

I Will Not Leave You Orphans

We have just finished reciting the Nicene Creed. In the final portion of this (as well as the Apostles Creed), we affirm our faith in God by saying, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Who with the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.” Do we believe in the Holy Spirit? Or are we glossing over these words? I mean, we never see Him. He is a ghost, a spirit. Scripture teaches that He lives inside us, but we struggle to know how to live with him here and right now. And though there is much to be said about the Holy Spirit, the good news that I have the joy of proclaiming *today* is that The Holy Spirit is present and active in our lives, bringing about life and empowering us to receive continual guidance and inspiration to love others.

Today’s Gospel reading begins and ends with Jesus teaching about love. But nestled in between these bookends of love, Jesus addressed something the disciples seemed to be struggling with: namely, that He was leaving them. Throughout the Gospels, during Jesus’s journey to the cross, He often told his disciples that he would be going (back) to the Father. Specifically, in John 13, Jesus famously said to them that he’d only be with them a little longer. He added that where he was going, they’d not be able to go with him, but that he was going to prepare a place for them and that they knew the way there. They seem disoriented and confused by Jesus’ words though. Peter asks, “Lord, where are you going?” And, “Why can’t I follow you?” Thomas says, “We don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

We can understand the disciples’ questions and concerns since they have literally been going everywhere with Jesus for the better part of his three-year ministry and now he’s just gonna abandon them? Lovingly, Jesus comforts them, first by reminding them not to let their hearts be troubled, (hey there, calm your nervous systems) and then by giving them a great statement of encouragement, “If you love me, keep my commands and I will ask the Father and he will give you another helper to be with you forever.” Someone else? Who is this other helper? It is the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, which would be better, Jesus said, even than his bodily presence with us. Because, while Jesus walked the earth, his ministry was limited to one locale and one person, himself. By giving his disciples (and us) the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus promised they would not be left alone because the Holy Spirit is a constant presence, a comforter, advocate, and counselor never leaving them comfortless, bereaved, or helpless. The same goes for us, regardless of the circumstances of our lives, storms, death, separation, we will never be orphaned by God.

But, the feeling of being orphaned is real. To be orphaned is not only caused by losing one or both parents (although that is the main reason), it also comes in many other

shapes and sizes like being abandoned, isolated, lonely and vulnerable. And anyone who has ever loved and lost a spouse, a child, a close friendship security, or lost hope in some situation understands this. These are the moments and seasons of life when transitions, changes, and tragedies can leave us feeling as orphans. Whether spoken or unspoken the questions begin: What will I do now? Where do I go? What happens next? Who will love, nurture, and guide me? Who stands on my side? What will become of me? These are the questions we can imagine running through the minds and hearts of the disciples in today's Gospel reading. Have you ever felt this way or found yourselves questioning like this? These are the orphan's questions.

If we have felt this way at one time or another, hopefully, that unease will point us to the deeper reality, that by ourselves we are not enough. It is not, however, because we are deficient. It is rather because we were never intended or created to be self-sufficient. We were never meant to stand alone as individuals. We were created to love and be loved, to live in relationship as persons giving themselves to each other, to dwell, abide, and remain within each other even as the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. Unlike the Gospel of Matthew, nowhere in the gospel of John does Jesus ask us to go the extra mile, turn the other cheek or render unto Caesar. Here, Jesus gives only a single commandment, that you love one another. He says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (13:34-35). According to John's Gospel, we were created (in God's image) to love and be loved.¹ And the Holy Spirit empowers us to live according to God's design. **The good news is that The Holy Spirit is present and active in our lives, bringing about life and empowering us to receive continual guidance and inspiration to love others.#**

But how do we receive this promise?

Especially when Jesus says stuff like, "*If you love me, keep my commands*" and later in verse 23 when he reiterates, "Anyone who loves me *will obey* my teaching and my Father will love them." The words "if" "keep" and "obey" make Jesus' sending of the Holy Spirit to be with us sound conditional.

If? How do we know *if we are loving* either our neighbor or God enough or rightly? Is there a measuring stick somewhere? Some of these scriptures can and have made people (including me) feel insecure or maybe even to lack assurance whether they are in

