

John 14:15-21

**Living Love
May 29, 2011**

Rev. Sharlyn Gates

¹⁵"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This 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.

¹⁸"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They 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." John 14:15-21 (NRSV)

This has been a difficult week for Fred and me. It's always hard to watch the devastation that a storm has left in its path, but watching the destruction and pain from the tornado in Joplin, Missouri this week has been like watching our home destroyed.

Joplin is very close to Parsons, where we moved here from, and was the larger town where we went shopping, found good places to dine, and St. Johns hospital, where 6 people were killed, is where I sat with church members before surgery. I was there many times. To watch the death count rise to 132 as the week has unfolded has been a sad thing indeed.

We've seen a lot of destruction this spring, haven't we? It just seems that disasters keep happening. And while we are here in Michigan, (I'm talking about all of us now), we watch it and are sad, yet I think we kind of repress it because we don't know what to do about it. It's like watching news documentaries about starving children or kids with cancer or AIDS. It's so sad to see, but we feel helpless in being able to do much about it. Most of us aren't wealthy enough to give big chunks of money or take time off to go help.

I feel that helplessness when I see things in the news about our soldiers too. I pray for them and thank God for them, but what else can I do to support them? I worry about how they feel so far from home and family. I wonder if they know how grateful we are to them for their sacrifice. I wonder if their families know how grateful we are.

We have a young man from our own congregation – Quinn – who is there now. And his beautiful young wife and daughter, his mother, are here with us. And we want to say to you "thank you. Thank you for your sacrifice as well. It does mean so much to us!"

We are also very thankful for Matt Todd, for the service he gave in Afghanistan, and we are relieved and grateful that he is now safely home with Cassie. Are there others whom I'm not aware of?

I wonder how many of you here today are veterans. If you are serving in any of our military or ever have, will you please stand up and tell us which branch you serve or served in?

To you all, we say "thank you!"

It would be great to have a long conversation and to hear how you make it through those times of loneliness and sometimes fear. Many of the veterans I have talked to have shared with me that

their faith really helped them get through that time; that there was always a sense of God's presence with them, helping them, encouraging and walking with them.

I have already been hearing those same kinds of statements of faith from our friends in Joplin – from the pastors and members of the two Presbyterian churches in town, and from many members of John Calvin Presbytery. We hear it on the news when people are interviewed – “God will help us. The Lord is with us. Our faith will get us through.”

Jesus promised his friends as he was leaving, “I will not leave you as orphans. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever.” Jesus was promising the Holy Spirit, who would come to believers and would cause us to know that we are never alone, that we are loved and cared for and always “in Christ.”

What does it mean to be “In Christ?” Jesus says you will know when the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, comes – that I am in my Father and he is in me and you are in me.”

It is the Holy Spirit that binds us together with Jesus and the Father; who unites us and makes us know – even when we are alone and waiting for our loved one to come home to us, even when we are in that foreign war zone, even when we look out of our shelter and our town *looks* like a war zone – we know without a doubt that God is with us and that somehow we will make it through. It is an assurance that is so important for each of us as we go through life.

But here is the other part of this. The pronouns in this passage are not singular, although we as individuals can believe that because of the Holy Spirit we are each one of us loved by God and abide in him. But Jesus is talking to the community – he is speaking to a plural “you” – to all his friends who are followers.

He is assuring them that they are – together – a strong community of faith who will not be alone – who will receive the Holy Spirit and with that Spirit comes truth and power – power to do his work, to be a support to one another and to others, power to stand up to evil and disaster, and to suffer together in his name, if necessary. He would give them - a community of believers – the ability to live the love he has for them.

Jesus said, “If you love me, you will follow my commands. It's as simple as that. You know what I've taught you, so do it. And if you do it, I know you love me. And because you love me I will be with you.”

These are powerful promises to the Church because we are still today all about following Jesus. We learn what his commands are and we are focused on doing them, because we love him.

What are his commands?

Jesus said the greatest commandment of all is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind; and the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. So, if we love God with all that we are, then we will do our best to live out the 10 commandments. They are still a good rule for life.

And if we love our neighbors, we put them first, we sacrifice for them. We don't decide that some people are neighbors and some are not. We care for the sick, the lonely, the grieving, the dying, for those who are in despair, those who are different from us, those who need food and water and shelter. We support one another and we pray for each other. We go out of our way to work for unity and peace and we do what we can to help those near and far who are hurting.

There's a lot packed into loving our neighbor, isn't there?

But how can we possibly do all that when we are just a small congregation with limited resources? We sure can't do it by ourselves, can we?

However, our answer is bigger than ourselves. Our answer is found in Jesus' promise. We have the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the one who speaks on our behalf, who gives us support, who is constantly with us – each one us, individually.

But together, as a community of faith – we have all we need to do what God leads us to do as His Church. There is nothing we can't do if Christ is leading us and the Holy Spirit is empowering us. We just need to pray for openness and leading.

I believe the Church today (I'm talking about the universal church) has been in an identity crisis. We've kind of gone inward into survival mode due to all our social issues we've dealt with and losing members and worrying about finances.

But Christ didn't call us to a spirit of fear and uncertainty. He called us out to be a strong force of faith and mission in the face of adversity and difficulty in the world. And he promised to give us power with the Spirit, and in that Holy Spirit he promised that Jesus himself would abide with us always.

This isn't about rallying you all to do something about the disasters; not at all. But it has made me think about our sense of helplessness and that *that* is not our call in Christ. We are the church *today*- just as we are – with the members we are blessed with right now and the resources we have. We are the church with strength and gifts and the ability to do all things in Christ who loves us, who died and rose for us.

Church, be assured of who you are in Christ. We come here to be renewed, to be resourced and revived. We come to give thanks to God who is our strength and our salvation, and we go out into the world, carried by the winds of the Spirit, knowing we are not alone.

Christ is in us and we are in him, and we are in each other – bound together in love. We can certainly be a believer without the church. And we can each of us, individually, know the presence and comfort of our Lord with us. We can also, as individuals, do acts of compassion and mercy.

But it is in the community of faith – the Church – where we come to know the power to truly live the love Christ calls us to – to live out his commands to love and serve and keep his ministry and mission alive, and to do what is not possible for us to do by ourselves. In being the Church, we are living love – his love for us, and our love for him.

In these difficult times, friends in Christ, know that you are never alone. You have a Helper, an Advocate, a Comforter who is always present, always loving. And you also have a family of faith that represents that Spirit, Christ himself.

The thing is, even though we, as believers say we know that God is always with us, there are times in our lives when it is easy to feel as if God has abandoned us. We cry out as Jesus did – “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It is in the Church, in the Body of Christ, that we come to know the assurance of Christ's presence with us – as we reach out in love and compassion to one another. We lift and hold each other up and we represent the love of God to one another in those times when we would feel utterly alone.

Thanks be to God for the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit, and for always being with us in all situations, especially known to us through the Body of Christ – the Church. Amen.

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