



Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Glenda Empsall

[Acts 17:22-31](#)

[Psalm 66:7-18](#)

[1 Peter 3:13-22](#)

[John 14:15-21](#)

God our heavenly Father, your children are living in unsteady and confusing times. Show us that your ways give more life than the ways of the world. May we, following Jesus, seek and find strength in loving you and loving our neighbors; and together create blessed community. Amen.

“Jesus’ Farewell Discourse” begins in Chapter 13 of John’s Gospel with Jesus washing the disciples’ feet and continues to Chapter 18 when Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Truly a long goodbye. Today’s reading picks up on Jesus’ ‘pep talk’ to his disciples from last week’s reading. This time the disciples don’t interrupt Jesus. They listen carefully, trying to understand.

Would that we could have heard Jesus describe the “new normal” the disciples would experience without him. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Sounds simple. I won’t make your eyes glaze over telling you the Greek, but the nuance is important. The Greek word for “commandments” is connected to moral ideals. Jesus’ commandments are not orders. There is no “or else!” from Jesus.

Which commandments? Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew [22:36-40] when the lawyer asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Love. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” If you love Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Light, then you will consciously live in a moral way. There would be no need for further instruction.

Jesus then promised the disciples, “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.” An Advocate is one who sticks with you and helps you, perhaps by comforting you, speaking up on your behalf, or giving you good advice, counseling you. Jesus told the disciples that this Advocate already abides with and in them. If I were one of the disciples listening to Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, I’d be more than a little bit confused. I would have plenty of questions, but Jesus is still talking.

“I will not leave you orphaned; ... because I live, you also will live. I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ... those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” A footnote in my Oxford Annotated Bible explains, “the Spirit imparts Christ’s life and unites the believer to God.”

John Chapter 14 is about the Father; a facet of God; God so immense, so outside of our understanding, so beyond the perception of human senses -- hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching – God that is beyond human comprehension and can only be known to us through Jesus, the Son.

I grew up with an image of God as that old guy like the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The one with the flowing white robes and long beard; a benevolent and indulgent great-grandfather – except when I made a mistake. Then he was a scowling, finger-shaking, raging tyrant ready to send me straight to hell for my sins. I was unable to comprehend God in any way other than through the lens of my personal experiences. In college, I attempted to understand God through use of philosophy, reason and logic. That worked for medieval scholastics [1100 to 1700], but for me -- not so much. I don't have answers. I have questions.

The writer of John's Gospel was not ordinary, nor was he a scholar. John was an evangelist; an early Christian mystic who, along with John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul, proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God, life-bearer to all who believed in him.

Education for Ministry (EfM) introduced me to the late 14th/early 15th century mystic, and theologian, Julian of Norwich. At age 6, she survived Black Death [plague] and at age 30, she contracted another usually fatal illness. During the progression of that disease, lying on what was thought to be her deathbed, she had mystical visions and conversations with Jesus. She received insights into Jesus' sufferings and his love for us. Her 16 visions were the basis for her book, "Revelations of Divine Love: Short Text" [25 chapters, 11,000 words] which is believed to be the earliest surviving book written in English by a woman. "Revelations of Divine Love: Long Text" [86 chapters and 63,000 words] was written while she sequestered herself over many years as an anchoress, studying and meditating on her visions and their meaning.

Julian did not perceive God as blaming or judging us, but as enfolding us in love. There can be no wrath. Wrath – 'all that is contrary to peace and love -- is in us, not in God. The gift of God's spirit, is to slake our wrath in the power of his merciful and compassionate love.' Julian used women's experiences of motherhood to explore God's loves for us and she referred to Jesus as our Mother. One of her more famous revelations was a conversation with Jesus about sin. Julian's premise was that, if there was no sin, everyone would be "clean and like to our Lord." Therefore an all-knowing God would not have created sin. In her vision, Jesus responded to her saying, "Sin is necessary, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

I mention Julian of Norwich for 2 reasons: First, Julian's message from the time of the plague and other dire illness is a message of hope and trust in God – a God whose compassionate love is always available for us. Second, because we have opportunities for learning through: studying the Old and New Testaments, being introduced to theologians such as Julian of Norwich, and in examining our present "situation" through the lens of history. Are you ready for EfM?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.