

From the Pulpit

Salem First Presbyterian Church

Not Left Alone

John 14: 15-18, 25-27

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First Presbyterian Church, Salem, Oregon
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Looking through the church newsletters from the 1960's, there were some funny reminders of the spirit of the times. On the cover of one from October, '69, there was a psychedelic picture, with intersecting lines that appear to shift and change as you look at them. Below it, the caption read, **Turn on to Jesus!**

There was one Sunday when the senior pastor, John Stewart, was going away to attend General Assembly, and he left instructions with the associate pastor on all that needed to be done and all who needed to be cared for. While he was away, the associate pastor, Wayne Hawley, was preaching, and decided to use a contemporary song as the sermon title for that Sunday. He called it, **“What's it all about, Alfie?”**

Our Scripture reading for today draws on Jesus' advice to the disciples as he was planning to go away. He was leaving them in charge, reminding them of all that needed doing, and all who needed care. His was not a temporary absence over a weekend; it was a more final farewell. He was going to Jerusalem where he would give his life on the cross. In the face of his impending departure, his disciples were dismayed and fearful, uncertain of what they should do and how they would manage.

It was a bit like the church here would have experienced at the end of the long pastorate of John Stewart, and in fare-welling other ministers down through the years.

For Jesus' followers, there was an unsettled feeling. There was a change coming, and, then as now, few of us are fond of change. But Jesus gives words of comfort to his followers, words we can take to heart when we face saying goodbye to someone close. **“I will not leave you comfortless,”** he promises, “I will give you another comforter to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth.”

The comforter he promises is the Spirit or **Paraclete**, which means advocate or counselor. The Spirit is an advocate who speaks to God on our behalf, who when we don't know how to pray, **intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.**

“If you love me, you will **keep my commandments,**” says Jesus. The story is told of one Sunday when a congregation heard a sermon on the 10 Commandments. As people were leaving the church to have coffee, one man said, “well, at least I've never made any graven images!” Keeping the commandments, trying to live a Christian life in the midst of the consumer culture can be a challenge. Not coveting your neighbor's remodeled kitchen, or off road vehicle, or sunny vacation, these can be hard. (I'll know I'm sanctified as an Oregonian when I no longer

covet the sunny vacation!)

But Jesus does not leave us alone to struggle with how to live the life of faith. Scripture assures us that God will never let us be tempted beyond our power to resist, if we seek his help. So that is part of what this Scripture has for us, a reminder that when we are facing trouble or temptation, we can call on God's Spirit to give us strength sufficient for each day.

Sometimes in life, so much comes at us at once that we wonder how we will come through. Troubles don't come singly, but in pairs or clusters of worrying events. At such times, the Spirit is our companion and counselor, our deepest friend when we feel alone.

I remember reading a book by writer Robert Dessaix, called *Night Letters*, which chronicles his journey through Italy following a devastating diagnosis of HIV AIDS. It is a tale all the more disturbing for being well written. At one point he tells of the fearful dreams he had at night, walking through dark forests, in the valley of shadow. He would "wake up," he said, "feeling desperate to be *companioned*, to feel the presence of someone kind."¹ In our darkest moments, in the times when our choices or circumstances have brought us to a lonely place, it is the Spirit of Christ who will come, a faithful companion when the night is dark, our comforter against the cold.

Christ promises the Spirit will **teach us all things**. Many years ago, one of the pilgrim fathers, John Robinson, wrote some parting words as pilgrims from Europe embarked from the Old World to the New. He assured them that God's Spirit would guide them in applying the Scriptures to life in the new world, saying, "there is yet more light to break forth from God's holy word." The Spirit would teach them in new ways in a new setting to respond to challenges they could not yet imagine.

John Calvin, our spiritual forbearer, said that we need the eyeglasses of faith² to understand Scripture fully, because the Bible is not written as a self-evident handbook, but rather as a statement of faith in God. To understand it deeply, we put on faith, through which the Spirit interprets and seals Scripture to our hearts.

