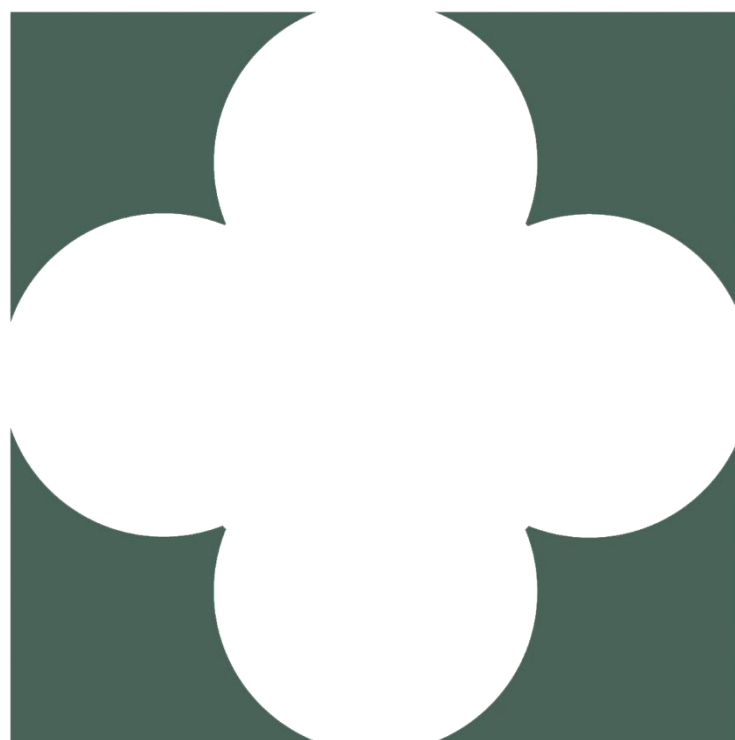


Faith Is Not for the Fainthearted

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John 14:23-29

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Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may believe.

Today, well into the season of Easter and on our way towards Pentecost in a few weeks, we return to the Gospel according to John, and to the night of the Last Supper. Having just shared the bread and the cup and a special meal with his followers, the gospel relates the lo-o-ong speech Jesus gives to his disciples, a speech that is almost four chapters long, sharing all the information that the disciples would need to continue doing his work. These chapters are commonly known as the Farewell Discourse. He is speaking, of course, to prepare them for a time when he was not physically present with them, a time that was coming much too swiftly for their liking.

I wonder how the disciples felt, reclining after their meal and receiving these teachings. What is he talking about? Where is he going? Why is he going? Why weren't we invited? How can we follow him? These are great questions, and relatable, even thousands of years after we know Jesus of Nazareth walked this Earth.

And you know what, my favorite Bible stories are the ones where people question and doubt and wonder. I like them because they are the most relatable to my faith journey. I was that kid who always asked "why?" and was curious about how the Bible came to be and who Jesus was historically and how the history of Christianity impacts members of the faith today. Questioning it deeply. So the stories of Thomas, Nicodemus, Mary

Magdalene, the Samaritan woman at the well – all those stories where people were up front about their doubt, their questions, their hesitations with faith, their desire to believe, where people questioned Jesus.

And just before this scripture that provides our focus today, the disciples are questioning Jesus, prompting him to give them these four chapters of directions for when he has gone away. In their questioning, Thomas and Philip and Judas (but not Iscariot) try to gain some clarity about Jesus' identity and mission and what he means when he talks about "going away."

Judas' question in our scripture is particularly important: "why does Jesus reveal himself to the disciples and not to the whole world?" Is Jesus' identity privileged information? Why is Jesus spending so much time with the disciples, and not more time getting his message out in the world?

