

The Gift of the Spirit Is Forever
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
John Knox Presbyterian Church – May 17, 2020

John 14:15-21

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

What do we do when we are leaving our surroundings and home? When I go to leave for a trip, I try and put everything in place. I make sure the bills are paid and up to date. There are instructions to how to care for the dog, which is for the pet sitter or family member. I try to remember to notify the bank that I will be using my debit card out of state or country so they don't put a hold on it. My husband is the one that will put a hold on the mail, if we are both going to be out of town for a week or longer. I make sure my family members know when I will leave and when I will return. I am not very tidy! I know what a shocker. You all have seen my office and please don't judge. So, I do not make sure my house is clean. If there is time, I will make sure that it is picked up.

This is just for a vacation. What is like when you go to leave a job, leave a marriage, move from your home, or go to the hospital? Sometimes, we are given a warning of our departure and sometimes we are not that fortunate. We may or may not have time to prepare. If you are fortunate, what is like for your loved ones or family members, when you do prepare?

In the Gospel of John, we hear from Jesus as he is preparing to leave the earth and all the people who have surrounded him in his ministry. He knows what lies ahead of him. He wants to prepare the disciples of what to do once he leaves. We know so well the story of Maundy Thursday. Jesus has had the last supper with the twelve men that have followed him, eaten with him, grew tired with him, wept with him, laughed with him and prayed with him. They have walked side by side and listened to his teachings and watched him perform miracles of wonder and healing. These are the people that Jesus is passing the baton to in his ministry.

He must prepare them. The gathering around the table has revealed the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter. Jesus has washed the disciples' feet showing that he is a servant and they are to model him.

As Jesus eases into the shock of leaving them, he reassures them that there will be another advocate – a helper – a supporter. Jesus is sending the Holy Spirit. In Greek, advocate is *parálytos* and is translated as *paralete* or Holy Spirit. One commentator refers

to this as the one being called to our side. (Feasting on the Word – Year A, Vol. 2; Westminster John Knox Press, 2010; Linda Lee Claver; p. 493) Jesus tells them that they will not be able to see him but he is not leaving them orphaned. He will remain connected to them by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit will be with them forever. Jesus says, “The Spirit will abide in you forever!”

The Spirit is a gift for everyone. But Jesus warns the disciples that the world will not be able to see it. Why is that? If everyone has it, why will they not be able to see it or feel its presence? It goes back to the beginning of this passage. Love! If we love Jesus, we will follow his commandments. What are his commandments? Love our God, with all of your heart, soul and mind and love our neighbors as ourselves. Pretty simple, right! We only need to turn on the television to know how the world struggles with this.

In this midst of this pandemic, we have witnessed rioting and protesting on the television because of people wanting to go back to work and they find themselves in states that are struggling to open up. Is this concern of safety, anxiety over economic hardship or is it a political weapon? We have heard of the outbreak of violence. Tension is high! It is no wonder that Jesus in this short passage of six verses points to the need for love of him and following his commandments not once but twice (verses 15 and 21)!

In the midst of this pandemic, we have also witnessed love. I appreciate Governor Holcomb spending time during his daily press conferences to take the time to not give only bad news and startling statistics but celebrating those people who are working on the front lines and risking their lives to work with people. The people who are supporting from their homes by words of encouragement, giving those working long hours encouragement to persevere. I heard a trauma nurse being interviewed on the radio this week. She said, “We are trained to take on emergencies and trauma at high levels. But those times only last a couple of hours and at most an entire day. This has gone on for days, weeks and months.”

It is such a gift to receive this passage of scripture during this challenging time in our lifetime. A time that has pushed some to the breaking point. Jesus sends us this message to let us know that the Spirit is in us and is with us forever! We are Christ’s disciples. God never abandons us. Jesus is there always. The Spirit of truth is our advocate walking by our side seeing us through this.