¹ This is what it means to be in right relationship with God and others. Matthew 5:6 "How good is life for or (Blessed are) those who hunger and thirst for right relationships (righteousness), because they will be satisfied" Our English term "righteousness" comes from the Hebrew word *tzedakah* and the Greek word *dikaiosune*. Both terms carry weighty ideas like justice, generosity, and honesty, which all describe ways of right relating with others and with God. <https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-does-it-mean-hunger-and-thirst-righteousness/>

good standing with God. And many of us have some negative connotations about what obedience means (or maybe it's just me). This word obey has been held over many of us in an abusive and oppressive way by authorities attempting to elicit unquestioning compliance from us, to our own harm and detriment. But, Father Ben Sternke explains that when Jesus calls us into obedience in scripture, it is different from that kind of unquestioning compliance. Instead, God calls us to obedience for our good/sakes, for our flourishing, but it is never imposed upon us against our desire or to our harm. And we live into the reality of this love by keeping Jesus' words. And when we hear that word "keep," "keep my commands" its not about doing something in order to earn God's love like trying harder to be nice or trying to stop cussing, smoking and drinking and being good. Instead, to keep God's word, we observe, care, and guard His word in our hearts, because living by them will bring us abundant life.

So, instead of the unquestioning-type of obedience previously mentioned, that allowed those in authority to abuse us, it should rather bear the fruit of preventing the abuse and exploitation that many of us have suffered and even inflicted on others. When we are seeking to keep and obey God's word, Jesus cannot mean unquestioning compliance because Jesus (himself) never treated anyone that way! **The good news is that The Holy Spirit is present and active in our lives, bringing about life and empowering us to receive continual guidance and inspiration to love others. #**

So, it's great that we can release our anxieties about these scriptures now that we understand Jesus' words are not conditional and that we are in good standing with God, (which has everything to do with what Jesus accomplished), BUT we still have the challenge of other human beings in front of us. Loving those we live and work with and all who cross our paths that irritate or bother us might feel daunting, making it ever more important to talk about love, even if it's hard, because God is love. The Lord of the universe is present in his creation in the form of love. Friends, we are sheltered and surrounded by love. That means when we encounter love in the world, it isn't an exaggeration to say we are encountering God. To love others is to move with the grain of the universe. We are not meant to be trapped in ourselves caught up in our own troubles, blind to the people around us. We were meant to connect with each other, to feel known, and to know each other and to care about what's really going on with each other. We were created to delight in each other and in God. And that's why it's such good news that **The Holy Spirit is present and active in our lives, bringing about life and empowering us to receive continual guidance and inspiration to love others**

When we really do connect with a human soul, there's nothing better. To fall in love for the first time; or the joys of parenthood that sound mundane when we say them, but when we feel them, realize the greatest joy ever experienced. The joy of realizing a friend

of many years really does know you and loves you and is in your corner. Or to realize for the first time that Jesus loves you. This kind of love is the kind God desires for us - and even deeper; and he has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us in this reality.

At the end of each day, and during each moment of the day, according to John's gospel, there's only one question to ask ourselves: "In what ways did I or did I not love today?" Maybe as you reflect on that, judgment arises. But for Jesus "judgment"² is to help us recognize where we are not meeting the mark, not to penalize.

Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit is another way of Him saying to us, "I am not leaving you orphaned." I'm going to guide you in particular ways, I'm going to inspire you to figure out how to love." And the Holy Spirit guides us by *always* pointing us to Jesus, to his words and to his posture towards everyone who crossed his path, while giving us freedom and wisdom to make decisions each day that will bring God glory and not harm to others. Theologian David F. Ford says, "That the spirit works in surprising ways, through surprising people and events, drawing on unexpected sources."³ It is possible then, that there are three to 300 different options, big or small, on any given day or particular situation that God would bless and would not conflict with His will or word.

You may be wondering how to discern the Spirit's guidance on loving others. Or even how to recognize between our own thoughts and his leading? For starters, the Holy Spirit does not lead or guide us in ways that are contrary to scripture or into sin. Throughout the New Testament we see the Holy spirit directing people to do the will of God; that which brings glory to God and flourishing to others. For example, in today's Act's reading, we are told that the Spirit inspired Philip to love his neighbor in a particular way and led him to an Ethiopian court official who needed help understanding the Scriptures.

So, do not be anxious, see where the Spirit takes you, believing that through the Holy Spirit, God is present and at work actively leading and guiding us the whole time. **The good news is that The Holy Spirit *is* present and active in our lives, bringing about life and empowering us to receive continual guidance and inspiration to love others.**

² The writer of the Gospel of John's representation of Jesus

³Ford, D.F. (2021) *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

So I ask, who are you having trouble figuring out how to love right now? Is there someone you feel comfortable talking to about this? Someone who is able to offer a listening ear or a new perspective?

Or who do you think you're loving, but the fruit is terrible because maybe the way you're loving them is not really loving them, and so maybe it's time to check in with God about it.

Will you pray with me?

Holy Spirit thank You that you are a constant presence with us. We ask you to help us to love with greater love. Empower us to reflect you as we love others. Inspire us to radiate the love that lives within us through your Spirit in ways that brings you glory. Amen.