

Before I Go
Cooke's-Portsmouth

May 21, 2017

John 14:15-21

I remember a time in my early teen years when I was being driven home from an event with members of the congregation who were friends of the family. I was sitting in the back seat with my mother and the wife in the front seat to her husband, "If you love me you will turn left here." I remember thinking that a left turn was the only way to get us home. Though I was pretty young I remember thinking if that was all that it took for a husband to demonstrate his love for his wife that the wife had set the bar pretty low. It was but a moment in my formative years but I have not forgotten it. Jesus set the bar much higher for his disciples.

He said, If you love me you will keep my commandments. And we are not talking about the original 10 commandments of Exodus but the nuanced and expanded version of his teaching. From Luke 6 we read Love your enemies; do good to those that hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek offer also the left. Offer your coat and your shirt to one in need. Give to the one who begs and do not ask that stolen property be returned. A tall order indeed, but he goes on.

If you love those who love you what credit is that to you? Even sinners are capable of such action. If you lend only to those who can return and repay it is no great reflection on you. But loving your enemy; lending and expecting nothing in return this is the action that proves discipleship. It is a daunting task to walk in the footsteps of the carpenter from Galilee. And Jesus knew it; so before he was taken from his disciples he wanted to remind them of his

expectation. True to his nature of grace he did not expect the original twelve nor any ensuing generations to follow without his abiding support.

He has high expectations of his followers but will never abandon; there will be an advocate who will bring to our attention the wisdom of his words and who will also strengthen and encourage. In essence he was informing that Before I am taken from you I want you to know and trust in three things: First I have expectations of you; that you will keep my commandments and continue to reflect my teachings in the living of your faith. Secondly I promise an advocate to help you to remain strong in living the faith and thirdly, I will never leave you.

If you love me it will be demonstrated to the world in your attitude and in the choices that you make. The small things like proffering a cup of cold water to the thirsty and the big things like not losing faith when your life is threatened.

If you love me you have the assurance that regardless of what befalls you will never be alone. In the wake of devastating news, diagnosis and prognosis by all means react with the fullness of your God given emotions: weep, cry, wail, question and demand but through it all remember that regardless of the circumstance you will feel my presence as you make the journey into and out of the valley of the shadow.

If you love me I will send an advocate who will give you the words to utter when you are shocked, frightened and speechless. In those moments when you know not what to say you will be given the words. In the times when you think that you will be unable to stand and not fall, you will receive strength and encouragement. You will stand on the other side and be surprised that you have circumnavigated the challenge, but you will know that it was by God's grace that you did not fall.

If you keep my commandments you can be assured of the love of both me and the One who sent me. We will not leave you, ever! In a little while the world will no longer see me but you will see me because I live, you will also live.

On Wednesday of this week I was suffering greatly with what I think may have been a tension headache. Pain in my shoulder radiated up through my neck and into the left side of my head. Pills did nothing to dim the pain. I spent the afternoon at home before heading out to Presbytery. A little before 6 p.m. the doorbell rang as I was reading the minutes for the meeting. There was a young lady standing there with a small bouquet of flowers in her hand. I opened the door and she stepped in and shyly said, "I don't know if you remember me but I am Sarah Creber." While I would not have been able to put a name to her face I recognized her as a friend of our daughter Lesley. And Wednesday, the day of my tension headache, was the twentieth anniversary of her death.

It was not grief that caused the physical pain; the tension. It was the fact that I have been forbidden to speak about her memory to some. The accompanying card said, "Twenty years seems both like yesterday like a lifetime ago. Please know that Lesley's memory remains deep in my heart. Thinking of you today and always."

I embraced her like a mother greeting a long lost child. Not only did she reach out to me, her actions of love were a testament to the truth of this text. Though others do not see, we see. Because I live, you also live. There is no death regardless of the minions who will try to tell you otherwise. Persons may put a gag order on an experience and ask you not to speak of it but the result of that is excruciating, physical pain. And so God sends an advocate-sometimes young, successful professors bearing flowers who share the same memory- and opens our eyes to the

truths of the faith that ground us. I will not leave you; the world may not see but you will see.
Because I live you will also live!

After placing the flowers in water I turned to an album that was gifted to me by the members of her class twenty years ago, with pages of poetry, memories and drawings. In the back of that album is the sermon that was preached at her funeral by Mary Beer. From that reflection, that referenced the children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit* as well as this scripture from John I read and was reminded: What is real is that God has not abandoned us. To be sure, we may feel that way right now, and this is ok. But if God had abandoned us, there would be no doctors coming in the middle of the night to ease the pain, no nurses checking on us by day, no medicine, no research. If God had abandoned us there would be no broken hearted community gathered today, to sing through tears because we know that there is more to what is real than what we see today. If God had abandoned us there would be no angels to come at 3:00 a.m. and carry a suffering child to her new home in what we call heaven.

She continued I watched God's love come to us in the form of doctor's nurses, and friends coming to the door with cards, a rose and a ring symbolizing peace. I saw the God who cannot forget us any more than a mother can forget her child for she died listening to her mother's voice telling her over and over that she would always be remembered. I saw what God's love must be like as I witnessed her father hold her close, suffering with her and reassuring her of eternal love. And we saw together the beginning of new life; the resurrection promised through Jesus. Because some power beyond our understanding gave her strength after all she had endured to come back for one brief moment; to show us that she saw something we could not as her eyes focussed for the first time in 24 hours on the ceiling. And she acknowledged that she knew how

much she was loved before the angels carried her safely home. It was as if we caught a glimpse, all that we are ever allowed in this life, just a glimpse of that eternity.

I will not leave you. The world will not see but you will see. Because I live you will also live.

These are not mere words from the dusty pages of scriptures; these are words to live by. As we live our lives we are to reflect the light and life and Christ. We are to keep his commandment to love without limit and without reservation as much as is humanly possible. Jesus has high expectations of us, but he does not stand idly by when we need him most. The advocate comes to open our eyes a little wider. Sometimes it comes in awe inspiring and earth shattering phenomenon like of the Day of Pentecost. More often than not it comes in powerfully subtle ways like a young, successful professor standing in complete humility and vulnerability on the doorstep with flowers.

More than proffering flowers the gesture was one of great love that reminded me that life and love are eternal. She opened my eyes to the truth upon which I have tried to stand even when the ways of the world have tried to push against. Before I go remember this in the triumphs and in the tragedies:

I will not leave you.

I am coming to you in sundry ways and sundry forms.

The world does not always see but you will see.

Because I live you will also live.

On any given day you will know that I am in God; that you are within me and I am within you.

Thanks be to God.