Yes, the challenge is finding the strength to persevere but it is also being an advocate for others. How do we love our neighbors as ourselves? It is true that we are celebrating each other in so many ways and looking for good news in the midst of adversity.

How do we stand up for justice and do it with love and peace? This is where we need prayer the most. I have been weary lately. It is very difficult to be cooped up at home and I am fortunate to have the ability to go out to the grocery store. How do we reopen and do it safely for everyone especially those at high risk? I spoke with Betty Hartman when I delivered her yard sign this week. She said that her children are telling that she needs to stay in until July 4th. That seems so long from May 17.

Goodness gracious, this is difficult! It is hard for me to try and get my head around this. Then, we hear about the violence. People killing each other! How do we find the strength from the Spirit of truth and love each other as Christ loved us?

We hear a lot about heroes these days. Those everyday people doing extraordinary things. I was looking for a story for the sermon today and low and behold on my desk was a book that I received for Christmas. The title is “The World According to Mister Rogers - Important Things to Remember” by Fred Rogers. Now, you have heard me quote Mister Rogers many times and I believe he had a lot of wisdom especially when it came to loving our neighbor. Fred was the one that in times of disaster and struggle his parents told him to look around and find the helpers. You will always find the helpers. He also invited the African American police officer to come and soak his feet in the pool **with Fred** during a time when our nation was suffering from racial strife.

The story today talks about Fred’s heroes. He says, *“I’ve had lots of heroes – lots of people I’ve wanted to be like. To this day, I can still feel the excitement in 1944 as I opened the first installment of my Charles Atlas exercise course. I had save my money (\$19.00) and had sent away fro those lessons that I thought would help me look like Atlas himself holding up the world. In 1944, I was a chubby and week sixteen year-old, and Charles Atlas was trim and strong. I did the exercises every morning – some of them even had me hanging on a bar at a doorjamb. Many month and many lessons later. I still didn’t look like Charles Atlas. Now, happily I don’t need to.*

Maybe it’s natural, especially when we’re little and feel weak, to choose “outside” kinds of heroes and superheroes who can keep us safe in a scary world.

My next hero was a “big man on campus” in our high school: Jim Stumbaugh. He could do anything. A letterman in basketball, football and track, he made all A’s. Both of his parents were teachers, but his dad died during our freshman year. Who knows? Maybe that made Jim sensitive to the needs of a shy kid like me. At any rate, we beat the odds and became lifelong friends. Many years after high school when Jim’s teenage son was killed in an automobile accident, I was there for him. The way he lived through that terrible time and the way he lived through his own years of cancer confirmed my pick of a hero. Jim started out looking like Charles Atlas, ended up looking like Mahatma Gandhi. What’s amazing to me is that he always acted like that peace-filled Gandhi.

Yes, Gandhi’s one of my heroes Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer and Jan Addams (that tireless advocate of internationalism and world peace), and Bo Lozoff (who helps inmates use their time well in prison). Other heroes are Yo-Yo Ma and everyone else in the public eye who cares about beauty and refuses to bow to fast and loud sensationalism and greed. Recently I’ve added an “unknown hero” to my list: the person who drives the car I saw the other day, the parked car with the flashing lights and the sign that reads, “Vintage Volunteer ... Home Delivered Meals.” (This is like our own “Meals on Wheels” volunteers!) So those are some of my heroes now: the Charles Atlases of my elder years! They’re the kind of people who help all of us come to realize that “Biggest” doesn’t necessarily mean the best,” that the most important things of life are inside things like feelings and wonder and love – and that the ultimate happiness is being able to sometimes, somehow to help our neighbor become a hero too.” (The World According to Mister Rogers – Important Things to Remember” by Fred Rogers; Family Communications Inc.; 2003; p. 138-141)

Thanks be to Jesus Christ who gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, which abides in us forever even in the most difficult times. The Spirit also gives us the help and guidance to follow Jesus' commandments, which is to love God and love each other. Amen.