

A Easter 6 5.17.20

John 14:15-21

Focus Statement: The Holy Spirit is always with us.

A couple of weekends ago I was downstairs reading the paper when I heard Dugan scratching on something and meowing sadly. I went upstairs to make sure he wasn't locked in the closet. Which has happened a few times. He likes to sneak into the back corner of the closet and then because, he's all black and hard to see in the dark, we shut the door on him not knowing he's in there.

The problem was a closed door, not one that was keeping him in, but one that was keeping him out. Travis had shut the bathroom door so he could take a shower and Dugan decided that he had been abandoned. Never mind that I was downstairs, less than fifteen feet away, or that Travis has never once gone into the bathroom and never returned, Dugan was completely convinced that Travis had left him forever, that he was never coming back through that door, and he was irreconcilable. The sound I heard was Dugan, lying on his side, alternating between scratching at the bathroom door and reaching his paw under it trying to coax Travis to come back out, meowing sadly. Travis, of course, was in the shower throughout this whole ordeal, completely unaware of the pathetic tableau unfolding in the hallway. Cat emotions, friends, are real, complex, and powerful. Illogical. But powerful.

While I don't feel compelled to lay on my side meowing sadly and trying to stick my hand out the front door, I admit a similar complexity of emotions these days as Dugan felt at Travis's abandoning him out of the bathroom. I know the world is out there, I know everyone I love is just a phone call, a text message, even a Zoom conference away, but the

distance feels immeasurable. I don't completely understand it. I've moved a lot, which means I'm pretty experienced with being physically distanced from the people I love, but this feels different somehow. My family has started a weekly Zoom call. Every Sunday night my parents, my brother and sister-in-law, and Travis and I all log into Zoom from our living rooms and visit with each other. My family and I are close, but this regular weekly check in is more communication than we'd normally have with one another. And I certainly wouldn't see them, we'd normally just call. Yet despite the regular communication, the fact that they cannot come makes the distance between us feel larger. My two best friends live in Wisconsin, I'll regularly go a long time without seeing either of them, but that I can't, that I don't know when that gap will lift, makes the distance seem unbearable. Even you all, even people in Battle Creek feel far. Ellis was in the garage at church fixing the lawn mower the other day when I stopped by to check the mail, and I was careful to keep space between us. There was nothing strange about this interaction. I've never made a habit of inspecting Ellis's lawnmower repairs. I own a push-reel mower, what do I know about the baby tractors that he and Bill ride, but just knowing that I needed to stay at a safe distance made him feel far off and distant.

I was thinking about all this this week, because our Gospel text for this morning is about the abiding presence of God through the person of Jesus and soon through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the work of the beloved community. This text is Jesus telling his disciples, I know you feel alone but I promise you, you're not. So let's take some time to walk through this text and hear this assurance of Christ's presence that Jesus is proclaiming here.

Our text this morning, which follows immediately on the heels of the one we read last week, is all about Jesus stressing for his disciples two crucial points. Point one – loving Jesus and keeping Jesus’ commands are inseparable experiences. You cannot love Jesus without keeping his commands, you cannot keep his commands without loving Jesus. We’ll circle back to what we mean by “loving Jesus” and “keeping his commands” in a minute here, but first let me go on. Point two of this section is this is not the end of the relationship between God and Jesus’ followers, because God continues to dwell with Jesus’ own even after Jesus has gone. In verse sixteen, Jesus told his disciples that God would send them, “another Advocate.” The word translated as “advocate” here is a great one. The Greek word is *parakletos*, which means “one who exhorts,” “one who comforts,” one who helps,” and “one who makes appeals on one’s behalf.” There isn’t an English equivalent that captures all of its meaning. The NRSV translation uses advocate, with a footnote that “helper” would also be a possible choice. The King James Version goes with “Comforter,” the NIV tries “Counselor,” The Message uses “Friend,” and the Common English Bible, “Companion,” you get the point. There’s so much packed into this one word that some translations give up all together and just go with the English transliteration of the Greek word, Paraclete. This complexity coupled with the fact that our English translations tend to capitalize the word as if it was a proper noun. Like Jesus is introducing someone by their name, “I’d like you all to the spirit of truth, her name is Paraclete.” But Paraclete or Advocate or Helper or Friend, none of these are names, rather they are functions. They are descriptions of the work. This would be like if we all stopped calling Kendra, Kendra, and started referring to her exclusively as Occupational Therapist. Or we only called Ellis, “guy

who fixes the lawn mower when the blade falls off.” Those are jobs they hold, but they’re not who they are. I make this point because Jesus said he was asking the Father to send us “another Paraclete.” Another tells us we had one already. Those roles I rattled off, counselor, helper, advocate, companion, friend, “one who exhorts,” “one who comforts,” “one who appeals on another’s behalf,” all of those are roles held by Jesus when he was with them. Now that he would be leaving, he promised there would be another who would continue to play all those roles for them.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus told his disciples, “I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.” I’d always read that passage as being about Jesus’ resurrection appearances to the disciples, or maybe a reference to Jesus return at the end of days. But I heard a theologian this week who said this promise that they will see Jesus is more immediate than even the resurrection. They will see Jesus because of the Spirit. Just as they know the Father because they know Jesus, and Jesus and the Father are one, so too do they see Jesus, even when Jesus is gone, because they have another who is continuing in all the roles which Jesus held for them. Roles of teacher, friend, advocate, helper, comforter, yes. But even more than that, role of holder of the relationship between Jesus and the Father, the relationship which we learned last week that the disciples too are now a part of because of their relationship with Jesus.

Which gets us back to Point One of this section. Point One remember being what Jesus laid out in verses fifteen and twenty-one. Verse fifteen, “If you love me, you will keep my commands.” My Bible has a note that some translations read “If you love me, you keep my

commands.” And then verse twenty-one, “those who have my commands and keep them are those that love me.” It’s the great chicken and the egg problem here, are the ones who love Jesus the ones who keep his commands? Or is that the ones who keep his commands the ones who love Jesus? Which comes first, loving Jesus or doing Jesus’ work? Yes is the very Lutheran response to this clearly not a yes or no question. The other question here also is what are Jesus’ commands? We talked about that last week, the command we are to keep is that we love each another as Jesus has loved us. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,” Jesus told them, told us, just a chapter before, “if you have love for one another.”

So dear people of God, here’s the good news. Here’s the promise. This loneliness we feel right now. This sense of isolation, fear for each other and our world, our concern for our neighbors, that, really, is a sign of God’s presence with us, a sign of God’s love for us. This is a bit of a curveball, I know, but bear with me here. Because think about it. All those things I just described, loneliness, fear for others, concern for our neighbor, those are signs of love, of us having love for others, just as Jesus commanded us to do. Our love for others and Jesus’ love for us are in inseparable realities.

Dear people of God, there are not words for how much you are loved by the Father. English, Greek, it doesn’t matter the language, no words could do that love justice. To borrow a line from later in John’s Gospel, if the words describing God’s love for you were written down, “I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” Amen.