

WHAT DID THEY NEED TO HEAR?
Acts 17: 22-31; John 14: 15-21
Sixth Sunday of Easter • May 17, 2020
by Pat Berger

Today's reading from the Gospel according to John continues where we left off last week; chapters 13 to 17 in this Gospel help us to grasp what Jesus thought the disciples needed to hear at this critical time. In what is known as the "Farewell Discourse," Jesus resumes these last teachings that he wants to give his followers before his death. When we watch the news or listen to the news these days, we hear a good bit about death and illness. We are much more aware of how tenuous life is right now than it has been in most of our lifetimes. We are privileged in these verses from John to be with those who were facing Jesus' death, and who got to hear Jesus' last thoughts for them. This gospel was most likely finalized near the end of the first century AD, and so was first read by a community of believers who had not known Jesus during his life on earth. In the nervousness of this community about who they were and what they ought to do and how they ought to go about helping others to become believers, John wrote these words that they -- and future readers -- might understand the sense of loss being felt by those first disciples. It is common to think of Jesus' last supper with his disciples as a quiet meal among friends; John shows us here their confusion and concern, and he shows us Jesus consoling his disciples.

In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, Jesus told those disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them, in that house of his Father's, the one that had many rooms, the one to which they knew the way. Surely they did need to hear that, and we can easily imagine that that alone was not enough to calm them. And so Jesus continued, where our reading begins this morning. First of all, those who loved him would keep his commandments. That would allow them to continue to see him; the world would not see him, but they would.

The Greek word used here for "keep" is not the word that usually means keep in the sense of obey; here, the word translated as "keep" means maintain. Rather than telling the disciples to behave themselves, then, the idea is more, do your best to make the world into a place where others can live according to the commandments. It wouldn't be enough just to be able to say, I didn't steal or I didn't envy; Jesus' followers would need to work to see to it that no one else was inclined to steal, that no one else envied, that no one else killed or did anything else that contradicted those commandments. As one of my friends says, go into the world not to offend and not to be offended.

Well: that's a HUGE assignment! How ever in the world can we do that?? Again, Jesus might have said (and maybe did -- it just didn't make it into print!), not to be concerned. Jesus will ask God to send to the followers an Advocate, the Spirit of

Truth, to be with them -- and us -- forever. So; Spirit is an Advocate. We have all known advocates. David Lose writes that an advocate is, "the one who stands up for you when you need it; the one who speaks on your behalf; the one who lends you a helping hand, takes your side, and won't leave you while you're down." We have known that one; I am quite sure that I would be safe in saying that each of you has been that one.

Jesus would not leave them alone, abandoned; they would not be as orphans. He would send them another Advocate. Both of those words are important to his message for them. He would send another Advocate. The disciples had already had one Advocate; that would have been Jesus. And now, he would send another who would be with them forever. The Greek word for Advocate, *paraclete*, can be translated as counselor, comforter, helper -- and most closely translated comes out as "one who walks along beside." Because of who Holy Spirit is, they -- and we -- will never be alone. Since Holy Spirit is Advocate and Jesus was Advocate, we can learn about Spirit by re-reading the Gospel of John, and paying attention to all that Jesus had done that is recorded there. In the words of one of the commentators, "To have seen Jesus at work is to anticipate the work of Holy Spirit." We can begin to imagine that this might have been comforting for those anxious ones. Their leader, their friend would no longer be with them in the same way that he had been -- and he would still be with them, in the person of Holy Spirit. Jesus told them in last week's verses that they would do greater works than he had; this week, he tells them that they will be able to do that because, "On that day" -- the day that Spirit comes -- "you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

Paul had heard at least some of what he needed to hear and absorbed it by the time he was giving the talk we heard from the Book of the Acts. He had been through the city of Athens and we encounter him as he began to tell the Athenians what he had seen. One thing he saw was an altar inscribed, "To an Unknown God." Paul wanted them all to know of the one God, a relational God who wanted to know them deeply and be known by them as well -- who didn't want to be "unknown." It wasn't necessary for them to make idols to "unknown" gods; get to know the one God who created everything that is, who placed everything in time and space, and who did all of that why? In Paul's words here, ". . . so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him - - though indeed he is not far from each one of us." Perhaps Paul is telling us of his own search -- looking, groping even, and then finding God walking right beside him. That was open to his listeners in Athens, too. He hoped that would be what they needed to hear.

How does it feel to know that you have an Advocate, someone there beside you, someone who loves you as much as God does, as much as Jesus does? There are those around us who feel abandoned, who feel orphaned, just as we heard

in our reading today; some days, maybe we are those who feel that way. And yet, we know that God is with us. God wants us to have and to live that abundant life that we talked about a couple of weeks ago -- a life of health and of community and of feeling blessed. That was what God had in mind when we were given Jesus; when that upset the powers that be to the extent that Jesus lost his life, God raised Jesus. And then there was more: then we were given Holy Spirit, as David Lose writes, ". . . in order to encourage us and look out for us and care for us and stay with us and walk alongside of us. In short, God comes in Holy Spirit to be like Christ for us . . . every day! God comes in Holy Spirit to be another Advocate, our Advocate, who will not give up on us . . . ever." That was what the disciples needed to hear.

And as for us? What do we need to hear? We are accompanied, everywhere, all the time. The promises Jesus made were not only for the disciples then; they are indeed also for us, now. We can still see Jesus, as we read through the Gospels, and through him see God. And we are accompanied by Holy Spirit, who makes it so that we can indeed do greater works than Jesus did. Perhaps a piece of our response is also to be accompaniers. We can be those who walk along beside those we encounter, to comfort them, to encourage them, to pray for them and with them, as each one has need. As we follow Jesus' commandments, we can become, as a commentator put it, "communities of the Spirit." In times of celebration and in times of isolation and in times of just ordinary, we best keep Jesus' commandments and best serve him -- we most easily see him -- when we accompany others of the beloved children. That would be acting out the love of God, and that is what each one and everyone most needs.

Let us pray.