

“A Commission & a Promise” based on John 14:15-21

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Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and the living Christ. A blessed memorial weekend to you all, whatever this time may hold for you and yours.

We are reminded at this time of year of lives that were ended too suddenly and too soon while serving in the military. At the same time, we acknowledge and pray for the families: who perhaps were never afforded the chance to say a proper goodbye, who yet grieve their loss. It is not always the case that you are lucky enough to share meaningful last words with those you care about most before they are gone. When do have the chance? Those conversations can become holy, and are not soon forgotten.

Several years ago now, I sat in the hospital three days in a row with a family, as their father/ grandfather/husband slowly slipped away. A WWII vet and retired police officer, at 86, “George’s” kidneys were failing and his body was going to give out on him; it was only a matter of time. George was conscious and with it up until the last hour of his life, and so his family members were all able to be there at the hospital, to say goodbye. George’s impending absence hung in the room like fog--each of his words were precious, as he called the family one by one to his bedside. There is no doubt that his family members will never forget those hours spent together or what he said to them. Those moments, those last words, are too important. George’s widow, half a year later, spoke with me about how she got up each day, and kissed his picture, and even talked to him throughout the day. “Goodbye isn’t goodbye,” she told me in her grief, “just hello in a different way.”

Jesus’ disciples are gathered around him in a room, listening to what they are learning might be some of his last words. They long ago dropped their former lives to follow him, to learn from him, to place their hope in him. It is clear by this time in John’s gospel that the disciples see God in and through him, too. They love Jesus, and he has just told them that ‘he is with them only a little longer’; soon they will no longer see him. And for three chapters of John’s gospel, Jesus is trying to say farewell, but the disciples are having a difficult time with it. Peter, the outspoken one, blurts out what all of them were thinking: ‘Lord, *where* are you going?’ Jesus answers, ‘Where I am going, you cannot follow me now...’ But Peter persists: ‘Lord, *why* can I not follow you now?’ Jesus explains more about what is to come, which prompts even Thomas to chime in: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

The disciples’ hearts were “troubled,” the text says, but the Bible might be taming it down a bit in this case. Reading between their concerned questions, it’s pretty clear that the disciples were on the edge of crisis at the thought of losing Jesus. And so, as Jesus is speaking to them in that state, I imagine that he chose his words carefully. He is trying to articulate an answer to their underlying question: *What are we supposed to do without you?* Part of his answer are the words we hear in our gospel reading this morning. They come out as both commission and promise.

First, the commission. He says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And again later, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me."

Jesus is asking the disciples to carry on after he is gone, which is understandable, but he sounds like he's almost playing a mind game with the disciples, of the likes that Brahm said I was never allowed to play in our marriage. I wasn't allowed to say, for example, "If you love me, you would do the dishes." Or, "If you love me, you would go get me that fuzzy blanket across the room." 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments,' Jesus says. I don't think this is so much a pretense, as a statement of reality: Those who love Jesus show that by living out what he have lived. Who was it that once said, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery"? So Jesus says, I've given you some guidelines for abundant life to live by, so whether I'm here or not, do it!

"They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me," he says. In case that sounded too daunting, in this same farewell speech, he has just given them which, one commandment, is the most important: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." On the plus side, all of the laws of the whole Bible, he seems to boil down into this one: to love. On the downside, it is one of the most profoundly difficult for any of us to carry out.

This is a daunting commission! It's hard enough to love like Jesus loved, when he was there walking the disciples through it, stepping in to guide and demonstrate when they stumbled. But he's talking about being gone and for them to yet carry on. That's something entirely different, even terrifying.

When I five years old, my parents gave me a pastel purple dirt bike, of which I was so proud. It had treads. And no banana seat. And tassels on the handles. So that spring I began with the training wheels. And when I had that mastered, my mom took to biking along side of me, holding onto my seat. Well, one day, we were heading down my road, my mushroom cut hair blowing in the wind as we picked up speed going down a hill, when I realized, "Wow, this was faster than I had ever gone!" And so I turned to look at how my mom was faring alongside me at these breakneck speeds and that's when I realized, "Wow. She wasn't beside me. Or anywhere near me. But rather way WAY behind me (like 6 feet), and her hand was no longer steadying my bike seat. And so I did what was only logical at that speed when you are five years old, I took my hands off of those tasseled handlebars and reached back for my mother on her bike behind me. The taste of gravel was the next thing I remember, and such a pain in my nose that I swore I would never smell again, as my face had taken the impact of the fall. I freaked out so much at the loss of mom's guiding hand, that I didn't realize that I had all the tools within me to carry on by myself. (I eventually learned to bike. But not that summer!)

The disciples share that very human fear we all hold, of losing someone we love. More than that, they are afraid that when Jesus lets go of life, they will to crash and burn and not have the strength to do what needed to be done. What were they going to do without Jesus?

What the disciples didn't grasp, and what is critically important for any of us who have never had the chance to actually shake Jesus hand is this: **An end to the life of Jesus in the flesh, does not mean an end to the living Jesus.** In fact, it opened up a whole new era of possibility for relationship with God. Indeed, it's the only possibility for any of us who lived after 33 AD.

See, Jesus does not stop with a commission for the disciples, but he keeps talking, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments *and* I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... I will not leave you orphaned." That is the *promise*.

Fleshy Jesus? Gone. Yes. He was and did leave. The *Living Jesus*? Not in the least. "I will not leave you desolate," another translation reads.

This Promise is the "Jesus goes wireless" moment in history. Where Jesus was once available for only 33 or so years, in one spot on the globe, to a specific number of people-- now, in his death, resurrection and ascension, he would be available to all for all time as Spirit (like how a wireless connection comes to us, anywhere, anytime these days). He says, "I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you..." The wi-fi symbol, then, is like a modern icon for the Holy Spirit. None of us have been "hardwired" to Jesus in the flesh for over 2000 years. But as for the *Living Christ*, and that power and presence to transform, redeem, and heal that come from God? We've been tapping into that for millennia, doing amazing things in Christ name, through his power. Truly, with Jesus, "goodbye was not goodbye." Just "hello" in another, utterly game changing, way.

Jesus, in his last days in the flesh, said two critically important things to his disciples: 1) A commission: 'If you love me follow my commandments, in particular, *to love!* Love each other! Love strangers. Love this world that desperately needs compassion. Love yourself. Because God certainly does. 2) A promise: You are not alone, in your grief or your fears, in your uncertainties or struggles, in your deepest need.

Jesus in the flesh may be gone. The living Christ abides! And as the gospel says, "You know him, because he will be within you, and among you." Goodbye is not goodbye, but hello in a different way! Thanks be to God, for this *commission to love* and *promise of presence*, that was for the first disciples, and is for us. Amen.