

Gospel - John 14: 51-21

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Sermon 5.17.20

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We are jumping the gun in our gospel on the 6th Sunday of the Easter season. We're already talking about the Holy Spirit, two Sundays before Pentecost.

Well, it's probably good to have a lot of warning before something so powerful shows up on your doorstep.

Today, we talk about love and obedience. And acceptance of the Holy Spirit.

Our passage today is part of John's memory of the Last Supper. I know, pretty confusing now that we're six Sundays into Easter and Holy Week is a distant memory. But the setting is important in that it is an intimate conversation between Jesus and his disciples, those who are charged with carrying His work forward, with starting the Christian church. In this passage, Jesus boils it all down to three things. Love. Obedience. Acceptance of the spirit.

Jesus starts by admonishing his disciples to follow his commandments. In Chapter 13 of John's gospel, verse 34, Jesus tells us: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

And in Chapter 14, verse 1, Jesus tells his colleagues: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." He goes on to say that he will prepare a place for the disciples in heaven, but here on earth, what's their mission statement?

Love. Believe. These commandments are open-ended, in contrast to specific and measurable Torah Law. It's as if Jesus knew that we were human, that we might strive but never quite achieve. This, he said, is your mission on earth. Love. Believe.

Simply put, but incredibly high standards. Standards I know we all struggle with. Every. Single. Day. These commandments require us to allow God to reshape our lives. Love. Believe. And, he says, by loving him and obeying his commandments, that he will reveal himself to them. That he will continue to be with them. Therein lies the beauty of the mission. We will never get there on earth, but grace has no measuring stick. To turn a phrase from Yoda, trying IS doing.

Now, fast forward to Easter. After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus did not reveal himself to those who did not love him and believe in him. Those who saw him were certain in their retelling of this incredible miracle. But those who did not see him were conveniently able to put that fact in the column of their disbelief. "I didn't see Jesus! You all are full of hot air!"

That must have given the disciples a taste of how hard it would be to spread His word, to move others to love and believe. What were a bunch of disciples to do, once Jesus ascended into heaven?

So Jesus gave them, and us, another tool. "I will not leave you orphaned," he said "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

The advocate, or parakletos (pair-AW-cle-toss), in Greek, is, of course, the Holy Spirit. Advocate is just one facet defining this word: it's also *translated as* Counselor, Comforter, and Intercessor. *Together, they present something powerful, a tool that can cut through disbelief and hatred, a tool that opens our eyes to the Savior.*

We have a lot of work to do. We have a world of darkness to convert. Our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles today tells a story of what early efforts at conversion were like: Here was Paul in Athens, wandering among the statues and icons of gods and goddesses, full of the Holy Spirit, with a new song in his heart:

“For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship,” he writes, “I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’”

He tells the Athenians that God is NOT unknown. He lets them know that God does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

That’s a lesson we can continue to share. Our gods and goddesses are different today, but they are put on pedestals and worshiped in the same vein. It’s a subject David Zahl explores in his book *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do About It.* Zahl invents a new word, “seculosity,” a combination of religiosity and the secular, that describes what might actually be happening in our culture even as we reject organized religion: It’s easier to rebrand the impulse toward religion than it is to extinguish it entirely. Zahl says, “The market in replacement religion is *booming.*”

Zahl describes today’s gods and goddesses, the idols we worship as we seek “enoughness.” Laid out before us in this fashion, they seem no less distasteful than the idols Paul walked among in Athens:.

Food, romance, education, children, technology and so on become idols when we co-opt them for our self-justification, when we make them into arbiters of salvation. That’s when they turn toxic.

These new religions go by different names but function more or less the same, maintaining all the demand and much of the ritual, but none of the mercy of the capital R Religion. If we used to go to church once a week, we now go every hour. It’s exhausting.

I would have thought that this need for “enoughness” would have subsided over the months of pandemic quarantine, but how many of my friends are counting the number of masks they’re making? How many are trying to convert us all to their political beliefs? Who has made the best dinners, created the coolest garden, invented the most creative workout routine? Thanks to social media, the competition is fierce. Worldwide.

WE all miss the point when we raise seculosity, or even religiosity, to a competitive level. Love. Believe. These are aspirational, sure. But will we, as humans, ever get there? No. We will not. And that’s ok. As Martin Luther said, “The law says ‘do this’ and it will never be done. Grace says ‘believe in this’ and everything is already done.”

We have a lot of work to do. We have a lot of idols distracting us from our mission. But fortunately, Jesus’ words of instruction are laid out simply. Love. Believe.

And we have help. An Advocate. A Counselor. A Comforter. An Intercessor. The Holy Spirit, filling us, helping us through those difficult conversations and impossible choices. In a world full of seculosity, we as Christians have countless entry points. If Facebook is any indication, there are a lot of desperate people out there, looking to fill their lives with something. And as the bumper sticker says, “When you’re down to nothing, God is up to something.”

“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.”

Amen.