

EASTER6.A1

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
April 27, 2008

Acts 17:22-31
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

John 14:15-21

15 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

18 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They 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

As Jesus was coming to the end of his earthly ministry, it seems like each thing he said to his disciples was more and more encouraging, more and more loving. This morning's Gospel lesson takes place at Jesus' last supper. He had less than a day to live. He wanted to give his disciples comfort and hope. He said, "I will not leave you orphaned." He told God, "I will love them and reveal myself to them."

That promise of Jesus is a greater gift that we can know to ask for. How often, when you hear someone who is troubled and searching, they don't say they wonder if God *exists*. They say they feel *abandoned* by God. God may be there; he may be the creator of all things, but they don't feel like he cares about them.

So, at his last supper, Jesus makes this final promise to his followers. "I will not leave you orphaned."

In a perfect world, I would repeat Jesus' promise and leave everybody feeling good about it. But...Is this really good news? We will not be orphaned. We will have a family.

You have been to some form of family reunion. You have gone to relatives' homes for Thanksgiving or Christmas. You have gone to weddings and funerals. They are

wonderful times. Some of the greatest memories humans have take place when families are together on special occasions. And you look forward to seeing rarely glimpsed family members and you miss them when you don't get to see them. (Some of them.)

But that's not all of the story. You've seen your co-workers after holidays with dark circles under their eyes. And, when asked, they just say, "family". You go into these sacred gatherings and wince because two people are both there and everyone wishes that only one of them were. And some younger folks are proud of the song they've learned and even if they only know one verse, that's all right – they will repeat it. And some older folks still remember what happened that one time but they're pretty sure that you've forgotten about it so you would probably like to hear the story again.

Our society has reached consensus that family values are good and we assume that family values means spending time with everybody who shares our DNA – but, my heavens, they can wear you out.

The third pointed observation about the new gravy recipe from the same person, or even the first inquiry about why someone doesn't have a steady relationship, or a question about your spouse's job prospects, or why you haven't been more vigilant with your children about whatever seems to be going around.

Being an orphan can start to look pretty attractive.

Jesus will not leave us as orphans.

When he makes this wonderful promise to us in this morning's Gospel lesson from John, he talks about the Holy Spirit. God comes to us in so many ways. The sacraments, the encouragement of friends. God speaks to us in Scripture. The things we are constantly learning. Family is on the list of ways God comes to us.

Last week, I attended the annual Workshop for Christian Unity. As the name implies there are lots of Christians from lots of different backgrounds who come together

and talk about ways to share our mission to show God's love in this world. So there is a good deal of learned talk and insights. Comparisons are inevitable and they are helpful. Last week, I heard an Orthodox ecumenist point out that his tradition was stronger than most in emphasizing the work of the Holy Spirit. And I was interested to hear him say that Lutherans had a strong tradition of emphasizing the leadership of all people and the study of theology and Scripture. (That's why everybody coming together is such a good idea. We all have different gifts to share – like a family.)

God will not leave us as orphans. I think our tradition takes that promise and applies it to Scripture. We look to scripture as an important way that God comes to us and guides us and gives us hope. That is one of the ways God has promised to live with us and we do not want to be orphaned.

The Bible is like a family.

If we understand it that way, we will come to treasure it as the promise that Jesus made to us so long ago. It would be good for God's people to do that. The Bible has fallen on hard times. It doesn't suffer from neglect exactly. It suffers from misplaced expectations. (It's sounding more like a family already.) Christians decide what they want to be true and then open the Bible back them up. Christians want clear instructions and we can get impatient when the Bible suggests there may be more to our searching than a quick answer.

We value our families, and the Bible is like a family. Just like always, sometimes we think we would rather be orphans. We would rather set our own direction and not hear about any responsibilities or be called to keep promises. We have a list of expectations for things we hold most dear and we are sometimes over-anxious to express our disappointments.

The Bible is not a place to look for specific instructions. Just like there are a lot of decisions that you don't necessarily want to postpone until the next family reunion so you can open it up for discussion. That doesn't mean you don't love your family. But your relationship with your family is usually far more important than any specific instructions that will tell you how to address some short-term question. Usually your family is more concerned with your happiness, your goals, your values.

