

Easter 6-May 14,2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

John 14:15-21

With You Forever Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen  
If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

These first words from Jesus at the beginning of this reading from John for today seem quite straightforward. These same words are arranged a little differently at the end of the reading for today. At the end of the reading Jesus says, they who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me. No matter how these words are put together it is a reality that love is a command and it would seem that your love toward God is to be measured by how well we do what God has told you to do. If you feel that you have kept all of God's commands to an extent that you feel God can't help but be pleased with you, you may be excused from listening to the rest of what God has to say to you today.

Jesus however does not stop with these words. He does not leave it up solely up to you to keep these commandments. Instead, the remedy for keeping the commandments is found in the giving of the Holy Spirit. Sandwiched between these two statements from Jesus about keeping the commandments as a reflection of your love is a promise that Jesus will be with you forever regardless of how well you keep the commandments. Jesus doesn't say, if you love me or if you keep my commandments, I will give you another Advocate, the Holy Spirit. If we could keep the commandments, Jesus could just be our cheerleader. Cheering us on when we do well and telling us it's ok when we fail and encouraging us to try harder next time. But Jesus knows that we need more than someone who shouts to us from the sidelines. Jesus gives us himself to do for us what we can never do alone. Jesus gives us his Holy Spirit and it is only by the giving of the Holy Spirit can you and I keep a single command of God.

We are coming to the end of the season of Easter when we celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven. It sounds like Jesus is leaving us. The words that we heard in the gospel reading for today precede Easter when Jesus was leaving to go to the cross. Again, it sounds like Jesus is going away. We will even confess in the Apostles' creed that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. We also say that he will come again. All these words may mislead us to believe that Jesus is taking a break from us. We can be fooled by Satan into believing that we have been left by Jesus to fend for ourselves. We can be tempted to believe that Jesus has given us his commandments to keep us on the straight and narrow until he comes back from wherever he has gone. But Jesus has not given us his commandments to keep us near to him, he has given us an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, himself, to keep us close to him.

In this reading for today, Jesus promised that he will not leave us orphaned. Jesus does not leave us to fend for ourselves on earth until we die and then we get to go to the place that he has prepared for us. Jesus does not leave us orphaned while he sits at the right hand of his Father. Jesus will not leave us orphaned, ever.

There is a fear within all of us about being left alone and it happens in all stages of our lives. The newest born babies know when they are handed off to someone that is not their parent and in most cases is not their mother. Most younger children have a fear of being left with a babysitter or even with a trusted grandparent for the first time with the fear of not knowing when the parent will return. I have kept a

background picture on my iPad that was taken after my seminary graduation when we tried to get our grandchildren gathered for a quick picture. I was holding our youngest grandchild at the time and even though she knew me, she was afraid of being left with me by her parents. Her arms were reaching out to her mother and her sad face showed that picture or not, she was not in the arms of who she safest. Whenever there is death in a family, there is the natural tendency for us to feel orphaned when someone we love, and we will no longer see whenever we want. We believe there is a connection between what we can see and the feeling of being left alone.

Jesus said in this passage that in a little while, you will no longer see me, but I will not leave you orphaned. Our understanding of what it means to be orphaned is different from what Jesus is telling us. Our understanding of orphanages is that they are a place where children are left to mostly fend for themselves. Children will be placed in homes only if there is something that can be observed in these children that appeals to prospective parents. It is up to the child to do something that will please the parents so that they will be taken home.

We are never orphaned by God because we have been left alone by Jesus. We are not orphaned from God because Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at God's right hand until he returns. We could be considered orphans, but only in the sense that we have attempted to run from our heavenly Father. We are more like the prodigal son whose will was to run from the Father than we are like the obedient son who never left his father's side and did as he was commanded. But in the story of the prodigal son, neither of the sons was orphaned. The father continued to watch over the son who wandered away just as much as he cared for his son who demonstrated obedience to him. The son who ran from his father eventually felt abandoned and orphaned when he was far enough from his father that he could no longer hear the voice of his father.

This is what Paul pointed out so cleverly to the people of Athens as he walked around that great city. Paul looked at all the statues of gods that were placed on every corner of the town. Paul even called the people extremely religious since they had so many gods. Paul seized this opportunity to speak about his God who was at that time unknown to them when he saw the statue of the unknown god. The difference between a god who is far off and the God that Paul proclaimed was their gods were silent. They may have given these gods credit when it rained or when they were successful in war, but when there was trouble, these gods were silent, and the people were as helpless as orphans.

Paul then preached to these people who had many gods about his God who existed from the very beginning and made the world and everything in it. Paul preached to them about his God who gave a blessing to Abraham and that from him all the world would be his descendants. Paul preached to them about his God who is not far off and does not have to be searched for, but not only comes near, but is near. Paul preached them about his God whose son, Jesus who because he was raised from the dead gives the assurance of eternal life. Paul preached about his God who was, who is and who is to come.

Paul preached to them about his God who is your God. Your God who has not left you orphaned even when you have wandered off. Your God who is not silent, but has spoken to you again today to let you know that you have nothing to fear when trouble comes, even death itself. Your God who gives you the Holy Spirit in the waters of baptism and the promise that He will be with you always. Amen