

A Sermon for Easter 6

Sunday, May 25, 2014 – John 14:15-21

Rev. Marsha Vollkommer

I will not leave you orphaned. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. I will not leave you orphaned.

Jesus spoke with the disciples, and through the words of the Gospel of John, Jesus is in conversation with us as well. It was – and is – a conversation that began with the beautiful words “Do not let your hearts be troubled...In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places.” And today we heard Jesus say, yet again, to those so close to him, I am going away but I *will not* leave you.

Last week we heard the disciples question. They doubted. They did not understand. And neither do we. Perhaps, like us, the disciples did not know what to do with the information Jesus was giving them. They couldn’t process. They could not put the pieces together to make sense. Jesus spoke of going away – of no longer being with them, yet at the same time never leaving them, and they just could not put the pieces together to ward off the pain of the impending grief and loss of his absence...of being alone.

Information is a wonderful thing. But the information we are given – in and of itself – is not wisdom, nor belief, nor trust, nor reassurance...nor faith. Information is simply that which we take in, and how it forms us and guides us and holds us up and moves us forward comes from within...from how we, with minds and hearts, are able to put the pieces together. This world in which *we* live is a veritable avalanche of information, bombarding us at every turn. Challenging us, buzzing in our ears all day long. And we are afraid to stop listening, for fear we might miss that *one* thing that will bring sense to all the rest. Answers. We are always seeking after answers.

Answers. Who – or what? – is this Spirit of truth? What does it – should it – might it – mean to each of us that God, in Jesus, has promised not to leave us orphaned?

I would like to suggest – in the fervent hope I won’t be struck down right here where I stand – that when we come to church on Sunday morning we are asked to take in a *whole lot* of information. Don’t get me wrong! Disseminating and digesting information is not the first thing church is about. Not the only reason we gather here. Not the sole purpose of what we call corporate worship. But all you need do is look at the bulletin: four readings, from four very different parts of the Bible; a confession, most days, and a creed; prayers – of the people, of the Holy Eucharist, of coming together and sending apart; a silent meditation to ponder; announcements that share the life of our community; the message of the hymns we sing together – nine times!; the words of the choir anthem; and, oh, the words of the sermon. All of this to take in, to speak and hear and sing, to absorb and try to understand, in just an hour, more or less.

Every reading, every prayer, every hymn is full of beauty and wonder and meaning. Full of promise and reassurance. Full of blessing, just waiting to be received. Those grace-filled lines of the poetry of Isaac Watts that concluded our procession hymn: “while all that borrows life from thee is *ever* in *thy* care, and everywhere that I could be, thou, God, art present there.” *They* say, in still another way, “I will not leave you orphaned.” So, too, the more contemporary words that

conclude the last hymn we will sing this morning when God asks, "...will you use the faith you've found to turn the world around, through *my* sight and touch and sound in you, and you in me." *God is in us*. Words of trust, and reassurance, and faith. And yet, if you are like me, too often the singing of the hymn is getting through the notes and hoping the words match up and breathing a sigh of relief at the end that we quit at the same time as everyone around us. And the poetry, the joy, the Gospel message in what we have just sung is lost. We have missed the glory of creation while we are wandering through the high grass.

But we are truly lost? No! However we struggle with assimilating the information; however stubbornly we try to take it all in, lest we miss something; however misguided we become – losing our way – looking everywhere but inward for God, **we are not lost**. We *cannot* be lost for God promised never to abandon us – never to leave us orphaned. And the spirit of truth lives within each and every one of us as proof that the promise has been kept.

What should we do with all this Sunday morning information? Live in it, I think. Live *in* it and with it and let it seep into our souls. When you gather yourself for worship – when you prepare yourself to partake of God's gifts at the Table – take a quiet moment and read a hymn or meditate on one of the readings or say, in your heart, one of the prayers. In words of great beauty and meaning you will hear, in new ways and old, the promise of our glorious God to love us and keep us and make us whole. The promise to fill us with the Spirit *always* and never to leave us orphaned and alone.

In my first course of homiletics at seminary (the class where they begin to teach preachers how to preach) one of the big rules is never to interject too much "me" into a sermon. We were taught that too much me won't leave enough room for you...and it just might not leave any room for the Holy Spirit. But today is a day of great blessing, in a life full of blessing, for me. One year ago I knelt right over there, and was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church. You were my witnesses. You were my encouragement and my strength all along the way – there to keep me grounded and to send me soaring – my prayer partners – my brothers and sisters in Christ. I give to you this morning, by way of thanks, a story I have told very few people. It is a story that seemed, for a long time, very private. It seemed, for a long time, a little too odd to tell. The Gospel message this morning asks me to share.

In 2008, I was in the discernment process – a time of looking inward, alone and in community, to determine whether I was truly called to ordination in the church. I was well aware, from other people's experiences, that I would be asked many times and in many places, if this was truly a call from God. Ack! Who knows, when push comes to shove, beyond any doubt, that what we *think* we know is really Truth with a capital T??? It is not as though the phone one day rings, the caller ID says Almighty Private Caller, and a voice says, "I am calling you." The question "is this truly your calling?" can make a person break out in a sweat, lose a lot of sleep, and become chronically anxiety-ridden in a big hurry.

Fortunately, we can sometimes forget ourselves and the grand importance of our own concerns, and a kind of unselfconscious openness occurs, and without knowing it, the Spirit of truth that lives within us is given some space to breathe.

I was driving home on a beautiful summer day – I think I had just taken the recycling to the Mount Hope Dump (and, oh my, we could do a lot of metaphorical digging on that one!). The windows were down and a lovely breeze was blowing through the car. I was thinking about someone I knew, and cared for, who was having a very hard time in her life. Thinking about how hard it is to live day to day with worry and sorrow and hopelessness. It occurred to me (and it is important for you to know that, in this instance at least, it was just a fleeting thought and not a high dive into self-pity) but it occurred to me that I had been living through - and in - a bit of *stuff* myself.

My sister had died, and her girls were moving into adolescence without all that a mother *is* in their lives. My mom had died, and we lost the glue that held our family together. Rob and I had only recently uprooted and relocated, and while we were planting our new roots, our kids had lived in nine different places (and there are only three of them!). My dad had moved to assisted living, fell and broke his hip, and was not recovering – mentally and emotionally – very quickly. My brother Bruce had meningitis, lost large pieces of his memory, and lost most of his emotionality as well. In other words, I had spent the past six years living a life that each and every one of us encounters and survives.

The thought that crossed my mind on that summer day was “Well, I guess I’ve had a bit of a rough patch lately, myself.”

And then...there was a voice...a quiet voice that spoke in my ear, in my head, and in my heart...a voice that said, “But I never left you alone. Now what will you do?”

I never left you alone. I will not leave you orphaned.

What will you do? Well, whether that was the call to the priesthood or not, I can not say. But in that quiet, summer-filled moment, I knew it was the call to my purpose in life. A call to share wherever and whenever and with whomever I could, that God will never, ever leave you alone. God is with you and in you. God has *chosen* you - whether you were the one who never got picked for the softball team, or the coach that did the picking - whether you were making minimum wage or the CEO of the company - whether you were the hard-working mayor or the hardworking laborer living in fear of deportation - whether you live in the posh suburbs or in a cardboard box under the overpass - God, the almighty creator of all things has chosen **you** in whom to reside and change the world. And when it doesn’t feel that way – when the world, and your life, and your very soul feel empty – you need only look around you – as I look at each of you – and see God in every face, in every friend or stranger, in every heart. God’s spirit of truth lives - **lives** - in each of you. May you know God’s blessings are upon you.