

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

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
May 17th, 2020
The Rev. Karen Haig

If You Love Me

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. John 14:15 Now I know our gospel reading had a lot more to say than that, and the other readings too, but I have to tell you... that first line stops me up short. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I love Jesus. And God knows I want to keep his commandments, but do I? Can I? How DO I love God? How do you?

If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Jesus said these words to his disciples on that last evening, just after their last supper together, just after he had washed their feet. He knew he was leaving and the disciples knew it too. It was a confusing time. A tender time. A sad and scary time. It was a time when there wasn't much time left, a time when every last word mattered. And if we take seriously the reality that Jesus was saying goodbye to his friends, to his earthly ministry, to his very life that night, the things he chose to say take on new meaning.

Jesus did a lot of talking that night before he died, and what he talked about was love. It's what so often happens when people know they are about to die... everything but love falls away. So Jesus talked a lot about love that night, and as he had with his entire life, he showed his friends what real love looked like. It wasn't a night of last minute orders, or job descriptions, or territory assignments. There was no list of things they needed to know. There was only love. Love made real in washing tired, dirty feet, love made real by looking at Judas with a broken, tender, forgiving heart, love made real in the promise that while he was going away he would still be with them, he would always be with them.

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. Another Advocate, Jesus says, because he was the first. That's what he had been for them you know – an advocate. The one who came along side of them, to teach and comfort and challenge and love them. And so when Jesus knew he was about to die, he promised that he would continue to come alongside them always. I will not leave you orphaned, he said, I am going, but I am coming to you.

Such strange and mysterious language, isn't it? I am going but I am coming to you. I'm sure the disciples would have much preferred that Jesus skip the going part, and stick with the I am coming to you part. But that wasn't to be. As it turns out Jesus had to go in order for the Advocate, the Holy Spirit to come to us. I am going, but I am coming to you.

Because he was fully human, Jesus had to die. And in his great love for us, he asked the Father to send us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. It was the way he could stay with us, the way we

could stay with him. Jesus, the Way, the Truth, the Life, has been with all of us, all these centuries beyond his earthly life, because God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, is the Spirit of Jesus alive in the world, alive in each one of us, advocating for us and in us and through us, until the end of time.

It's an extraordinary thing, having an advocate. It changes everything. A dear friend of mine spent years advocating for her daughter Lindsay. Lindsay had – and still has - a beautiful and generous spirit. And she had some very real difficulties with reading, with math, with navigating the myriad responsibilities of being a student in a school world of high-expectations and high achievements. It wasn't just that school was hard for her, it was agonizing. It nearly broke her spirit and it broke her mama's heart. But her mama never quit. Missing hours and even days of work, this mother met with teachers and principals and counselors, advocating for her daughter and insisting she be offered the resources that were available to help her succeed.

Testing was done, tutors were employed, special accommodations were offered and finally things began to change. Not only did Lindsay begin to do well in school, her little person began to blossom. She gained courage and confidence, and in the midst of her challenges, she began to discover the gifts that were uniquely her own. And because she had an advocate, because she knew her mother would always be there right behind her, supporting her and cheering her on, she began to take risks, trying things she never would have tried, experiencing things she never would have experienced.

That precious little girl has grown into a beautiful young woman who won several local and national awards for her art and design work. And because she had a model who taught her the value not just of having an advocate, but of being one, she has learned to advocate for herself. She applied to and was accepted at one of the most prestigious design schools in the country AND she was given a great scholarship. But it wasn't enough.

After weeks of agonizing, her parents finally told her that they couldn't cover the costs. So Lindsay sat down and wrote to the Dean of Admissions, explaining that her whole life had led her to this place, that this was the only school for her and could they please come up with another \$20,000 a year so that she could be there. And you know what? They said yes.

The way my friend advocated for her daughter? It's the way the Holy Spirit advocates for us. Tenacious. Compassionate. Patient. Understanding. Encouraging. Empathetic. Uncompromising. Loving. And when we have THAT kind of advocate, there's nothing we cannot do. I know it's hard to be brave, to keep trying, to be generous and open-hearted when we're alone or afraid or unsure. And these days, a lot of us are feeling alone and afraid and unsure. But we aren't alone, and we need not be afraid. Yes there is much uncertainty for us all. When will we get to be with our families again, when will we ever go out to dinner again, when will we be able to be in church again? We don't know when all those things will happen. What we do know is that we have an Advocate who is there for us, who will always be there for us, who will never, ever give up on us. And when you have that, you can do anything.

The Holy Spirit, our Advocate, is the way Jesus is present to us and in us, the way God continues to be present in the community of God's own beloved. As members of God's beloved community, we come alive in loving and advocating for one another – it's the way we take our part in keeping Jesus alive in our own time. It can't be the same when we're on our own, when we're all we've got, when we're isolated in the lonely worlds of our own making. Sure, we can be spiritual on our own, but what a poverty that is. It's the reason we stream Sunday worship, pray Compline together on Monday and Friday nights, sit in Centering Prayer on Tuesday Mornings and say Evening Prayer together each Wednesday. We need to be in community and we can still do that. We can, and have remained connected to God, to each other and to St Barnabas because deep inside ourselves we know that the Gospel comes alive in community, in relationship, in context. And so do we. And it all has to do with relationship, which of course, has everything to do with love.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

On that night before he died for us, Jesus gave us a new commandment. Love one another, as I have loved you, you should love one another. You should advocate for one another, especially for the ones who cannot advocate for themselves. And that, my dears, is what it means to keep Jesus' commandments. Love one another. Advocate for one another. That's the way to walk around in the world as love incarnate. Live life generously and compassionately, bravely and lovingly, knowing that you have an Advocate to hold you up and encourage you on, an Advocate who will never, ever give up on you. Keeping Jesus' commandments doesn't mean following a list of rules and regulations, doesn't mean being perfect or even right, it isn't about that. Keeping Jesus' commandments means living a life of advocacy and love. There's nothing conditional about it. Jesus doesn't need us to perform perfectly or to get everything right. To love Jesus, to love each other, to love God's beautiful and glorious creation IS to keep his commandments. Love God, love one another, love.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments, Jesus said. It was never a test. It was never a threat. It was, and always will be a promise. Amen.