

## **Love is a Verb**

Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

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The focus scripture today, from the Gospel of John, is part of a narrative that continues Jesus' last speech to his disciples – in Biblical commentary these passages are often called the “farewell discourses.” In this particular set of verses we are hearing a lot about God's love and God's spirit. I've never really connected to this set of readings – there are simply a lot of words and a lot of recurring words.

And, to give Jesus credit, the audience had to be a difficult factor. It had to be a part of why this reads and feels so redundant. The disciples had to have been bewildered at the very least. There had been a public torture and execution, the women had come back to the group and said the impossible – that he was alive, and by now they all have seen this Jesus returning to them teaching and even eating among them, and now he says he is going to ascend to heaven

At some point there must have been a sensory overload. Those faces and eyes that nod and smile, but clearly don't comprehend a thing. I remember getting my first dog as an adult – Digger. He was 10 – a “previously owned” dog. That first day was going so well – he rolled over, shook hands, barked when told to, and then we went outside and I threw the perfect stick. He just looked at me. Tail wagging. “Go get it,” I said. Tail still wagging, but a little slower. “Go fetch.” Tail stops wagging. Utter disbelief. He gave me this look like “You're kidding. You threw it away. If you want it, go get it.” I had a dog that didn't fetch, and nothing I did ever changed his attitude on this subject.

Whether it is like Digger or the disciples, there are times when we just don't get it. We are bewildered. Things don't make sense. Whether Digger's “you threw the stick away, you fetch” or the disciples' “we thought you were dead, now you're back here among us, and you say you are going away for good?”

Now Digger probably just thought I was a little crazy. “Fetch?” “You've got to be kidding.” But the disciples were probably all over the map. Anger. Abandonment. Fear. Uncertainty. Bewilderment. In some ways they probably simply needed reassuring from Jesus that they were not going to be truly alone. It seems like a common need that we all struggle to overcome – that need that we had as children towards our parents or caregivers – surely someone greater and stronger and smarter is in charge, and that person loves me. And, in turn, that is why this is such a deep violation when that caring and love does not happen.

That genuine need – and an appropriate one as a child – when it remains too long can lead to the dilemma of organized religion when people never outgrow that need. It is a strange combination of both needing to be taken care of and needing to be told what to

believe. For some, it is as if the whole part of being a thinking and responsible adult gets thrown out in the aspect of religion. Religion can then unfortunately become an escape from the world, rather than a way to participate in and embrace the world, even with all of its complexities and shadows.

So in the midst of all of these words, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit. It is called an Advocate in some Bible translations, which our church school curriculum says sort of sounds like a defense attorney. The Greek word is *parakletos* which in other translations is simply stated as the Paraclete. This is a word that is a verb, it is full of action, and it is grounded in love. It can mean to encourage, to help, to comfort, to counsel, to be called alongside, to advocate, to assist, or to give courage.

It feels a lot like what ministry is all about – hygiene kits, pancake breakfasts, serving lunch and soup at a downtown shelter, handing out popcorn to visitors, building a ramp for walkers or strollers or wheelchairs, singing your heart out – love is a verb.

But Jesus is also telling the disciples that there is no physical person to be present among them – he will not be staying. This Advocate, this Paraclete, this Holy Spirit will be sent to give them strength and courage and remain with them – and us – forever.

And for many of us, thinking of the Holy Spirit as a verb is a little tricky. We're not quite sure of what it really is. In our baptism liturgy it is named as Sophia, which is named in the Book of Proverbs as a feminine presence alongside of God at the time of creation. The King James translation calls it Dame Wisdom. We name it, again in the baptism liturgy, as our Conscience and our Comfort.

I think that we often think of spirit as this meek way of being in the world. Ethereal. Breathy. Not grounded in things that are earthly, things that matter, things that are real.

Many years ago, in Massachusetts, I remember talking with a teenager who was participating in our church's confirmation program. We all were writing statements of faith in pairs. He was stuck on the Holy Spirit. I have no idea what I wrote at that time, but I'll always remember what he wrote. The Holy Spirit for him was like that seeming electricity in the air during a third overtime in an NCAA final four basketball game.

What an image! And one that definitely works for me!

Love is a verb. Spirit is a verb.

On this day of baptisms, of new beginnings, of special music, or joining; may we close by turning to the back page of our worship bulletin. The "how do I love thee" image may feel a bit cheesy, but this is as good a listing of any of love as a verb. And, for those of us who find ourselves in conversation with others about our church and our denomination, especially in these days when we have been in the news in new ways, these are helpful "talking points" in speaking about what brings us here, and hopefully, what keeps us here. May we say the bullet points together:

- You are not only a united, but also a uniting church.
- You welcome me, and all newcomers, into fellowship without any preconditions.
- You not only accept me just as I am, you affirm who I am, no matter what society says.
- You let me think for myself, and speak for myself, because you impose no tests of belief.
- You share the Good News without hesitation, but also without compulsion.
- You welcome me, and everyone else who believes in Jesus, to the Lord's Table.
- You encourage me, and every member, to participate in the business of our congregation.
- You bind me gently in covenantal relationships with my congregation, Association, and Conference.
- You honor both the ministry of the laity and the calling of the clergy.
- You open the church doors to all the hurts and joys of the surrounding neighborhood.
- You join with other communities of faith in witness and service to the community and nation.
- You initiate and maintain partnerships with Christian churches around the world.
- Your compassion for those who suffer is only exceeded by your passion for justice and peace.
- You will never wither or weaken because you are always attentive to the stillspeaking God.

May it be so. Amen.

### **Acts 17:22-31**

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, God who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since God gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and God allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for God and find God – though indeed God is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being;’ as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”

“Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now God commands all people everywhere to repent, because God has fixed a day on which God will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed, and of this God has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

### **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 for ever. 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.”