

John 14:23-29

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.*

So You May Believe - May 22, 2022

John 14:23-29

Change is a fundamental part of life. Another fundamental part of life is that human beings tend to resist change. There are many ways to define change but essentially what happens when we change is that we are letting go of one thing and starting something new. There is an ending and a beginning. Sometimes when things end, we are delighted. I'm sure Ukrainian refugees will be delighted when their time in exile comes to an end. At the same time, Beginnings can be frightening. Moving to a new school can be terrifying for a child. The fact that it must happen doesn't make it any less scary.

We are coming near an ending in our Christian year. The season of Easter will finish next week when we celebrate the Ascension of Christ. The Easter season is all about the risen Christ preparing his disciples for their new mission: spreading the good news. Recall what he had to accomplish.

First, he had to help his followers overcome their personal burdens of guilt and shame because they knew they had let him down and abandoned him during his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Jesus had to reassure them that he knew all along that they would flee for their own safety and that, in fact, was a good thing. If Peter and the others had not run away, it was entirely possible that they also might have been captured, tried, and executed. That is certainly no way to build a church -- with your key leaders wiped out.

But then, onto the second task. Once his followers accepted that Jesus understood what they did and was OK with it, he needed to prepare them for their mission. Now Jesus' earthly ministry was a three year course in how to talk about God to people and how to demonstrate how God's power is available to anyone with faith. But now the students have to become the teachers. Not only do they have to become the teachers, they have to be confident and strong in their own faith so they can carry out their mission.

Jesus' followers were entering a hostile world. They had many things going against them. Obviously, they had to contend with the Jewish leadership who saw their Jesus movement as a threat. They saw Jesus as a threat, they obviously would view any speaking on his behalf as a threat. Furthermore, while the Romans who occupied Israel were tolerant of long-established Judaism, it was quite another thing to ignore a brand-new religion, which Christianity was rapidly going to become.

So here is the problem: the disciples of Jesus had a huge, daunting task ahead of them. They were to spread out and talk about their faith. But at the same time, their leader and inspiration, Jesus was going to leave them physically.

But isn't that the way things had to be? I mean, our relationship with God does not and cannot depend on merely physical evidence. If Jesus stuck around for a while, would things have gotten better for his followers? If Jesus were alive today, would the world be a significantly different or better place?

For me, the answer is no. Jesus is one person. One totally unique and special person to be sure, but still just one human being. During his life, he was able to reach out and speak to several thousand people. He healed many and the healings scripture records are notable because they were healings of people generally on the fringes of society. Yet, as Jesus himself often complained, his healings were not enough to persuade people he was the real deal. His words were not enough to persuade people that he was the real deal. The point is that acting alone, he was able to persuade only a few people, several hundred at most that he was the Messiah promised in the Jewish Scriptures -- He was and is the Son of God.

If Jesus' life and teachings were to have any significance beyond his fairly small group of followers, something had to change and change seriously. Jesus as one person could not spread the good news alone, rather his followers would have to take on the job.

Jesus himself explained that what was going to happen to him and the church was similar to what happens to plants and their seeds. In John's gospel Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

In other words, Jesus is the seed that died in order that his spiritual offspring, his disciples, could in turn become seeds themselves and carry on the work of Jesus. The seeds of Jesus had to be given their opportunity to grow.

These people, the disciples of Jesus, are the true seeds of change that began to spread throughout the world carrying the good news.

But how was that going to happen? I mean does the coach of a football team quit right before the Super Bowl? Does a General go on vacation right before the troops go into battle? Does a father go on a business trip right before his child is about to be born? I certainly hope not!

But here is the risen Christ, seemingly abandoning his followers even before any serious evangelism, or "good-news-spreading" got underway. How could any team succeed? More importantly, how could Jesus' team succeed?

Friends, what was about to happen was a complete change in mindset, of thinking, of reimagining our relationship with God. For the Jesus project to work, his followers had to understand God in a completely different way.

Earlier I asked whether things would be fundamentally different if Jesus were alive today and I said I didn't think so. The reason for that is not just that Jesus is only one person acting on his own, he is outside of us. He is external to us. He is other.

No matter what Jesus could say, no matter what miracles he could perform, Jesus always remained to his followers someone whom they experienced with their physical senses. In other words, they were limited to seeing, hearing, and touching him. Everything they knew about Jesus came from feelings and thoughts which were driven by what the senses told them.

I know this may all sound philosophical and esoteric, but what I am trying to do is differentiate experiencing Jesus externally -- the only way the disciples knew -- from experiencing Jesus internally.

Friends, what we are about as a church, what we are about as followers of Jesus Christ is not just being a society of do-gooders. If that is all we are, then we might as well join the Rotary or the animal Rescue League. There are plenty of "good causes" out there we can support with our time and money.

However, there is another aspect to following Jesus Christ and that aspect is all about faith. Faith is something that goes beyond our senses. It goes beyond our feelings. It goes beyond our emotions. Faith is not at all dependent on what goes on outside of us. Rather, faith comes from inside us. It comes from our hearts.

For some people, perhaps many people, talking about faith can be difficult, especially with those we don't know very well. Having faith is a gift from God. It is God who gives us the ability to be aware of God and to want to be with God.

The yearnings we feel to walk with God cannot be described in neat, easy-to-understand terms. Yes, there are times, when we are slapped with feelings of awe. Holding a newborn, witnessing a sunrise, just glorying in the magnificence of all that God has made.

But more often than not, our awareness of God's presence is much more subtle and may leave us questioning what we have experienced. And that, friends, is the presence of God inside of us. We call it many things: the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Breath of God, or as Jesus said today, the Advocate.

Whatever you want to call it, God-inside-us brings a totally new dimension to our relationship with the Lord and it was absolutely necessary to enable the disciples to spread the good news and build the church.

With the Spirit inside of us, God living inside of us, Jesus is more than just an external role model, Jesus is there, truly there, making himself known to us in all sorts of ways. But most importantly, the presence of Jesus in our existence equips us with the faith and the confidence we need to venture out into this hostile world and proclaim Jesus.

That is what Jesus promised to his followers. He promised that although he would no longer be physically present with them, he was planting the seed of faith and awareness of God in each of them so they could carry Christ with them all the time.

That, friends is exactly what the disciples would need — the innate, inexpressible knowledge that God was with them and would never let them go. That, friends, is the Holy Spirit at work.

And work is a good way to describe what the Spirit does for us and proof that it is real. How else, how else can we explain the explosive growth of the early church once Jesus had left his disciples?

Consider all the obstacles they were about to face. But suddenly, instead of one Jesus spreading the good news, hundreds were now doing what Jesus did: preaching, teaching, healing, and changing the world.

But the best news of all, friends, is that the Advocate that came to Jesus' first followers is the same Advocate that inhabits us right now. Make no mistake, we are as empowered as the first disciples to do exactly what they did and go forth from this place to spread the good news in all we say and all we do.

We do not have to be afraid! God lives inside each one of us! All we have to do is stop resisting, stop doubting, and live instead in the full faith God is blessing us with!

Listen. I know perfectly well that these are not good times for the Church of Jesus Christ. I know that many have turned their backs on who we are and what we stand for. I know we may feel like those disciples of long ago who had no idea what they would do after Jesus left.

But the fact is that Jesus never really leaves us and when the disciples believed that, when we believe that we can and we will share the good news in ways we cannot even imagine. Go ahead tell the Advocate living inside you that the Spirit is always welcome. Praise God!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.