This is a great question. Over time, people have read this text as supporting predestination, the idea that God reveals Godself in the form of Jesus to only a few elect people. Today, for us here in this progressive Baptist congregation, many of us do not think about salvation being available to only certain people, only certain believers. And even in this passage, Jesus doesn't answer Judas' question directly, in true Jesus fashion, instead remarking on his own relationship to Abba God in lieu of making a judgement about who's in and who's out, who "loves God" and who does not "love God." He says that anyone who loves God and keeps God's word also loves him and keeps his word, because he and Abba God are one, and they will come and dwell with the people. Here, Jesus makes a powerful statement about the inseparability of his own being and God's being.

For several hundred years, theologians have read this statement of identity as evidence of the Trinity, and that is also not what I'm trying to focus on here, mostly because the doctrine of the Trinity as we know it today gained traction as an idea a few hundred years after Jesus came on the scene. All we need to know about this part of the Farewell Discourse is that Jesus understands himself as intrinsically related to God. More importantly, in this scripture is the promise to Jesus' followers that the Holy will dwell with them, no matter if he is within their sight or gone from it. It doesn't matter if Jesus' physical form is gone from the Earth, God's presence still dwells with God's people.

Now, put yourselves in the place of the disciples. Do they understand the nuances of these teachings in the moment? Probably not. The disciples are a pretty dense bunch throughout the gospels. And yet, Jesus teaches, even if the knowledge will not make sense to them for a while. He tells them that he is going, that they cannot follow, that he will make a way for them, that they will be provided for.

I imagine that alongside the confusion and wondering about what Jesus was talking about, there must have been anticipatory grief on the part of the disciples, too. Anticipatory grief is just that—anticipating the emotion of grief, which you might experience as a loved one enjoys a beautiful celebration though their health is failing; or when a big life transition approaches, even a good one, and you know you will be sad to see the “old days” pass away. Even here in the Easter season, when the resurrection appearances of Jesus form so much of our scripture readings and the joy of Easter continues, a commentator reminds us that “anticipatory or remembered grief will cast its shadow.”

I feel that deeply right now. Even in the midst of the celebration of Easter, of the lengthening days and spring flowers and blossoming trees, there is much to grieve. We read the news recently that there have been over one million deaths from COVID-19 in the USA. Protections for personal privacy and bodily autonomy are under attack at the federal and state levels. Our own personal griefs and heartaches that manifest as sighs too deep for words, as our bodies and minds and hearts are continuously processing the news cycles that tell us of hate, and violence, and war and ongoing oppressions.

But into this space of confusion, of anticipatory grief, Jesus offers a lifeline to his people: he tells them that, though he is leaving for a place to which they cannot accompany him, they will not be left alone. The Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the people. In Greek the word is *paraclete* which means “Comforter, Advocate, or Counselor.” Though God in the form of Jesus called the Christ will no longer be walking and talking on Earth, God in the form of the Holy Spirit will accompany Jesus’ followers so that they are not orphaned.

The Paraclete will be with them as the things that Jesus preached about come to pass, as they continue the work that Jesus had begun, the work of loving the lost and welcoming the outcast and pursuing justice for the

mistreated. The Paraclete will bring peace to the disciples left behind in the world. But the kind of peace the Paraclete brings is not the world's peace but God's peace.

This distinction is so important – not only will the Holy Spirit bring peace to the disciples, comforting them in their grief over losing Jesus again, but the peace that is coming is God's peace. Peace in the world may look like an absence of conflict, but God's peace is far more powerful. Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare writes in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary, "Many people yearn for peace in the world's terms: cessation of conflict, whether psychological tension or warfare; a sense of calm or serenity of spirit. The peace that Jesus promises as he takes leave might include such things, but the peace that Jesus gives is nothing less than the consequence of the presence of God. When God is present, peace is made manifest."

By saying he leaves them with God's peace, Jesus offers a reorientation to the disciples: he says, "don't focus on the world and center your lives on the world, but the focus and center should be on God and God's kin-dom, the beloved community."

This realignment of values takes *faith*. And it is not for the fainthearted.