That's how God comes to us in Scripture.

Let's not ask Scripture questions it doesn't plan to answer. I would no more ask the Bible about geology or astrophysics than I would ask a beloved aunt to take out my appendix. That's not the nature of my relationship with my aunt and it's not how she plans to show she loves me.

Setting my own agenda and making demands from my family about what I want them to care about and how I think they should help me – would not take my family seriously and it would not be a way to show love to my family. In the same way, if I ask the Bible to answer questions that would never have occurred to the people who wrote it, I would not be taking the Bible seriously and I would not be showing reverence for scripture.

Asking the Bible questions is not always a sign of love. When I ask questions, that means I set the agenda, and I tell God what I want, and I expect an answer.

Scripture is deeper than that and it covers more subjects than the limits of my personal life. The Bible is far better than an infallible answer book. It is a way to live with God.

Living with God means living in his creation, with his creatures, respecting them, respecting myself. It involves relationships; it means listening. We must let God speak to us in scripture. He may take us in unexpected directions. If we were orphans and nobody

cared about us, we could always know exactly where we were going. God will not leave us alone.

Scriptures and family are alike in another way. Neither of them is consistent in anything but their love.

A family is not all one person. A family is made up of many different people. The Bible is not a book. It is a library. It is contained between two covers, but there are very different books in there that were transmitted generation after generation and collected and saved over centuries. In the short space of a few inches, we have words that span uncounted years and hundreds of perspective and depth of thought we cannot imagine.

Reading the Bible is like looking around the house at your family reunion.

There will be two sisters talking; re-living the same shared experiences over and over, never tiring or talking about what happened to them and how they responded and sharing a disappointment that nobody else in the house can know what they've been through and how well they've done in spite of it. And then open the Bible and read Ezra and Nehemiah as they both stand in the ruins of Jerusalem, finally back from three generations of exile and ready to restore a holy city after everyone else had given up hope.

And there will be two guys talking about the education system or politics or road construction. Go ahead and call it an argument. They've *both* got a good point and they love to make it. Everybody else can see that they both have a truth to tell and can appreciate both – but they get so much satisfaction of saying it forcefully. And then open the Bible and read Paul as he writes, “We are saved by faith, not by good works.” And then read James as he writes, “Faith without works is dead.”

Listen to the grandparents, who really care about a side-event in a dimly remembered incident – but they don't agree on how it happened. And listen to Bible

reading people today who are still arguing over the fate of Judas as they read about it in Matthew or they read about it in Acts.

And there is the uncle who sits by himself and wonders why everybody is so interested in the wrong things, and doesn't their lives. And open your Bible to Ecclesiastes and read "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." "There is nothing new under the sun."

And shake your head over the nephew who wishes he wasn't wasting time here when he could be with his girlfriend and he kind of hopes that she's miserable with her family because he's counting on her missing him so much. And then read Song of Songs – from first to last a celebration of how beautiful his beloved is with no attempt to get advice or direction or self-examination.

Dreamers, story tellers, advice givers, Psalms, Jeremiah, Proverbs. (Proverbs contains such deep and mysterious passages as "If you find some honey, eat it because it's good, but not too much or you will get sick." Proverbs 25:16)

This is your family. You are not orphans. Even when you wish you were.

Sometimes we all think we could do very well without any advice, or encouragement, or suspect insight, or dubious experience.

But we will not live our lives alone. God comes to us. He has spent the history of countless generations collecting the family of Holy Scripture as a way to live with us.

We love our family most by *listening* to the people who love us - not telling them what to say, not insisting that they all agree, not demanding that they have the same values and the same way of talking and not expecting that they always talk about *you*.

Jesus will not leave us orphaned. The Holy Spirit comes to us in many ways. One of them is scripture. "Scripture" is a simple enough word, just two syllables. Like "family". But those words last a life time and never run out of meaning.

Jesus says he will not leave us orphaned. He says he will love us and he will reveal himself to us.