

THE CONTINUING PRESENCE

A minister tells the following story about a member of his church. She told him that a friend asked her to help three days a week in a program in the poorest part of town, an after-school program that provides food, fun, and tutoring for kids from some of the most marginalized and challenging homes in town.

“Sure, I was a school teacher much of my life,” she said, “but I just don’t think I’m good at this sort of thing. I really think I deserve a rest. Surely they can get someone who is better qualified than me.” She had all sorts of reservations.

But she hesitantly said she would give it a try. She said that before she began work each afternoon she would sit in her car and offer a little prayer: “God, you got me into this. Now please, please help me through this. Do whatever you want done here today. Amen.” Well, to her surprise she was a great success at this ministry. She quickly moved from three afternoons a week to every weekday afternoon. She shared with her pastor that one of the little boys, a child with whom she spent the whole afternoon trying to teach him how to do better in math, bid farewell to her late that afternoon with the words, “Thanks, God. You really helped me today.”

Of course, she isn’t God. But that story illustrates the Gospel lesson for today. I hope you will keep that story in mind as we open up the Word of God, which was spoken by our Lord Jesus to his disciples in the upper room. As we heard last week, when our focus was on the passage just prior to today’s lesson in John 14, Jesus was nearing the end of his public ministry. Judas had already slipped out into the night and had set in motion the events that would soon lead to Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, his mock trial and crucifixion. In the time remaining, it was crucial for Jesus to brief his disciples about what was most important for them to know and to do.

Jesus emphasized, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Then in the next breath, he told them that he would “ask the Father, and God will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.” As Jesus obediently moved toward the cross, he had every right to expect and ask that his disciples – then and now – do the same. Jesus ordered them to obey (“keep my commandments”) as an ongoing sign of their love for him to the world.

And, what were the commandments that Jesus wanted his disciples to keep? Jesus required that we love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and that we love our neighbors as ourselves. All of his teachings fell within these two summations of the Law, which Jesus combined and made into one great commandment. As we read through the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ teachings and his actions, it becomes very clear that Jesus, unlike so much of our culture today, did not define love as a mushy sentiment or limit love to physical affection.

Jesus made it clear that love is an action verb. The agape love that Jesus talked about described the same kind of love that Jesus had for his own. Jesus exhibited the self-giving love that seeks the good of the other. This godly brand of love is generous and, by its very nature, it is sacrificial love. Throughout his ministry, the disciples had seen this love portrayed in Jesus as he reached out in compassion to others. He was never too busy to stop and attend to the needs of those who cried out to him for mercy and healing. He ate with sinners, gathered in the outcasts, and touched those who were considered defiled as a way of saying to them, “You matter to me. God loves you and calls you into the family.”

In the span of twenty-four hours, the disciples would witness the true depth of Jesus’ love for them as he suffered and died on the cross. He did so because of his great love for us all and

because he lived in obedience to the Father's will and his understanding of the role of the Messiah as revealed in the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah. For Jesus, love and obedience were tied together, and he expected no less from his disciples then and now!

Listen to what Jesus said next. Jesus spoke about asking the Father to give another Advocate to be with them forever. This is the Spirit of truth. Jesus would soon be leaving them and, not just once but twice! He would leave them for three short days during the time of his death, which must have been three very long days to those disciples. Then, forty days after his resurrection, Jesus would leave them again as he ascended and returned to the heavenly realm to "sit at the right hand of God the Father."

Jesus was leaving the disciples, and yet, he would not be leaving them alone. They would not be orphaned because God the Father and the Son would send the Holy Spirit to be with them., Jesus would be absent from their midst as God in human flesh; however, the Spirit, who is the continuing Presence of God, would come to them and remain with them.

It's interesting to note that Jesus described the Holy Spirit as another Advocate. The same personal relationship the disciples had with Jesus during his time with them would carry on as the very breath or Spirit of God would come to them and dwell within them. Even though Jesus would be leaving them, at the same time he would be present with them in a more powerful, intimate way as the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the Spirit would act as the disciples' Advocate, who would be with them always. An advocate, in the Greek, literally means someone who is called in to stand by our side and help. The Holy Spirit comes to us and takes away our inadequacies and enables us to cope with life. The Comforter comes with strength and empowers us to act in obedience.

We know from our own experiences that it is difficult to keep God's commandments. On our own, we fall short of God's glory. But the Holy Spirit now comes to us, stands with us, and enables us to keep the commandments. God's continuing presence and power go with us in life and help us to say "No" to temptation, self-centeredness, and sin, and to say, "Yes," to God's will and do it. We confess it is difficult to love others in the same way that Jesus loves us. But, it's not an impossible task for the Spirit helps us, shores up our weak attempts, and provides what we lack so that we are enabled to love and serve others. In this way, we keep and fulfill the commandments – to God's great joy.

Remember the teacher in the opening story? She didn't really want to do what she was asked to do. She didn't think she could do the work. Surely there was someone else, who was better qualified. However, despite all of her reservations, she said she would give it a try. And each afternoon, before she began work, she sat in her car and prayed, "God, you got me into this. Now, please, help me through this. Do whatever you want done here today. Amen." God heard and daily answered that prayer. The Holy Spirit came alongside of her, provided and called forth the necessary gifts, and empowered her to give of herself in love to tutor the children. By loving God and obeying the law of love, God did not disappoint her. The Spirit of truth, the continuing Presence of God, was with her and stood by her as another Advocate. And, through her, God was present as an Advocate to the children.

Finally, the Spirit of truth not only comes to assist us with our concerns and endeavors; the Spirit also brings to us God's desires for us. God gets our attention through the Spirit to speak and act on behalf of the poor and the lonely. God instills in us an aching hunger for peace and reconciliation with others. The Spirit is also God's Advocate, who whispers in our ear, speaks the Word to us, prods our conscience, equips us, and nudges us in the right direction so that we do God's will and work in the world.

In his book, *The Different Drum*, Scott Peck tells a story about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. There were only five monks left – the abbot and four brothers, all over 70 in age. In the woods near the monastery was a hut that was visited from time to time by a rabbi from a nearby town. One day the abbot was led by the Holy Spirit to come to the rabbi to ask his advice for their dying monastery. The rabbi responded that he had no advice to give. But he did leave the abbot with this strange message: “The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks asked him, “Well what did the rabbi say?” “He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving – it was something cryptic – was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi’s words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. He is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you think about it, Elred is virtually always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course, the rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet what if he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary love and respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And, on the off chance that each monk, himself, might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with more love and respect.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came there to visit, to picnic on the lawn, to wander along some of its paths, and even go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary, Spirit-filled love that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men, who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order, and, thanks to the rabbi’s gift (as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit!), the monastery was indeed a vibrant center of light, love, and spirituality in the realm.

Let those who have ears, hear. And, let all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ, love all others (just as we are loved by him). In that way, with the help of the continuing Presence of the

Holy Spirit, we keep the commandments and, at the same time, we bring glory, honor, and praise to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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