

[Jesus said:] "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, who will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, whom the world neither sees nor knows. You know the Spirit, because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 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." **John 14:15-21 (NRSV)**

Revealed in Love

I recall the moment I knew that I needed glasses. It was on Christmas Eve, about eight years ago, as I was preparing for a candlelight service in my first call to parish ministry. On that evening, a couple that was coming to worship cheerfully greeted me from the back of the church. Although the voice of the man sounded familiar, I was unable to identify him because I could not see him clearly. As a result, I could not return his personal greeting. I knew my vision was getting worse, but that experience led me to schedule an eye exam and finally order a pair of eyeglasses as a remedy for my visual impairment. The eyesight given to us at birth is a precious sense. We value our vision because we depend on it for a wide variety of activities every day. Yet, there is also a spiritual dimension in life that is to be seen beyond this physical realm. Unlike the eyesight which allows a person to see the world, the ability to see and know the particular nature of the three persons of God is not given to everyone at birth. The Bible teaches that people come to see or know God personally (and not as an abstraction) through a means of special revelation in and through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

In his intimate conversation with his followers (John 14-17) that took place just before he was betrayed, arrested, and sentenced to death by crucifixion, Jesus made it clear there was a difference between those who were devoted to him and those who were "in the world." To handle this distinction and the qualitative difference that Jesus made between the faithful and the unbelievers requires a great deal of attentiveness to the details of what Christ taught. It would be easy to deal with the teachings of Christ in vague generalities, but then we lose focus on what Christ wishes to help us recognize. One of the recurring problems with us as humans is that we attempt to see and know God by our own terms. It is this self-referential way of being in relationship to God that is our approach. But, as you likely know from your relationships with other people, that is no way to develop intimacy with another person. After all, *is there a genuine relationship between people if it is simply one-sided?*

It is the sinful nature that leads people to approach a relationship with God in this way. It was the tragedy that Christ entered the world and yet the world hated and rejected him. That sinful nature is the inclination within every human heart. For it is inborn within our nature to begin life as children whose world is narrowly understood to ourselves. As people develop, psychologically and socially their world expands and they (hopefully) find their place within society for the good of all. One day, the world of a child or youth is replaced by the world of the adult. God help us all if the world becomes an arena where the adults learn not to submit to each other in love, but approach it as a world that must bend to meet the needs of the sinful, sovereign self. God is never seen or known in such circumstances in life. Those who wish to follow and know God must learn to leave this world in search of the world that is to come.

In this present age, the American church finds itself situated in a culture that has difficulty seeing and knowing the truth about the world that is to come. Jesus prepared his followers to recognize they would always be cultural misfits, but how many Americans who wish to see and know Christ recognize the same is true for those who follow Him today? Although Jesus never used the language, the idea he communicated is that of spiritual conversion. Jesus acknowledged that the eyes and the heart of those who follow his teachings would be spiritually misaligned with the world. His followers would see, but the world would not and could not. His followers would know the truth and would be set free, but the world would not and could not. Christ laid down his life to give life to people who tragically killed their Savior.

In article five of the Augsburg Confession, Martin Luther and his fellow reformers observed, “the Holy Spirit works faith when and where God pleases in those who hear the Gospel.” Faith and love are not generated through personal willpower, but they mysteriously come to life in the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The reference point of our faith does not begin and end within ourselves. If it did then it would fail. The point of reference is within the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. “Because I live, you also will live,” Jesus said (John 14:19). The point of the Gospel is that God has brought his love and lifegiving power to those who believe. While the world hates and rejects him, Christ extends his merciful love as the hand of parent reaching down to a child incapable of providing for its own needs. God is revealed to us in love. Having received his merciful love, are not the children of God revealed in the same way?

As the New Testament scholar Craig Koester observes, “Coming to faith is analogous to falling in love. One cannot fall in love in the abstract. Love comes through an encounter with another person. The same is true of faith.” As followers of a loving Savior, we are to follow the Master’s lead, reciprocating his love and obedience to the commands of the heavenly Father. As God has been revealed to us through acts of divine love, this love is further revealed to us and in us as we respond in love to a world that God seeks to save. Movement in love is directed away from the self toward God. But, in the love of God there is self-forgetfulness and the old nature that is hopelessly “curved in upon itself” is put to death. It is in this way that life comes to us. Life that is born not through human effort, but life that springs from the One who died and rose from the dead to live eternally. Such a marvelous gift belongs to those who accept it from the One who gives it freely in the Gospel. However excellent we may believe our vision to be, without Christ it is not clear enough to rightly see a righteous God who has come to live with us personally and bring us to salvation. It is that old pride or stubborn nature that may keep us from making an appointment to get the remedy we need. But, why suffer from trying to go through life with poor vision? In seeing and knowing God rightly through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we begin to see and know ourselves and each other as God wants us. One does not have to live in spiritual blindness. In the Gospel, God has opened our eyes to see and know the truth revealed in love.

Come, Holy Spirit, and open my life to hear your truth. Forgive me for when I have been too stubborn and too cold-hearted to listen to what you want to teach me. Help me see and know what it is you want for me. Help me to seek nothing but your love and to lovingly respond to you. Let me leave the world that lives in rebellion from you so that I may seek after the world that is to come. In your holy name. Amen.

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