



ABIDING PRESENCE



Alice Fleming Townley
May 17, 2020
John 14:15-21

15- If you love me
and obey the command I give you,
16- I will ask the One who sent me

to give you another Paraclete, another Helper
to be with you always—

17- The Spirit of truth,
whom the world cannot accept
since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her;
but you can recognize the Spirit
because she remains with you
and will be within you.

18- I won't leave you orphaned;
I will come back to you.

19- A little while now and the world will see me no more;
but you'll see me;
because I live,
and you will live as well.

20- On that day you'll know
That I am in God,
And you are in me,
And I am in you.

21- Those who obey the commandments
Are the ones who love me,
And those who love me,
Will be loved by Abba God.
I, too, will love them

And will reveal myself to them.”
Inclusive Bible

— John 14:15-21, *The*

As the Passover neared, Jesus knew the time had come to depart from the world and return to God. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.[i] Jesus gathered together with his disciples for dinner, and while he was eating, he took off his outer robe, tied a towel around himself, poured water in a basin and bent to the ground, tenderly washing their tired and dirty feet. He explained that if he, who they called Teacher and Master, could kneel, and wash their feet as a servant, then they could for each other. He told them he would be with them only a little longer, and he gave them the commandment that they love one another, just as he had loved them. That night they were on the edge of an ending. Fear and grief hung heavy. They yearned, “Jesus, just let us stay here and commune around this table with you forever.”

Jesus continued, “If you love me, keep my commandments. And I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Paraclete.” *Parakletos* is a compound word merging the preposition *para* with means ‘with’ or ‘alongside’ with the verb *kaleo*, ‘to call.’[ii] The Paraclete is the one who is called to be alongside us. Jesus himself was a Paraclete according to John. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Paraclete is also translated Friend, Advocate, Helper, Comforter, Spirit of Truth. We remember how Jesus saw and befriended Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector. Advocate, and we remember how when a mob was ready to stone a woman caught in adultery Jesus drew lines in the sand and questioned, “Who among you?”. Helper, and we remember how Jesus partnered with a child, and fed the 5,000. Comforter, and we remember when Jesus wept with Martha over her brother’s death. Spirit of Truth, and we remember when Jesus stood before Pilate and summoned what was known deep within, “What is truth?” Jesus continued, “And *another* Paraclete is coming, the Spirit . . . The world cannot see the Spirit . . .but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you.”

And so, we hear these words of Jesus, after weeks of sheltering in place. As one of you said to me recently, “These walls are getting closer and I’m the only one I have to talk to.” We yearned for a “quick” return to “normal” and now suspect otherwise and grieve these times of uncertainty and separation. Everything is harder, even simple things passing a stranger on the sidewalk, buying groceries, caring for those who are hurting, and holding space for our own pain.

Julian of Norwich lived over 600 years ago, she struggled with her own health and with the bubonic plague and political uprisings and church divisions. On reflecting on this passage, she wrote, *The place which Jesus takes in our soul he will nevermore vacate, for in us is his home of homes, and it is the greatest delight for him to dwell there. . . . And the soul who contemplates this is made like [the one] who is contemplated.*[iii]

And on this day between Easter and Pentecost, we recall the words of Jesus' farewell discourse, "I will not leave you . . . You will know that I am in God and you are in me and I am in you." I will dwell within you as the Comforter, the Helper, the Friend, the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate. In our weeping, we can release into the Comforter. In our exhaustion, we can lean upon our Helper. In our loneliness, we can turn to our Friend. In our meditation, we discern Truth. In our anger at injustice, we can summon the Advocate. Yea thou we walk through the valley of the shadow; we love and live as Jesus commanded by the presence of the Paraclete.

Here this poem, from a daughter to her mother:

You have the courage, [Mama] to live alone at 87,
Even though you never had to until now.

You have the courage to get up in the morning,
Even though you know it will hurt. . . .

You have the courage to say "yes" to new ideas,
Even though that "yes" may follow a knee jerk "no."

When I tell you [Mama] I admire your courage,
You say, "Yes but I have to call it up."

And I write that down, so that when I'm afraid,
I'll remember that courage is an act, not a feeling.

–Valerie Raymond, sister of Jill Schaberg, member of our church

Yes, but I have to call it up. When fear and grief overwhelm, and we sit on the edge, we draw deeply from the Holy One who dwells within. And sometimes we take turns because there will be days for all of us when we can't do that ourselves. We call it up for one another—with a prayer, a gift, an expression of compassion. *I'll remember that courage is an act, not a feeling.* We hear Jesus, "Keep my commandments." Somehow bridge the distance with a call or note or text. Wear a mask, stay home, thank essential workers. Notice whose feet are worn. Comfort. Befriend. Help. Speak Truth. Advocate."

One of those ways we call the Paraclete's presence up for one another is through music. To hear the chancel choir and students with Connor suspends us in holy awe. To hear Marlene on the organ expands us. The vibrations of the bells with Irene and the choirs fill our

hearts and minds. The children with Sarah and Sandy and Olivia spark in us joy and hope. And even now, over Zoom, with a few added fury friends, the children's choir sings each Monday. Special guests at the piano like Gail and Beth bless us. Jazz artists get even us the slightly frozen-tapping and swaying. The hymns we sing on Sunday, often repeat in me, pray in me, move me, day and night.

Breathe on me, breath of God:
fill me with life anew,
that I may love as you have loved
and do as you would do.

Breathe on us, breath of God,
until our hearts are pure,
until our will is one with yours
to do and to endure.

Breathe on us, breath of God;
fulfil my heart's desire,
until this earthly part of us
glows with your heavenly fire.

Breathe on us, breath of God;
so shall we never die,
but live with you the perfect life
of your eternity.^[iv]

Amen.

^[i] [John 13:1](#)

^[ii] 191, Karoline Lewis, *John*.

[iii] Fr. Richard Rohr, Theme: Julian of Norwich, "Oneing," Tuesday, May 12, 2020, <https://cac.org/oneing-2020-05-12/>

[iv] 286, Edward Hatch, "Breathe on Me, Breath of God," *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*.