *Parakletos*, which, in its simplest and broadest sense is translated as “helper.” But even that is a bit too vague. The literal translation is “one called alongside.” Implying one who journeys alongside another for a particular purpose. The form that takes depends on context. Most commonly, it referred to a lawyer who comes alongside a defendant to advocate for their position in a legal case—hence the common translation of “advocate.” Another common usage was in reference to a teacher coming alongside a student to teach and guide. The latter being probably the best description for what

Jesus is talking about, as indicated by his explanation that this Advocate “is the Spirit of truth.” In the next section of the Gospel following today’s reading, Jesus provides even more details, stating, “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” (Jn 14.26). So the plan is to replace the disciples’ departing teacher, the earthly Jesus, with another teacher, the Holy Spirit. Foretelling the Pentecost event. Which for the disciples would be another seven and a half weeks away. For us, a mere two weeks away.

And while we don’t want to get too far ahead of ourselves—gotta leave something to talk about on the Day of Pentecost—there are some important revelations about this Advocate, about the nature of the Holy Spirit, that we just don’t get in the actual Pentecost story in the second chapter of Acts. In his preview in today’s Gospel, Jesus gives us insight into how the Holy Spirit will operate and interact with the faithful. Not just for the disciples. This way of being with and in the Holy Spirit would extend to all the faithful, for all time. Further, the implication in what Jesus tells the disciples is that this interaction, this relationship, with the Holy Spirit will be far deeper and more intimate than Jesus could have accomplished in his earthly, physical form. So, in what is a strange twist, Jesus’ departure, while painful for the disciples, is really a making way for a more intense, a more complete, relationship between us and the Divine.

Jesus gives us a couple of clues as to what this intensified relationship will look like; of how it will be characterized. The first is: “You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” A rather interesting statement. Jesus tells the disciples that he will send this new “thing,” the Holy Spirit, to be with them. But then saying, “You know him, because he abides with you.” Implying that the Holy Spirit has been with them, has abided, has dwelt with them, all along. That the Spirit is already with them and will remain with them.

How can this be, that the Holy Spirit is already with them, among them, when the Pentecost event has not yet occurred? Of course, we have a little insight and understanding that the disciples were not privy to. Without going too far down another rabbit hole, this one related to the Trinity and our discussions on Trinity Sunday (three weeks from now), we know that God is manifest in three “Persons”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three manifestations of the one being that is God. So, that being the case, the Holy Spirit has effectively already been with them through Jesus. That just because Jesus will no longer be with them in the flesh does not mean that he will no longer be with them. He will, only now in the form of the Spirit. A simplified explanation, but one that suffices for our purposes.

And then there is the part about “he will be in you.” That the Holy Spirit will be in the disciples and all who follow Jesus. Abiding, dwelling within us. Making for the possibility of more intimate relationship. Abiding in us, being within us, meaning that the Holy Spirit is not just be with us, but is a part of us. That we will always have access to the wisdom, the guidance, the comfort, the love, that the Holy Spirit offers. Meaning that God’s loving presence through the Holy Spirit is available in an ongoing way that was not possible with Jesus in purely human form. Or put another way, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ own Spirit would be available to us in an ongoing way.

All this is further emphasized in the second thing Jesus says about their relationship—about our relationship—with the Holy Spirit. “On that day, you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Through the Holy Spirit, we will have a greater understanding of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son. A relationship that is bound together by the Holy Spirit. With the Holy Spirit being the means by which God and Christ—particularly the Resurrected and Ascended Christ—are able to be in ongoing relationship with us. All in an interconnected way. God the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit being intertwined in that mysterious Trinitarian relationship. But even more so, we are brought into that relationship. As Jesus told the disciples, he is in the Father and Jesus’ followers are in him, and he is in us. All made possible through the Holy Spirit. That it is only through and because of the Holy Spirit, that we are able to be in the ongoing, intimate relationship with God and with Christ.

In our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear Paul’s discourse with the people of Athens. Coming upon a temple dedicated to an unknown God—something the Greeks often did so as to hedge their bets just in case there was a god they did not know about—Paul tells them about a god unknown to them, but known to Paul. Our God. He describes God as being “not far from each one of us. For ‘in him we live and move and have our being.’” This is a powerful statement that points to the growing understanding of who God is post-Resurrection, post-Ascension, and post-Pentecost. As the early Church developed following Pentecost, and the early Christians had the opportunity to live into their emerging understanding of their faith and their relationship with God, the understanding of how we relate to and interact with God became more apparent. They began to realize that this relationship really was a two-way street. That God did not just dwell with them and in them. That was radical enough at the time. But even more so, that we also dwelt with and in God. Implying that we are directly connected to, that we have direct access to God. An even more radical departure from previous understandings of who God was. A radical departure from how any other religion viewed relationship between humanity and the divine.

What we hear laid out today, by Jesus and by Paul, is a new understanding of our relationship with our God. That our lives are so intimately and intricately intertwined with God—with the one who abides in us and in whom we abide. I don’t know if we, even 2,000 years later, really understand or fully appreciate what a powerful revelation this is. What a powerful declaration this is. That abiding in us, God can use each of us to advance his purposes—if we allow him to do so. And that we, abiding in God, have the power of the Divine at our disposal—if we choose to tap into it.

“In him we live and move and have our being.” What would happen, what could happen, if we actually began living into the reality and the fullness of what relationship with God truly means?