When Jesus tells his disciples that he is going away, I wonder if they were scared. If they were in denial. If they were angry, because they'd spent so much time following him all over Judea during his ministry, they had surely proved themselves good companions to him. And, after all that, as Bill Herzog II put it in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary, "is absence all they have to look forward to?" You can imagine the grief they were feeling, the kind of grief that creeps into every facet of life until it feels as if it controls you. Perhaps some of you feel that grief even now.

In the face of this powerful grief, Jesus offers them a lifeline: they will not be left alone, but they will be accompanied by the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit is one that will teach them and help them and offer them comfort. Living alongside this Holy Spirit will take faith, and Jesus' message to the disciples was that he believed they had what it takes. Because living with your values realigned towards God's kin-dom takes faith.

It takes faith to live in a world where the government dismisses your gender identity or sexuality. It takes faith to live in a world that is bent on denying

legal protections for your relationship. It takes faith to live in a world where you are told that you don't know what's best for your own body. It takes faith to live in a world that demonizes people struggling with mental illness. It takes faith to live in a world where babies are being denied formula and being used as political pawns. It takes faith to live in a world that continues to look away at systemic racism and the Black and brown people who are being shot down by police brutality and by homegrown fascists.

What kind of faith is it, that keeps us going on in the face of these devastating challenges? Faith that another world is possible, and as writer Arundhati Roy says, that it is already on its way. Faith that beauty and equitable relationship and communal flourishing and justice-centered peace do exist, and we have even experienced that in some pockets of the world. Faith that the interconnectedness of all Creation is important, and that ecological wisdom holds keys to living sustainably. Faith that we are never alone because each of us was made in the image of the Divine, and as such we belong to God's family—and no one can change that. Not ever.

This is the kind of faith that helped protestors advocating for Black Lives stand firm; the kind of faith that refused to back down when threatened by fascist takeovers; the kind of faith that inspired Creation care advocates to block pipelines; the kind of faith that builds houses after hurricanes; the kind of faith that moves us to recognize our irrevocable interconnectedness with all life and with our planet. The kind of faith that loves courageously and seeks to practice joy, as poet Wendell Berry says, "though we have considered all the facts."

And, beloved church, it takes faith to keep on going just one more day when faced with these obstacles—and thank God that you have that faith. And thank God that none of us have to have that faith alone. We can hold it for each other and lift one another up. This is the faith that I see in you, and in our community, as we commit to pursuing peace in our world through justice as well as God's cosmic peace.

Friends, it is challenging to center your lives on the things that characterize God's kin-dom: love, justice, harmony. Because when you do, you find you have responsibilities: to do what you can to make the world better, to live with your eyes and mind and ears open to the world *as it is* because your heart is focused on the world *as it can be*. When you have faith, you are

consistently faced with disappointment because you know the potential of people and of the world. When you have faith, you cannot look away and pretend the world doesn't affect you; you are called to respond, even in the tiniest way in your small corner – not because you are obligated, but because you cannot live otherwise.

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And so, beloveds, what do you hope to do with your faith? What do you wish you had the guts to do? The courage to say? The creativity to express? The power to change? The encouragement to take action?

When you are rooting your lives in God's peace, you are living your faith deeply. Friends, when you have faith, you *do* have the guts, the courage, the creativity, the power, the encouragement. When you have faith, God is reminding you that you are enough and you can do remarkable and seemingly impossible and improbable things, like living with your heart oriented on a cosmic peace. My friend Rev. Peter B. Carman wrote in one commentary on this passage, "In the absence of a physically present Christ, our daily practice makes real the living presence and love of God. Love in action is the route to experiencing Love's grace-filled indwelling. Love in action is the closest we come to evidence of God."

Church, may you be moved to become love in action. May your faith be rooted deeply by the stream of God's peace, and may your heart not grow faint, but may you live every day knowing that the Holy accompanies you through all your life.

May it be so. Amen.

Benediction

May the Lord Bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May God give you grace not to sell yourselves short,

Grace to risk something big for something good,

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything

but truth, and too small for anything but love.

May God take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hands and work through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.