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John 14:15-21

May 14, 2023 Sixth Sunday of Easter

***John 14:15-21***

***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.”***

I have a book of daily devotions called “Flunking Sainthood Every Day.”1 The subtitle is, “A daily devotional for the rest of us.” And a quote on the back of the book says, “Relax, spiritual slackers. You can do this.”

Given those three phrases, I’ve decided that this is a book of daily devotions I feel like I can approach. So many books of daily devotions, daily prayers, feel too perfect. They aren’t all that way, but they are often holier than thou and make us feel like giving up as soon as we begin. Or it’s that same feeling of reading someone else’s words – they’re not my thoughts and feelings. Every day’s devotion is a reminder of what I’m not doing. When I read a devotional called “Flunking Sainthood Every Day” I feel like I don’t have to be so hard on myself. Wouldn’t want to set the bar too high!

I tell you this, because I have to confess right here and now, that your pastor has failed sainthood. She has read the one commandment that Jesus has given in his farewell discourse here, from the chapter 13, just before our text for today that says, “**34**I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” I’m okay with the love-one-another part. But I’m not so good at loving others *as Jesus loves* all of us. Just after this text for today, Jesus says it again in chapter 15: **12**“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

The good news from today’s text is that although Jesus warned his disciples about his coming death, he reassured them that they would not be left alone. They would not be orphaned.

My feelings about the word “orphan” are 100% diametrically opposed to the feelings I have about the word “belong.” If belonging is central to human life, then being orphaned is close to death. When Jesus says that we won’t be alone, that feels great. Here, when Jesus says he will not leave his disciples or us, orphaned, I want to cry! An orphan is completely *without*. Someone who belongs is *with*.

Jesus knows that once he is gone, the disciples will be confused, frightened and lost and probably angry. The Paraclete, a word only used in the gospel of John to refer to the holy spirit, is originally a legalistic term that refers to being alongside someone, comforting, being an advocate, it is what we do in an accompaniment ministry when we accompany immigrants along their journey here in the U.S. The church will celebrate Pentecost in a few weeks where we will celebrate the coming of the holy spirit. Other gospels use the word pneuma, which is more like breath, or wind. For today, the gospel writer wants to remind us the even though Jesus is now gone, Jesus is with us forever in the spirit. The Spirit of Truth.

The Truth is something the disciples will need in the immediate after math of Jesus’ death. The Spirit of Truth is the kind of Holy Spirit we need now. The Holy Spirit is described in many ways that have to do with mystery, freedom of God, God touching us. The description as Spirit of Truth just seems to be perfect in our current climate of untruth, lies and slandering, blatant fraud, technological meddling, and even Chat AI. Knowing the truth would bring us much comfort in times like this.

Times like this. How many times do we use that phrase? How many of us of any age who have lived through different times in this country and in the world have used that phrase. It’s a way to generalize about the corporate struggle and divisions between differing factions. We felt that way about the McCarthy hearings; about the Vietnam War; civil rights; about women’s rights about voting, about health care, fair wages, etc.; Each time we refer to our context in terms like “times like these” we think it is the most urgent. After the 2016 election; After January 6th. The things that divide us seem to get deeper and deeper. Change will not stop so how are we to move through a world as a community if loving one another is a commandment but still so difficult to do?

This is where I want to tell you about two experiences I had this week. The first was last Sunday at Glide Memorial Church in the city at a presentation as a part of their program called “Come to the Table: How to communicate across deep divides.” We screened a documentary called “The Abortion Talks.”2 The documentary is about six women who were deeply affected by a 1994 shooting in their Brookline, Massachusetts community where the same gunman went to two different clinics on the same street, where abortions were available, and shot and killed two women. The six women were leaders in the women’s movement of the time – three of them on each side of the issue. The documentary consists of news clips along with current day interviews with all six women about how they felt then and now, and why they met. Not immediately but after some time, they agreed to meet just four times to see if there would be a response to the shooting that would make sense or lead to any changes. These women and their families were targets for angry people on each side, they could not be seen together or be known to even know each other. Not only did they meet those four times in a basement room without any windows, but they decided to continue meeting. One of the women said that before the meeting, she was wondering why she would even want to go. She wasn’t looking for consensus, she wasn’t going to agree to anything they said, and she hated them even! And yet.

One of the first things they did was to come up with a list of words that the group could not use. Words that would be too triggering or blaming to the other side. That’s kind of a great first strategy actually. How many words do you think they came up with?

200! I was shocked. If you eliminate that many words from conversations where there are deep disagreements, what else can you say? But what a great move that was. In the end, they went public, having a news conference together and publishing a letter in one voice that the six of them worked on for months in the Boston Globe. The Boston Globe at the time as a policy did not use the phrase “pro-life” or “pro-choice.” But the six women were insistent that they keep their letter as written, and said they would just go to another paper. In the end, the Boston Globe kept their letter intact and included a line along with the letter saying that the Boston Globe has this policy, but they had set it aside just this one time, and is proud to be printing this letter by these six.

The documentary was a slice of time in which people involved thought what is the world coming to, what is happening here? They probably used the phrase “times like this” pretty often. What a powerful example of coming to the table.

The second item I want to tell you about from this week is much shorter, and has nothing to do with deep divides. Rina, Tamra and I went to San Mateo this past Thursday to attend a housing summit put on by the Peninsula Solidarity Cohort. The PSC is a group of faith leaders from San Mateo county who are working to end homelessness on the Peninsula. The guests for this summit were leaders from San Mateo county government, the town of San Mateo, and a group called Home for All, a countywide collaborative organization in San Mateo county. It was a powerful presentation that provided an example of coming to the table also, this time without the rigor of a politically charged issue and violence and hatred. In this case, the collaborative nature was crystal clear, and the experience was very uplifting. I hope you’ll ask Rina and Tamra or me about it.

There are about 15,000 homeless in all of San Mateo county. Solving homelessness seems daunting. And it is.

“Times like this” are going to continue to be a daily struggle in all of our communities. Whether it’s the growing violence around issues, the climate of untruth, or the good outcomes of people working together – our society demands much of us. Jesus had a lot to say and teach while he was alive. While he was only here for a while, the Spirit of truth, the advocate he left with us is our guide and companion during all of our times, is here forever.

Amen.

1Flunking Sainthood Every Day: a daily devotional for the rest of us, by Jana Riess, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Mass, 2014.

2<https://gracecathedral.org/calendar-events/the-forum-at-grace-cathedral-with-film-directors-josh-sabey-and-sarah-perkins-the-abortion-talks-in-person/>