

May 14, 2023  
John 14:15-21  
1 Peter 3:13-22

Life can feel pretty lonely sometimes. We can feel disconnected from others, cut off from what is good and life-giving. We want to be included, to be a part of things, to be in the mix and in the know. But sometimes, we aren't. It's like everyone has left us behind, and the world has moved on. I am reminded of this every Sunday when I try to wrangle our technology. I barely understand how it works. I grew up recording songs on cassette tapes from the radio, for goodness' sake. And now, now everything is so different. It keeps changing. Things keep moving on and I constantly feel left behind.

Maybe you have noticed how things keep changing. The culture around us shifts and moves at a faster and faster rate. And we can feel lost. We can feel alone. In spite of all the ways we can connect, we feel like we can't connect with any of it. The American Hospital Association has noticed in our culture an increase in loneliness. They are calling it a health crisis. Officially, this week, the COVID pandemic ended, but they say we are now in a pandemic of loneliness. With stress and worry and

the grief of what has happened over the last few years built up inside us. We want to do something about it, but we can't. There aren't enough therapists available. And we are so very busy. We have to keep going. We have to keep moving. And so we dump all those feelings on others, finding someone else to blame. Or we keep it to ourselves and stuff it down; until it becomes a lead weight dragging us down. Depression is serious business, and it has spiked among the old and the young. So much so that it has started affecting our health, our very existence. Loneliness is everywhere. It is affecting nearly everyone. And it affected the disciples too. In our scripture from John, Jesus is about to leave them. And they will have to figure out life without him: Jesus, their teacher and Lord they have come to depend on. He wouldn't be there anymore, and there would be this great big hole in their lives. It's that lost, empty sadness that comes with grief. The grief that we know ourselves when we lose someone; a parent, a grandparent, a close neighbor or friend. When they leave, life goes on, but we can't. We won't. We don't know how to do so without them.

Jesus knew that his disciples would feel alone. They would feel orphaned even. And maybe, they would lose heart. They would lose the spirit of their group. They would feel like giving up. They would stop trying to love one another and they would stop trying to work together in Jesus' name. And instead, they would fight. They would turn on each other. All that disappointment and sadness would have to go somewhere. They would fight because anger is really grief in disguise. And if it doesn't come out, it stays within. And it becomes despair.

Jesus knows this. He is giving his disciples the sad news that he is leaving, and they will need to go on without him. Their world will change drastically. But one thing won't change. God won't change. God won't leave them. They won't be orphaned. God will send another one to be their companion. Their comforter and guide. This Spirit, this energy will infuse them and fill them. It will abide with them and be IN them. They will not be alone. This Spirit will reveal the truth that God is with them always to the end.

The word for this spiritual companion is Paraclete. The Greek roots of the word are para, which means 'beside,' and kaleo which means 'to

speak'. The paraclete is the one who speaks beside you. Like a friend or a counselor. The Paraclete will help and offer reassurance. It will be trustworthy and safe. It will communicate in a way that you can hear the truth of God's faithfulness and love. It will speak your language. It will talk to you about the goodness that holds all life in the universe together. The paraclete will also speak FOR you. It will speak up and defend you. Like an attorney who makes your case in court. The word paraclete means Advocate and in Jesus' day it was a legal word as it is today. The paraclete presents the truth and argues for it. It combats the lies of fear and falsehood. It won't rest its case until it is clear to everyone that its defendant is entitled to salvation and resurrection in Jesus Christ. The Paraclete is the lawyer of all lawyers and it won't quit until you have received the compensation you deserve.

The Advocate speaks FOR us and TO us. It speaks its words at our side as a friend and a supporter. But this Spirit is not just sent to you or me alone. Jesus says, my Spirit will be with you. And this YOU is a plural you. In Greek, this you is y'all. Y'all will have an advocate from my Father, Jesus says. Y'ALL will have that Advocate forever; and y'all will

know it because it is the Spirit of truth. And it will be where two or three are gathered. In community. Because that's how love works. That's how God works. Not as an individual me-kind-of-thing, but as an all-together-us kind of thing.

This Spirit will be with you, says Jesus, when you ask for it. When you ask, you will receive. We might wonder why we have to ask. It might seem like we shouldn't need to. Jesus should just know we need help.

