

A Sermon preached by Allison Paetz, Intern for Children and Youth Ministries  
Sunday, May 9, 2010  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church

This morning we celebrate the last Sunday in Easter before Ascension Day. After Ascension Day, we celebrate Pentecost. Before we begin either of those celebrations, we read from both the Gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles. Within the Gospel of John, we revisit Jesus in the last week before his death – Holy Week. This gives us a context in which to reflect upon Jesus' teachings before his death with the knowledge of what occurs after he is resurrected.

In this Gospel, Jesus is in the midst of telling the disciples what's going to happen after he is gone. We're at the point of the Last Supper – mere hours before Jesus is going to be crucified. While we know that Jesus is resurrected following his death, I'd imagine that the disciples were feeling vulnerable, lonely, and very frightened. Jesus says to them "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." Peace. In the midst of his own fear and uncertainty, he comforts his disciples, as they look to the next huge step in their lives together. Jesus says, "I do not give to you as the world gives," reminding the disciples that the gift of relationship with God is different, and very special. Jesus and the Father offer sanctuary from the trouble and strife of the world, a gift far greater than any worldly treasure. He says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Do not let your hearts be afraid. Here he tells the disciples that no matter what happens, through loving him, loving God, and loving each other, it's going to be okay.

Love God, love each other – this message has not changed at all since the day Jesus gave it. That doesn't mean it's easy. In fact, these simple commands are perhaps the greatest and most fundamental challenge of Christianity. To love as we are meant to love is not easy, and can even be painful or

seemingly impossible. Occasionally it seems effortless – and this illustrates the spectrum of experiences we have while trying to live the will of God and achieve what we are called to do.

Throughout his farewell, Jesus is trying to describe to the disciples how they are to relate to God in their own lives. In last week's Gospel, Jesus gives the new commandment "love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples." This is a very empowering piece of scripture. God speaks to his creation through his son, Jesus – saying to them – you can do great and wonderful things. I ask you to live by the commandments I have given you and care for each other, and with that you will have peace.

Jesus also says to the disciples "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will make our home with them." If the disciples and those who choose to follow him live their lives according to his teachings, not only will they have a home in heaven, but God the Father and Son will make a home on Earth as well.

The scary part for us and for the disciples is that Jesus is also telling us that he won't always be there in person – that he does have to leave. What is reassuring is that he returns to us both in body and in spirit. The speech at the Last Supper becomes a sort of pep talk. Jesus is telling the disciples – you can do this. You can go out and help people, teach what I have taught you, and do good things. This is what we've been practicing for since the day you decided to follow me. You will be without me physically by your side, but you will not be alone. The Advocate will come after me to help support you.

The Advocate which Jesus refers to is the Holy Spirit, which comes to the disciples on the day of Pentecost and empowers them to go out and preach the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is also known by another name – the Comforter. Yes, Jesus returns to the disciples after he is resurrected, but he still leaves them yet again. The Comforter helps serve as a reminder of the fact that there is not a place we can go where God is not. Jesus' death and resurrection means that God is with each of us always.

Thinking about this story reminds me of my own story. I was pretty scared going off to my first day of kindergarten. The world was big, full of people and things I didn't know or understand. New school, new teacher, new expectations – as any six year old will probably tell you, this is something both fascinating and terrifying. To help with my anxiety, my mom made me this little card to take with me to school. On the card is a picture of our whole family and the words “We love you!” on the back. This little card reminded me of the people who loved me, who made my home, home. While I no longer carry it in my pocket to school, it still reminds me of how much I am cared for.

In a way, Jesus is preparing the disciples for their first day of kindergarten. They will have to go out and make their own way without him there, but they have each other and they have the Holy Spirit in each of them as a reminder that God is there, watching over them. The image of God as parent and protector has always spoken to me. Like a parent and protector, Jesus is very encouraging here – he wants the disciples to understand that they can keep going through what seems like a very big, scary world even without him by their side.

How many of you have comforted someone who was frightened or upset, though you yourself were far from calm? What does it feel like to be scared and alone? Think about your first day of something. It doesn't even have to be a first day of anything – maybe just a time when you were feeling lost and vulnerable. What was that like? Was there a time when you were comforted by another? Hopefully, you have experienced times when you were both the comforted and the comforter. As human beings AND ministers of the Holy Spirit to each other, we are privileged to fill both roles throughout our lives.

This story serves as a reminder of the fact that we are loved and never abandoned by our ultimate parent, God. God never abandons us, though he does let us make our own way when we are ready, as any good parent does (though we may not always feel ready). Jesus must eventually leave the disciples on Earth, like a bird pushing her nestlings out of the nest. We never really know what we are truly

capable of without being tested. Would the disciples have been able to do what they were meant to do with Jesus still with them? Was their reliance on Jesus impeding their ability to carry his message? These are questions we will never have definite answers to, but are important to reflect upon in our own lives – to what extent are we truly self-reliant? How does that affect our actions?

In the passage from John, the disciples are given the promise of the Holy Spirit, which will give the strength and encouragement to help us do the work we are given to do. In the Acts passage, we see the example of Paul going forth to do the work Jesus started, and challenged the disciples to continue – to spread his message with open hearts and minds and expand the budding church. Reflecting on the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter... how will you live out your end of the promise? What is the work that you have been given to do with the aid of the Holy Spirit? Consider these questions as we approach Pentecost – the day the Advocate came to the disciples. What does God's will look like in your life? Remember the two commandments? Love God, love each other? Maybe it's sending your daughter off to kindergarten feeling loved, maybe it's baptizing open hearts and minds. No matter what, though, God is with each of us, letting us choose our own path, but watching and loving every step of the way.

Amen.