Jesus told us the truth, but we have to figure out what it means, how it applies in our lives. The Spirit helps us in this, when life brings us dilemmas for which the Scripture lacks any specific teaching.

"Honor your father and mother," the Bible says, but when we are faced with the difficult decision of when a parent may need to go into an assisted living facility, there is no specific chapter and verse that will give a precise answer. But we are not left alone, God's Spirit will guide us which way to go, with the wisdom we need in facing life's difficult choices.

"Go to the ant, you sluggard, and be wise," says the Proverb, counseling hard work as the way to security. But today when many who are working find their hours already so long that family life is squeezed out, how do we apply that Scripture counseling hard work? How do we balance it

¹ Robert Dessaix, *Night Letters*, p. 31.

² the "spectacles of faith"

with other places where the Bible tells of walking with God beside the still waters? The Spirit will lead us into all truth, and will help us learn to live a balanced life.

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you—not as the world gives do I give unto you,” says our Lord. His **gift of peace**, shalom, is **never just the absence of trouble**, it is peace independent of circumstance. It is a peace that doesn’t fade whether the children are smiling or crying, whether our studies are going well or we’re failing a class, whether work is going well or we’re threatened with layoffs, and perhaps hardest of all--whether we’re healthy or carrying the weight of a hard diagnosis. A peace not as the world gives, our Lord promises, to keep our heart no matter what may come.

When Christ says he will not leave us comfortless, the word he uses literally means, **“I will not leave you orphaned.”** One writer who has lost both her parents says this passage speaks to her as “a bit of good news for those who are orphaned.” “Those who truly love us live inside us, and no one can” take them from us. “If we want to talk with them, we may have to sit down someplace quiet and listen to the sound of the wind, for the still small voice that speaks in silence more than words. Hence forth there can be no doubt about where home is for them or for us. God dwells with us, leaving us notes all over the house: “love one another, do not be afraid,” my Spirit is with you always.³

This is the promise of our loving Lord to our church, that through these days of sometimes unsettling transition, he is leading the congregation into the future. The Visioning Team has been meeting with groups in the church, beginning to flesh out a fuller sense of our church’s identity--what are its priorities and where is its heart? In these past weeks of worshipping in the style of past decades, we have had clues as to the church’s identity through the years, the **music** that has shaped its life, the **connection to the community**, the **friendly welcome** that has kept a warm heart.

From the ‘60’s, we find further clues to the church identity, noting there was both a Social Education and Action Committee *and* an Evangelism committee. This shows a church concerned both with **sharing the love of Christ** with those in need of help, and **sharing the message of Christ** with those in need of something solid on which to build their lives. The church at that time was **socially active in meeting community needs, though not politically activist**, a potentially helpful distinction as the church continues to find ways to be faithful into the future. God calls us to reclaim the engagement with our near neighbors in need in the community.

Through serving God’s kingdom, being part of God’s movement, we might say in 1960’s terms, this church will continue to play a part in making the presence of Christ’s Spirit known,⁴ lifting the “cross beside the pioneer” Words of Rev. Poling, from the 100th anniversary history of First Presbyterian Church, Salem,⁵ in this capital city of Salem.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, pp. 79 ff.

⁴ For this exegetical insight, I am indebted to William Loader, Professor of New Testament at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia.

⁵ Words of Rev. Poling, from the 100th anniversary history of First Presbyterian Church, Salem.

In all this, Christ gives his Spirit to lead us. He will not leave us comfortless as a church; his Spirit will guide the congregation and the Visioning Team, and, in time, the pastoral search committee, to the person gifted and called to be the next installed pastor.

Christ will not leave us comfortless; this is his promise for you as well. Our Lord does not leave us alone; he will send a counselor and comforter, his own Spirit to be with us forever. May this be our comfort and our peace, now and always.

Let us pray: We give you thanks, O Lord, that in all the changes life brings, you will not leave us comfortless, your Spirit will come to us with a peace that passes all that life can bring. May we know that peace in our hearts this day and always, In Jesus' name. Amen.

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