And God should just give it to us. And besides, we hate asking for things. We hate needing others to give us things. We hate relying on others because we should be independent and self-sufficient. But Jesus says, we will have to ask for the Spirit. We will need to rely on God.

And we will need to do it constantly. We aren't meant to do this alone.

The community of Jesus' disciples isn't just a ME or a YOU; it's an ALL Y'ALL.

Our Advocate speaks TO US and FOR US and says that we cannot be separated from God. There is no life apart from our Creator who made us and who loved us and continues to love us even when we are not at our best. Even when we are ignorant or selfish. Even when our fear and

anger corrupt the truth. Even when our life is over, even then, God does not give up. In his letter today, Peter tells us that. That Jesus never gave up. He was faithful as God is faithful. And nothing stands in the way of God's desire to save us. When Jesus was crucified and he died and descended to the dead, to the spirits in prison, it became the opportunity to get to the place farthest from God. To reach those farthest from God. All the dead from the past, going all the way back to Adam and Eve. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, this is called the Hallowing of Hell. The devil thinks he has finally defeated God, but it is God who has defeated him. Peter tells us in his letter: Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated. Christ endured all the suffering in the world to bring you to God. To set you free from fear and death.

The Advocate speaks the Truth to us. The truth, of what is real and what really matters. On the back of your bulletin insert is a set of questions.

The first one is: what is the truth that matters most to you? I want you to think about that and write it down. What do you believe and how does your life reflect it? How do your decisions reflect what matters to Jesus? How does your life reveal the truth of Jesus' commandment to love your

neighbor as yourself? To treat others as you want to be treated. To seek first the kingdom of God, and confirm the least will be the greatest and the last will be first. To trust that for our sins, Christ suffered once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us, you and me, to God? We are all gathered here by the Spirit of truth, our Advocate who speaks to us. And who speaks FOR us. Look at the second question: What truth would you like others to know? What do you wish they would understand about life? This world full of people who don't know love anymore. Who are too overwhelmed by change and loss. Who have less certainty. And fewer people to rely on. And have never felt farther from God. The Advocate speaks up FOR us. You are not alone. You are not hopeless or worthless. You are not orphaned or abandoned. You are God's own child. You matter beyond your understanding. You are worth rescuing and saving.

The Spirit speaks the truth FOR us and for one another so that we do not lose hope. In Sweden, researchers found that children in hopeless situations develop something called resignation syndrome. It happens frequently among children of refugees. They are struggling with all the

extreme trauma of war and displacement. While their parents apply for asylum, they try to find their place in the world. But when it looks like the request for asylum might be denied and they will have to return to their country, the children stop eating or drinking. They stop getting out of bed or caring for themselves. They become catatonic and unresponsive. It's as if despair shuts their bodies down.

Despair can do that kind of thing to people. That's what isolation and separation can do when we think the world has given up on us. Or that life matters so little. We go numb. We disconnect from all the feelings because we just can't take anymore feelings. We separate ourselves from love and from God and from one another.

But the truth is that we were made for love. The truth is that Jesus came to teach us that we aren't meant to do this alone. And if we ask for help, God will be with us. God will be our companion. God's Spirit will come and dwell with us and be our advocate and speak to us of God's love and faithfulness. God's Spirit will speak FOR us. Because God is not against us. The Spirit defends us from the world. Defends us from our doubts and negativity. The Spirit stands up for us against the condemnation



that's out there. Arguing that this one is loved. This one is precious. This one is worth saving.

This is the Spirit that Jesus has given us is our defender and comforter.

This Spirit of truth speaks for us when we can't speak for ourselves. So what truth needs to be spoken for others? How is the Spirit calling us to speak for those around us? To encourage others, to be a companion to others, to let them know they are not alone? Which people need to hear the truth that they are worth keeping company with? Because the truth is that God will not leave us alone, nor will God let us be orphans. The truth is that we do not need to fear what they fear, as Peter says. We have an Advocate that is with us forever. All we need to do is ask, and it will come to be our companion. To fill the emptiness and dispel the doubt. To speak the truth to us and for us. To abide with us and be in us. So we may know that we are loved and so we may love one another. Come, Holy Spirit, and be our defender. Guide us in wisdom and truth. Come Holy Spirit, reveal your truth. As you live, let us live in Christ. Come Holy Spirit, make us more than ourselves alone. Make us one together in you.