

The Sixth Sunday on Easter
May 21, 2017
John 14:15-21

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A Provisional Farewell

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isn't it strange, on this my last Sunday with you prior to leaving on sabbatical, that we hear words from our Lord offering a part of what is known as his "farewell discourses?"

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This 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.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They 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"

Yes, I know. There is no obvious or even identifiable similarity between me and Jesus. I just enjoy the coincidence of this passage about a temporary departure—a provisional farewell—from our Lord on the occasion of my final Sunday before a time of renewal.

And, let me reiterate here—as I do in my article for the upcoming newsletter—that I will not be gone for a year. Several people have asked this, and I want to be sure you all understand that I will return in the early fall. My first Sunday back with you will be October 1st.

So, no, "I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you. In a little while you will no longer see me, but you will see me"—when I get back in a few months.

This, of course, has nothing of the great significance of what our Lord is saying. Yes, it is a farewell discourse. But it is provisional. It is temporary. And for Jesus, that meant that he would die and then be raised. It is perhaps also pointing to the Ascension, traditionally placed 40 days after Easter. That day is this coming Thursday, The Ascension of Our Lord. While Jesus was seen again following the resurrection, those appearances lasted only a little while. He would depart yet again as he ascended into heaven. And yet, even then he remained present to his disciples, and indeed to us.

With the gift of the Advocate—the Holy Spirit, we know intimately and internally the abiding presence of our Lord with us even though ascended to be with God.

In case you're wondering, I don't intend to do this last bit. My departure is wholly provisional. It will last for a season that is somewhat longer than the forty days of our Lord's resurrection appearances. But when I return, I have no thought of ascending into heaven. That could happen, of course. We are all mortal. But it's not what I plan. I fully expect to return in a transfigured state of renewal for the sake of further mission and ministry in this blessed and holy place.

For the sake of our mutual edification, let me focus in on one verse from today's gospel: "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

That is a puzzling thing to say, isn't it? Jesus in God, disciples in Jesus, and Jesus in disciples—all at the same time?

Oddly enough, even conversations this week dealt with these words of our Lord. On Tuesday evening, the group that has completed the 21 sessions of the truly superb biblical theology study called "Living the Questions" met in order to reflect on what that study meant to us. It's the kind of thing we do too infrequently. We just have our classes and move on. How refreshing it was to engage that study over a year and a half and then take the time to share with one another how we have been affected by our time, our conversation, and our learning together.

Many of the comments were of appreciation for the communal nature of the sessions—that all were blessed by the valued input of others, that Christian study has at its core sharing and community, and that it was an experience that is too rare. Folks noted that the study confirms and encourages that faith is a direct relationship with God. It challenged us to live out fully as a church the call to be inclusive. It affirmed, as reflected in the title, that Christian life is about living with and into questions. Faith is not about certainty. It is about living with the mysteries of life and seeking ever new perspectives. One member noted in this context that grace and contentment are about finding a way to be at peace with the reality of whatever happens, and this doesn't mean you have to like it.

In all, we appreciated the openness to questioning as well as the spiritual honesty of acknowledging mystery, provisional answers, and persisting quandary—something many did not grow up with in other churches. But more to the point of that phrase from today's gospel, people spoke about their transformation—and not simply as a catchword, but in some spiritual depth.

Jerry Smith shared a poem of his with us, written as a reflection on his experience of the class. You'll hear in the first lines references to John, chapter 14. Whether that was intentional on Jerry's part, I can't say. But his poem certainly returned to mind as I considered today's gospel. It's called "Transforming with God."

You are in me
I am in You.

We walk hand in hand
through life

in the community
of your Kingdom.

You confirm me.
I confirm you.

Not my idea,
not yours either.

Just the way things are,
have always been:

first, within the Trinity,
then with humanity.

Becoming fully aware,
makes all the difference.

Jerry Smith

Those comforting words about the mutual indwelling of God and people take on a greater poignancy in Jerry's poem. I rejoice that the Spirit led him and others in the class to know something of that mutual indwelling in a deeper way.

By the way, the group decided that it would like to see to it that another series of Living the Questions classes is offered beginning in the fall. I hope you will look for and respond positively to that opportunity. It's set to begin in mid-October during the Education Hour in the Conference Room.

This morning, our Lord offers his disciples a provisional farewell. He reassures them of a continued presence that will abide beyond his physical presence. He affirms that he and they are intimately connected, bound together in a way that transcends time and space, weal and woe. It is a remarkably poignant and powerful affirmation. Jesus and we are connected, profoundly and forever.

On this day of such a magnificent promise from our Lord, I offer a pale shadow of that provisional farewell. As I do so, I trust that our Lord will co-occupy our hearts as we move through these few months together. You will be in my thoughts and prayers. I hope and trust that I will be in yours. God will embrace us over the space and time that will separate. And we will know the Spirit, who abides with us, and will be in us.

“I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.