

Acts 17:22-31  
1 Peter 3:13-22  
John 14:15-21  
Psalm 66:7-18

We can't do it, you know? We can't do what Jesus has told his disciples to do. He leaves them with one command: love one another as I have loved you! Form a community of interconnected relationships and weave them all together by loving each other the way Jesus loved you. That's Jesus' commandment. That's Jesus last directive to his disciples. That's all he asks of them. It isn't much. He didn't tell them to move mountains. He didn't tell them to heal the sick or topple governments, although he did tell them that they will be able to do things that far surpass what he has done if they call upon his name. He told them simply to love each other. Sounds easy enough, right?

Think again. Think how Jesus loved them. Jesus was servant to them. He took care of them. He taught them. He led them. He made sure always that they were OK. He anticipated what their emotional needs were. He challenged them to expand their spiritual experience with God. Do not be afraid, he told them. He knew that he would be leaving them. He also knew that no one had ever loved them the way that he did. When Jesus talked about abundant life, he was talking about intimacy.....relational, emotional, spiritual connection between human beings which begins with that kind of intimate connection with God.

In the gospel this morning, Jesus is in the middle of his Farewell Discourse. He's been trying to explain to his disciples what is going to happen. The power and wonder of the resurrection are still with them, but Jesus knows that he will not be with them forever.....not in his resurrection body.....on this earth.....as he has been. He knows that he will be ascending to the Father and will be with them no more in the way that he was before the crucifixion and even more powerfully after the resurrection. He's giving them instructions for how they are to be with one another in his absence.

Jesus is laying the foundation stone for community.....the community that will become the church.....the body of Christ in the world forever. These disciples could not possibly have realized or fully grasped what Jesus was trying to tell them, but they listened nevertheless. And they tried.....and, we, as Christ's disciples, are still trying. We are still trying to love one another they way Christ loves us. But we aren't Christ. We don't have that capacity or those skills and Jesus must have known that. He must have known that

the disciples were not going to be able to love each other on their own the same way he loved them. And we still can't. As knowledgeable and sophisticated as we are.....as many self-help books as we read, as many psychotherapists as we consult, as many tries as we make, as good-willed and well-intentioned as we are, we still can't love each other the way Jesus loves us.

Jesus must have known that. He must have known that no matter how good our intentions are, we still can't do it like he can do it. So he tells his disciples that the Father is going to send another Advocate.....one who can guide and help and sustain the disciples in their efforts to love like Jesus, the first Advocate, did. The Father will send an Advocate that will help the disciples and will help us as well in our attempts to love each other as Jesus loves us.

Jesus refers to this Advocate as the Paraclete.....which is a Greek term for 'one who comes alongside.' Isn't that exactly what we need to get through the hard parts of life? We need someone who will walk alongside of us.....to guide us, to teach us, to nudge us, to sustain us and to keep us steady as we go. We can't do this alone. And not for lack of trying. All of us try. And more often than not, we fail when we are completely on our own. When we turn to the one who walks along side us, we succeed.

The Advocate that the Father sends to us when the resurrected Jesus departs from the disciples is not hampered by the physical restraints that sometimes constrained Jesus in his human body. Jesus prevailed over many physical limitations: he walked on water; he was transfigured on the mountaintop; he healed the centurion's son without ever seeing or touching him; he knew that Lazarus was dead before he went to him; he fed 5000 people with limited resources; and in his resurrection body he appeared inside a locked room to a handful of his terrified followers; and he did many other things that would have seriously constrained any mere mortal. But the Advocate that he sends has even fewer physical constraints. As a matter of fact, the Paraclete, the one who walks alongside, has no physical restraints at all. The Paraclete is ubiquitous. He is all things to all people. He can be anywhere and everywhere.....with everyone and each one simultaneously.....and is even frequently referred to as 'she' implying that gender is not a constraint either.

Jesus said to his followers: "Do not be afraid. I will not leave you alone." The saddest and most emotionally and spiritually depleting feeling of all is the feeling of being alone.....of being abandoned.....of being disconnected not only from God, but from our fellow human beings. None of us get through this life without figuring out how to

deal with loneliness for it is a universal experience. And it is emotionally charged. It is both painful and terrifying. We aren't emotionally or physically or spiritually or intellectually equipped to deal with life completely on our own and on some very primitive level, we know that. Even in a room filled with people, we can feel that overwhelming sense of being alone. We've probably all been there at one time or another. And it is this need.....this powerful need.....to be connected.....that propels us to pursue intimate relationships with other people and ultimately drives us toward seeking that kind of intimacy with God. It is God, after all, who is the source of all intimacy.

Jesus offers us the antidote to such to that profound sense of loneliness. When Jesus talks to us about abundant life, he is talking to us about profound connection.....the type of profound connection that we call 'intimacy.' And it begins in this life. We don't have to wait for this abundant life until after we die. We can begin to taste it now.....in our most intimate human relationships.....in those relationships that confirm our connectedness to each other and ultimately to God. It is this intimacy that Jesus calls 'abundant life.' It's right here and right now.....in this life.....and it gives us a taste.....an abundant taste.....of the life that Jesus has prepared for us.....the life that continues from this life into the next.....the life that is eternal life.

God sends us the Paraclete to walk alongside us.....to be embodied by those people in our lives who walk alongside us in the darkest moments of our lives. They aren't sent to us to 'fix' it or take it away or heal it or solve it. They are sent to us as companions in grief.....as a reminder and a tangible experience of knowing that we are ultimately not alone. Most of you love someone who has died and is now separated from you. Most of you know what that kind of grief is like. And from time to time most of you think about the one you love and feel you have lost in this life. Those memories and those feelings haven't gone away and they never will. That's our connection to the ones we still love and whose presence we can sometimes still feel. That we are able to remain connected through love to those who are on the 'other side of the veil' as they say is the gift that Jesus gave us. And it is the promise of the Paraclete, the Advocate who comes after Jesus, that makes that connection possible because the Paraclete is our present companion.

Jesus has claimed us as God's own. Jesus showed us how to love even though he knows we fall far short of his capacity to love. And God sends us the Paraclete, the one who will walk with us, guide us, sustain us, teach us, and remind us that we are never ever

abandoned. We are never ultimately alone. We are God's own. Jesus made that possible. And Jesus is the proof to us of God's undying love for us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.