

“On Leaving”

John 14: 23-29

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I have something to confess to you this morning. I have to admit that when I picked out the title for this week's sermon, “On Leaving” I knew that it was my second to last Sunday, and my second to last sermon. It may have crossed my mind as I was choosing this title that some of you would probably assume I would be talking about ME leaving. It's not really what the sermon is on. Sorry about that.

No, this sermon is a sermon “on leaving” that's about Jesus and his leave taking. The gospel story we read this morning backtracks from the resurrection stories that we have been hearing the last few weeks and returns to the time before Jesus' death. Specifically, it goes to the night before Jesus dies, when the disciples are starting to clue in to what's about to happen. They are not ready to say goodbye to Jesus and they are worried about what life is going to be like without him.

Worried is the understatement of the year. The disciples would have been in full-on panic mode. They have been following around one person for the last year, totally uprooted and gave up their lives to be with him, and they are realizing he's about to be gone forever. They don't know what's going to happen or what they are going to do. I imagine their conversation that night took a trip through every stage of grief and loss:

- ♣ Anger at Jesus for not at least trying to stay out of trouble so that he would remain alive and they could all stay together.
- ♣ Bargaining with Jesus – if they promise to be well behaved disciples and listen to everything he says, maybe he can stay with them just a little longer?!

- ♣ Depression – perhaps being too down and sad to even say anything at times.
- ♣ Acceptance – moments of clarity where they understand and accept that this is going to take place the next day, and there is nothing they can do to stop it.
- ♣ And of course, my favorite stage of grief: denial – pretending this is just a regular evening and a regular meal and there's nothing wrong and no changes are about to happen so they can sit back and act like everything is normal.

When Bible stories are read I like to try to place myself in the story, and in this story, I am fully a disciple. It's not hard at all to imagine the feelings they might be going through as they prepare to say goodbye to their friend, as they try to imagine a whole new life, as they go into full on panic mode about what the following days will involve. I'm close friends with those stages of grief, and so I approach this passage not with wisdom to spare, but as the disciples would have: needing to hear a good word from Jesus – needing to be reminded that someone out there has more answers and insight than any of us do. This morning, I am especially thankful that when the original disciples placed their questions and fears before Jesus, he answered them not just with certainty and peace, but with an answer that would sustain and transform our relationships with God for millennia to come.

Jesus' answer that night was to introduce them to the Holy Spirit. For us Trinitarians, it is the moment our understanding of “who God is” expanded and how we eventually came to believe that God manifests in our world as three separate but connected beings, as a Creator God, as Jesus Christ both human and divine, and finally as a Holy Spirit, connecting us all. It is the moment when God became three and one at the same time. Being both three and one is really bad math, but I'll tell you the same thing my theology professor told me when he was trying to explain how God could both three and one at the same time: trust me, it all works out in the end.

Thankfully Jesus didn't call on us to be mathematicians – he simply called on us, his disciples, to be aware that in our midst was a Holy Spirit, an Advocate. Sharing this part of how God is present in

the world is critical because he is telling the disciples that even though he is leaving, God is still with them. He reminds the disciples that no matter what they face, or what kind of grief and loss they encounter, they will not face it alone. God will be beside them – not far away up in the clouds – but truly moving among them and through them – to give them the strength and guidance needed to face anything that comes before them.

This teaching from Jesus is not meant to be trite. He does not say it to placate the disciples or belittle their very real feelings of loss. He tells them about the Holy Spirit precisely because he knows how much they are hurting and he knows how much they will need comfort and guidance long after he is gone. It is a reminder to the disciples, really to us all, that when we struggle or when we grieve, God is right there with us in our grief. Even at our loneliest, we are never alone. Even at our most fearful, God brings us comfort. Even at our most grief-stricken, God is seeing us through. God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, is our counsel, our sojourner, and our advocate. It is the assurance from Jesus that though he must leave the disciples, God will never leave them. The Holy Spirit will never leave us.

I am thankful for the Holy Spirit. It is an important element of my personal faith. I love God the Creator, but often that form of God can feel distant – over there doing being work and creating big things that I'm not sure how I fit into yet. I love Jesus, and I love his teachings, but he is not still walking among us. He has come and gone, and returned and gone again. And so, as important as those two parts of God are, on many days I am most thankful for the Holy Spirit. I like knowing that even if God is up there somewhere, she is also right here. I like knowing that even if Jesus is back there in history, a connection to him is still right here with us. For me, the Holy Spirit is a reminder of the living God, and a reminder that the strength and peace of God dwells inside each one of us. It comforts me when I feel worn and weary. It soothes me when I feel battered and bruised. It guides me when I feel directionless. I am thankful that we are not expected to figure life out on our own – God understands how big of a task discipleship is, and has committed to walking beside us each step of the way.

I am thankful for the Holy Spirit because it doesn't just dwell inside of us, but it moves between

us. It connects us with each other, with our neighbors, with all of humanity including those original disciples who sat with Jesus and poured out their grief to him. Because of the Holy Spirit, when we pour out our own grief, I know that it reaches Jesus. I know that it connects me to the generations of people who have come before me with their own struggles and pain. I know that no matter what any of us is going through or facing in our lives, we are connected to each other – we carry one another's pain through the Holy Spirit so that no one person must carry it on their own.

So I might have been wrong at the beginning of this sermon. This part is a little about me, and a little about you. Because leaving is a rollercoaster of emotions. There is joy at what is next to come. There is fear at what is next to come. There is gratitude for the relationships we have shared these past few years. There is sadness knowing those relationships are coming to an end. If it was up to any one of us to carry all these conflicting and constantly changing emotions, we would surely fail. It's a lot. And, me as your pastor leaving is just one of many stories of loss and change and grief that is unfolding in our congregation at any given moment – it just happens to be the public one. Each one of us is carrying our own private grief's and losses. And none of us can carry the weight of these stories on our own. But we're not expected to. God is with us, each one of us. Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit is our **ADVOCATE** – our support, our champion, and our strength. As our stories of unfold, as a story that has been one for these past several years becomes two, the Holy Spirit will continue weaving us together. So that even in our separation, we are not truly apart. There is a spirit that flows between us and through, naming us as one people, one group of disciples, part of one body of Christ, living out that call in different ways in the world.

Today I thank God for the Holy Spirit, for that presence and strength and counsel when we most need it. Today I thank God for never leaving us alone. Amen.