

John 16:16-24, 32-33 "In a Little While" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/24/20

A story is told about a couple who had anxiously waited for indoor restaurant dining to become a thing again to celebrate their anniversary. The first day their favorite place opened, they headed out but failed to make reservations. When they arrived, they learned that several people had signed up for tables ahead of them. The hostess said it would be a little while before they got seated. The husband asked how long was "a little while" but the hostess had already run off to seat another couple. So they sat in the lobby. Soon thereafter, a disgruntled couple left the restaurant, complaining the wait was too long. Within minutes, the hostess called, "Johnsons?" No one responded. She called again but to no avail. Quickly, the husband said to his spouse that if they told the hostess they were the Johnsons, they could be seated faster. As they approached her, she asked, "Are you the Johnsons?" He nodded. "Great, we've been expecting you," she informed them, "Your family is waiting in the dining room."

How long is "a little while?" We all wonder what is meant by the phrase when we hear experts say, "It will be better in a little while." Does that mean a few days or weeks or months or what? In a little while, we say to our son who asks to go to the park... in a little while, the peaches will be ready to pick... in a little while, you'll be able to ride your horse again... in a little while, the baby will be ready to be born... "In a little while," Jesus says, "you will no longer see me, and again in a little while, and you will see me." The disciples are confused saying "What does he mean by this 'a little while'?" This section of John's Gospel, as you've probably heard, is Jesus' farewell speech to his friends and in it he has some hard things to say to those he loves. Today's text is the conclusion of Jesus' long and difficult good-bye as he warns his disciples they are in for rough times ahead. Verses 16-33 basically summarize themes already treated in earlier verses and it is the reason we rarely hear a sermon on this particular text. Just one example comes from 14: 19, where we hear Jesus saying, "In a little while, the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." But I wanted to address chapter 16 and this often overlooked text because of its repetitive emphasis on "in a little while," a phrase that is shaping so much of our daily lives right now.

Even before COVID, our culture was defined by immediate gratification; you want something, you can get it within a few days thanks to things like Amazon Prime. We are like

that impatient child who is asked if she would like an ice cream sundae and she stomps her foot crying, "I don't want to wait until Sunday, I want ice cream now." We don't like to wait, and waiting which comes with an undetermined time frame attached is the worst. "In a little while," Jesus says and some scholars believe he is speaking of that brief separation that crucifixion and death will bring between him and his followers. Yet others believe John shares this part of the story to indicate that time after the disciples have said good-bye to the risen Christ and are just waiting for his return, however and whenever that will come. It could easily be a word to the church saying, it will be just a little while, you will not know the day nor the hour, but Christ will come. In typical John fashion, the imagery and figures of speech in this segment point to the whole Christ event over those particular things that Jesus says or does. This leads me to ponder its meaning for us who are knee deep in COVID ambiguity and unsure what this whole event means for us now and in the future. Some of us are quick to try and take over and alleviate the ambiguity... on this day, we will do this; on this day, these things will open; on this day, by my authority, you will do this. When such statements are directed at the church, such as when churches will open, I must respond that first and foremost this church has never closed. Even today, we are not closed – our building is in minimal use but our building is not the church, never has been. The people are still praying, probably more so than ever before; our mission continues to be defined by the greatest commandment there is and that is to love God and neighbor as yourself. To love our neighbor means to protect others and place their safety, especially the well-being of the most vulnerable, above our personal wishes. As our General Minister and President made clear Friday night in a national statement, "A Christian understanding of community requires that we take seriously public health guidance to protect not only our congregations, but the communities in which we live and serve. But it does not require taking undue risks with the safety of our neighbors just to respond to a governmental official. Our faith is small indeed if we see it only expressed through worship in buildings." This is one of those "in a little while" moments where we have to be patient recognizing that just because we do not see each other face to face does not mean that God is not at work in mighty ways among and within us.

Sometimes I think that we are convinced if we could just have our way, if we complain and grumble enough about the situation, then the problem will miraculously go away. It is like the young woman whose car was stalled at a stoplight. She tried to get it started, but nothing happened. The light turned green and everyone behind her was ready to go, they were done waiting and wanted to be on their way, but there she sat, frustrated and embarrassed, holding up traffic. Rather than safely navigating around her, the driver of the car behind her started laying on his horn. After another desperate attempt to get the car started, she got out and walked to the honker. The man rolled down his window in surprise. "Tell you what," she said, "You go start my car, and I'll sit back here and honk the horn for you."

Jesus says, "if the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before you... if they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (15: 18, 20). "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world, you have tribulation, but take courage, I have conquered the world." (16:33) Did you catch that? D'Esta Love notes that this is the culmination of Jesus' lengthy good-bye which I think we need to hear again and again: You will have problems but be brave for Christ has conquered the world. The words "in a little while" are used by Jesus to give the disciples peace and hope in chaotic and uncertain times. As one poet wrote for times like these, "Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not get bent out of shape." Jesus is calling for courage and flexibility in the ambiguity which marks our lives. Suffering in the world is unavoidable but take heart, Jesus has overcome the world. This is not meant to direct followers to seclude themselves in sealed-off Christian communities so they don't encounter the world, but reminds followers that forces which dominate the world such as greed, power, wealth, even disease do not have the final say. God provides the way to sustain courage and practice compassion for others in this time ... and it is God who will claim the victory.

Courageous voices among us are speaking up for those with the least power and wealth along with the most COVID cases per capita of any population. The facts are out and it is the black, latino, and Native American populations who have been devastated by this pandemic. Those of us who live in predominately white America have been physically untouched in comparison. but that also lays a huge responsibility at our feet. Jesus is clear about his expectations towards those who are advantaged, as he says, "To whom much is given, much is

required.” We are called to continue being the church, feeding those who are hungry, assisting those in need, sheltering those without homes, making medical care readily available for all, and always choosing to love our neighbors by protecting their safety and well-being first and foremost. Against the backdrop of uncertainty and fear, there is good news this day as our text reminds us that we have a friend in Jesus who will breathe sweet peace into our hearts and lives, showing us that “in a little while” this too shall pass. The peace Jesus gives is not as the world gives; it is not the peace that takes us to war and that is won when all conflict has ceased, and our enemies are subdued into submission. It is not a false security that draws boundaries between nations and races to keep foreigners from infecting our way of life. It is an all-encompassing peace that calls us to be courageous in the face of persecution and trials and patient for a little while, knowing that we have a place in the sanctity of the Creator’s love, the comforting and consoling presence of the Holy Spirit, and the reassurance that our friend Jesus has overcome the world. “In the world you have tribulation...but take courage, I have overcome the world.” Amen.