

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:7-18

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Do you remember the first time you were left home alone? It happens to every child eventually and it can stir up all kinds of mixed emotions. On the one hand, it's pretty thrilling and heady for a child to be left 'in charge' of the house. That's a huge responsibility. I remember being thrilled to have the house all to myself. I also remember feeling very proud that my parents would trust me to do that. Then again, I was also pretty nervous knowing that I had absolutely no idea what I should do in case of an emergency. Being left home alone was probably the first time I was ever confronted with my own limitations...and it was pretty scary!

This morning, in our gospel lesson, Jesus is preparing his disciples for being left 'home alone.' Last Sunday we heard a portion of Jesus' Farewell Discourse in our gospel lesson and this morning we have gotten more details. This passage was written about Maundy Thursday and Jesus is preparing the disciples not only for the crucifixion that will happen the next day, but for the resurrection and the subsequent ascension. The crucifixion will be brutal and emotionally traumatic. The resurrection three days later will be mind-blowing and both frightening and exciting as well as joyful. But the ascension is what will mark Jesus' ultimate departure from his earthly life. It's at the ascension that the disciples will realize that Jesus is truly leaving them.

Like children left home alone, they must have felt a mixed bag of emotions...elation at having seen Jesus and having spent time with him after his crucifixion...and fear and trepidation about ultimately being without him. They must have known that those post crucifixion appearances would not happen indefinitely. Jesus knows our hearts better than we do, so he must have known the disciples were apprehensive about not being in the physical company of Jesus any more. So Jesus talks to them about what to expect. He reassures them that he will be with them always. He soothes them by telling them that he is not abandoning them. He promises that he will not leave them orphaned. And he tells them about 'another' advocate that will come to be with them...the Spirit of Truth. We know that the ascension will happen soon. As a matter of fact, it's on our Liturgical Calendar for this coming Thursday. So before we meet again for Sunday worship, Jesus will have ascended into heaven. We also know that Pentecost and Trinity Sunday will be coming up in just a couple of weeks, so we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves in terms of talking about the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church on Pentecost. For today, we need only to focus on what Jesus means when he promises the disciples that he will not leave them orphaned.

It's always a good idea to look at translations when we're studying scripture. There is a lot to be learned about the way different Greek words were translated into English. In this particular passage, Jesus talks to his disciples about being 'in' them and about them being 'in' him. That's sometimes a hard concept for us to grasp. How does that work...for Jesus to be 'in' us and for us to be 'in' Jesus? Consider for a moment that there's another way to translate the Greek word that has been translated 'in.' It can also be translated 'among.' So Jesus might just as easily have been saying that Jesus is 'among' them and that they are 'among' the Father and the Son and now, as Jesus tells them, the Holy Spirit.

It's all about community. Jesus is telling us about community and his presence among us when we are in community. He created community when he chose the twelve disciples. He created community when he reached out to outsiders in their own communities. He referred to community when he described himself as the Good Shepherd and the safety for the sheep in the sheepfold. The sheep were in community. The sheep who got into trouble were the ones who wandered away. Thankfully, when that happens the Good Shepherd goes to retrieve them. And Jesus talks about the joy of the Father when one who was lost is found and is restored to the community.

Jesus even created community from the cross. He told the thief hanging next to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." That's community. And from the cross he created community when he gave his mother to the beloved disciple and the beloved disciple to his mother. That's community.

Jesus tells his followers that whenever two or three are gathered together in his name, he will be among them. He will be with them. That's community. When he walked along the road to Emmaus with his two distraught followers...he was talking with two of them, not one of them. That's community. When he appeared in a locked room among his disciples after his resurrection, he was spending time with the community he had created. They talked to him. They ate with him. They examined his wounds. He was truly with them. He was among them.

Of course, each of us can and do have our personal one-on-one conversations with Jesus and with God. We bear our souls in our prayers. And we know that we are heard. But the place where we are able to experience Christ is in the company of other believers. Christianity is not an individual enterprise...a personal savior. He's the redeemer of all of creation. Christianity is fed and nurtured and sustained in community. Jesus shows us that from the beginning of his ministry until he leaves this earth and he reinforces it when he makes himself known to us whenever two or three are gathered together in his name. When that happens, he is present.

Jesus gave his disciples and us one command: he said, "If you love me, you will love one another the way I have loved you." And Jesus loved the ones who were unlovable: he loved the one who betrayed him; he loved the one who skimmed money out of the common purse; he loved the two brothers who jockeyed for position both wanting to be on Jesus' righthand side; he loved the one who would not give up his wealth to follow Jesus; and he loved the one who denied three times that he even knew Jesus. Loving the ones that are easy to love is not what Jesus commanded from his disciples or from us. Loving the ones who are hard to love is what he demanded. He requires that we love one another the way he loved.

We long to gather in Jesus' name because when we do, we know that he is among us. And when we celebrate the Eucharist, we know that he is made known to us in the breaking of the bread. The 'gathering' is what has gotten so hard recently. We can't gather together in person. That's a huge loss for us who seek Christ in the companionship and company of other believers. We may be feeling all kinds of emotions right now...sadness, frustration, loneliness...or a sense of being set adrift. We may even sense that we are grieving for what has been temporarily suspended and not available to us. We might not be able to put our finger on exactly what's wrong, but we know that things are not 'right.' Our lives in general have been upended and our community of believers has been scattered. It's disorienting. We've lost the very heart of how we practice our faith in not being able to gather together in person. We can 'see' each other electronically and that's a blessing, but it's not the same as being together in person. Knowing what we know about our faith...knowing that it is a combination of the personal relationship we have with Jesus and the communal relationship we have with one another that assures his presence...and our sense that he is made known to us in the breaking of the bread...it's hard not to feel a profound sense of loss.

Trying to explain to someone who has not been drawn to God through Jesus is like trying to explain to someone what falling in love is like. Most people fall in love...at least once during their lifetime but the only way to know what falling in love is like is to experience it. There are no words that are adequate. And there are no words that are adequate to explain the power of Jesus Christ in our lives. We just have to experience it to know what that is.

There are moments through the disruption and chaos of this pandemic that can easily leave us feeling like we've been abandoned. It's easy for us to wonder where God is in all of this...and we probably won't be able to see that until we have emerged on the other side of this experience. But we know that Jesus walks with us. We know that he is at the heart of our church community. We know that we experience him through one another...through our care for one another. And we know that Jesus keeps his promises and that he has told us that he will not leave us orphaned. Not only is he going to send another advocate...the Spirit of Truth...but

he himself is going to be among us whenever two or three of us are gathered together in his name.

He is not going to leave us home alone.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.