

**Sixth Sunday after Easter**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**14 May 2023**

**John 14:15-21**

Back in 2015, I was driving back to church after a poker game with friends. I had had two drinks over the space of four or five hours, so I was by no means intoxicated. But I was exhausted. It had been one of those insanely long days at the church, made even longer by my weekly poker game. At some point, I switched lanes on the deserted highway without using my signal. Before I knew it, there were police lights which appeared from nowhere. I parked on the dark shoulder, as one of the Sheriff's officers pointed his powerful flashlight directly at my face. He asked me for my driver's license and registration and went back to his patrol car. I could see a second officer in the passenger side. I knew I had driven erratically, I had done wrong, and I expected a ticket. My fear was that they would give me a breathalyzer test. I wasn't drunk in any way, but they could have demanded a cumbersome and embarrassing test. I was a nervous wreck while both officers talked to each other. At some point, the Sheriff's officer returned to my window and said, "My lieutenant says he knows you well. Just be careful and use your signals. Have a good night, father." With that, I was let go to my great relief.

I will make a connection to this brief story later. For now, let us talk about John 14:15-21. We are in the Upper Room on the day Jesus had his last supper with his friends. He has just begun his farewell speech to his friends, starting with the line, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me." We are very familiar with this passage because we preach it often at funerals. Jesus tells his disciples that he goes to prepare a place for them and that he will come for them when the time is right. At some point he tells them, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do." (v.12.) The reason why this will be the case is that Jesus is going to the Father, and the disciples will be able to ask anything of the Father in his name, and it will be given to them.

Now, at verse 15, Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." This verse continues with the argument at the beginning of the farewell speech. He will no longer be with them, but this in no way signifies that he is leaving them orphaned. He will send the Spirit of Truth to be with them. It is because of this Spirit's presence within them and among them that they will be able to do the things Jesus has given them to do. I want to expand on a few words here, so that we avoid confusion.

The passage starts with the following statement: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." The word "love" in this verse is significant. Jesus uses 'agapao' for love. This word has an emphasis on action. It doesn't mean love as that emotional state of

having warm feelings for another person. It implies a showing of our affection, a doing something to demonstrate one's love for the person. It is an active verb that does for the other, even when may not feel like doing it. This is the type of maternal love we celebrate today. A sacrificial love that delights in pleasing the other, not necessarily because the other does something to deserve our love, but because it is within our nature and will to love the person in that way. Not out of fear, not under compulsion, not out of societal pressure, but out of a complete dedication for the other. The Lutheran Pastor, Brien Stoffregen puts it this way, "Loving one's enemies doesn't mean to develop warm feelings for them, but to do 'beneficial deeds for' them."

This is the love Jesus is talking about. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." It is as if Jesus is saying, "Your love for me is an active love that requires doing and engagement." The next word Jesus uses is "To keep." Those who love Jesus keep his commandments. This verb "To Keep," can mean a variety of things according to a Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament. It can mean, "to retain custody, keep watch over, guard, to continue, to hold on to, to reserve, to preserve, to persist, to fulfill, to pay attention to, etc." It is interesting that this word (tereo) is often translated as to obey, but the meaning is much richer than this. In a way, Jesus is saying, "If you love me, you will embrace my teachings with great care and consider them of utmost importance. Loving Jesus means, "Keeping alive the memory of all that Jesus did and said and carrying on that ministry -- keeping it going. Displaying it so that others know that it is dear to us" (Stoffregen.)

The question for John in this passage is this, "How do we have a relationship with Jesus when he finally leaves us?" His answer is, "By keeping his commandments." Which brings us to the third word, "Commandments." Are we talking about the 12 commandments? Perhaps about the 613 specific edicts distilled from the Commandments? Is Jesus talking about the Jewish Torah? In the Gospel of Jesus, the word Commandments means two things, "Love of God and Love of others." Remember that in John the new Commandment is that the disciples love each other as the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. Jesus says today, "They 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. You will hold dear everything that I taught you."

Jesus knew how extremely hard it is to love others in this sacrificial, active, fully engaged way. This is the reason why Jesus will ask the Father to send us his Spirit of Truth. This Spirit will do several things for us: 1. The Spirit will speak for Jesus. It will become the internal whispering who will guide us the rest of the way home. 2. The spirit will teach us the things Jesus did not have the time to teach us. This Spirit is a master, a guide, a counselor, an instructor. It will reveal God's Son to us. But the Paraclete will also

remind us of all that Jesus has said to us. We are forgetful people and it is very easy to fall for human wisdom and to forget the wisdom Jesus taught us. The Spirit reminds us of his words, actions, and his promises. The Spirit centers our attention on Jesus and reminds us that we are not orphans. Christ is within in us, Christ is in the face of all strangers. Christ is present in our world and all we need to do is open our eyes to see him. The Spirit reminds us of this reality every day. The Spirit will testify on Jesus' behalf, reminding us that our salvation has been paid by the blood of the Lamb. The Spirit of truth reminds us of the truth of our sinful condition, but most importantly, it will give testimony about Jesus' desire that the whole world may be saved through him.

So, going back to the original question: How do we have a relationship with Jesus after he has ascended to the Father? First of all, we claim the truth of baptism -- we have been born with Christ in the waters of baptism, and his Holy Spirit now dwells in us. Second, we recognize ourselves as sinners. We still fall short and fail to love as God directs us to love. The Spirit of Truth reminds us of the grasp of sin in our lives. Third, we recognize and believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is our savior and friend. He died for us. Going back to my original story, we have crossed the lines and deserve the punishment. But we also remember that we are known by Jesus. He is our friend and our savior. We are known and we are forgiven by him. Lastly, we keep Jesus' message alive by loving others, not in a sentimental love, but in a sacrificial love that delights in serving and caring for others, even when in the absence of the internal fuzzy feelings we mistakenly call love.

Happy mother's day to all of those who have been blessed to realize the gift and promise of motherhood. And to those who have been unable to conceive, those who have lost children to miscarriage or death, and those who simply didn't feel called to be a mother, please know that God loves you deeply and that we include you today in all of our prayers and thanksgivings. May our God continue to bless all of you today and always. Amen!