

The Farewell Discourse
Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC,
Lexington
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
May 14, 2023

Scripture Reading John 14:15-21

¹⁵ ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments.
¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another
Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This 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.

¹⁸ ‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In
a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will
see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day
you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I
in you. ²¹They 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.’

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A local non-profit holds a Mothers' Day themed fundraiser every year. I've come to expect the messaging and tune it out - "send your mom flowers and support the program you love." I'm sure you have heard this message, too. But this year they've changed their strategy. Instead of emphasizing the cheerful, high quality roses your mom will enjoy for weeks, or the smile you'll put on your mom's face by supporting her favorite non-profit, this year's fundraising spots tell stories of mothers who passed away years ago. Recipes they left, their most important teachings.

I'm not entirely clear as to whether focusing on stories of grief and loss will result in excellent fundraising results. As someone who lost my mom twenty years ago, hearing these particular ads in the middle of my commute has been jarring. I reach for the change station button the moment the appeal begins.

On the other hand, there are moments when we've got to talk about the serious stuff. Jesus, in today's text, needed his disciples to take seriously what was about to come: his death, and the continuation of his ministry without him.

So Jesus had something to say to his soon to be grieving followers. Here's what I expect of you, even when I am

gone: love one another. Keep my commandments, which is to say, live the way I have lived.

Jesus so often gave instructions - teachings, commissions. Here, he *also* offered encouragement. Blessed assurance, even. Though tough times are coming, you won't be alone. The advocate, comforter, helper, counselor, breath, Spirit of God is coming to abide with you. I will not leave you orphaned. I will not leave you orphaned. What a poignant, beautiful word. *I will not leave you orphaned. You are not alone.*

Jesus was wise beyond his years. Theologically, it makes sense. In John's terms, Jesus had been there from the beginning - Jesus was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God, had been with God, had been God, from the beginning. Jesus was God incarnate, the divine enfleshed. In some mysterious way, both human and God. Jesus was wise because God is all Wisdom. In a profound sense this young human being had the wisdom of the Ancient of Days, the experience of an old aching God, the eternity of the Alpha and Omega, love stretching from everlasting to everlasting.

You can tell Elizabeth's announcement about Older Americans' Month got me thinking about the gifts of our elders, and the blessing of our everlasting God. To quote

singer-songwriter Paul Simon, *God is old*. And to quote Lynn Casteel Harper, one of the pastors at the Riverside Church in New York, “Amidst the chaos and violence of 21st Century America, we worship a God who is experienced, who possesses the long view, who is practiced in loving, forgiving, and bringing life out of death. God is old. Praise be.”¹

In his thirties, Jesus was wise beyond his years. An old soul. He could see his human end coming, and he could see what his friends and loved ones would need when he was gone. He knew what they would need, what we would need, to keep following him and to keep building his movement of compassion and justice. So here is Jesus’s commissioning and benediction. His graduation speech to the class of 30CE, his last will and testament, his closing speech at the banquet. He didn’t get to retire, but Jesus did have the chance to be a wise elder.

Some of his students might have railed against it - no, no, this can’t happen - but they also took notes. And when his earthly life was over, and they were telling others about him, his love and mercy, his wisdom and sharpness, they remembered that they were not alone, they were not orphaned. And what they did would mean that followers of

¹ May 2023, <https://www.trcnyc.org/watch/> → <https://youtu.be/c9dkCDKnCQ8>

Jesus who came late could receive that same blessed assurance:

We are not orphans.

We are not alone.

I wonder if next year, that local non-profit should find a way to say:

Wherever your mother is, you are not alone.

Because that is a good word.

There is a local non-profit organization that says, at its core:

You are not alone. God, our Mother, Christ, our Teacher, the Spirit, our Comforter is right here. And when we gather together we are all surrounded by love.

That non-profit is us, right here.

We love one another the way Christ has loved us.

And we will not leave each other orphans.

Here, we are brave to say: you are not alone.

That is a good word, indeed. Amen.