

“The Promise of Companionship for Life”

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Based upon John 5:1-9, John 14:23-29

Who will be with us?

Anna Carter Florence, professor of preaching at Columbia Seminary writes the following:

“When the poet, Mary Oliver died, many of us felt like we had lost a dear friend. We did not know her personally, but she knew us. She knew the life we were longing to live and the beauty we were longing to see and she wrote poetry that gave us a holy way of moving through the world. Who will be our Mary Oliver now that she is gone?”

Captain Tom, a Marine officer, was a beloved company commander for a group of midshipmen at the Naval Academy. Captain Tom was tough, but knew the men and women in his care and command better than they knew themselves. He rooted for them and was a stellar role model in leadership. But just before their first-class senior year, Captain Tom was given new orders. It's the military. It happens. But this was a rough departure for this group. They wanted Captain Tom to be physically present especially in the year that would culminate in their commissioning as military officers. Who would be their Captain Tom now that he had moved on?

Who is a person that comes to your mind, who has been influential in your life as Mary Oliver was to Anna Carter Florence or Captain Tom was to his company?

Maybe like Anna Carter Florence you didn't know this person personally, but you felt like you were known, and you waited with eagerness for their next poem or novel or scientific discovery or some creation that came from them that impacted your life, brought meaning to it. You came to rely on their creations and contributions. Maybe like Captain Tom you did know this person as a mentor or someone you followed, a person who rooted for you even as they challenged you; that music teacher who made you practice those scales, that CEO who taught you business ethics, the head nurse who taught you how to make a hospital bed and care for the sick, the coach who demonstrated team work, the person who radiated beauty and goodness for you.

Who comes to your mind in this moment, the person you relied on to be there... **and then they weren't.**

If you stand in these shoes for a moment, you might have an inkling of how the disciples felt as they heard Jesus talk about his departure. They had eye witnessed so many healings similar to our first scripture from *John* this morning.

What that must have been like to experience those miracles with their own eyes, to see the flesh and bones of Jesus and his ministry, to know his voice as he taught with parables and sermons. The disciples saw Jesus' expressions of joy, anger, sadness, and fatigue. They didn't always understand what Jesus was doing, but they were his followers. And in our passage from John's

Gospel, that takes place prior to the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus is preparing these followers for the concrete reality that he is going away. Who would be their Jesus?

The Gift of Companionship for Life

The disciples would need to find the strength to face new circumstances in which Jesus' departure would place them. We rely on physical presence, and we struggle to hold on when a person is no longer with us, the fear we have that time will cause them to fade into the background and become less and less relevant. Jesus desired to give his disciples the assurance that, even without his physical presence, they would have a future shaped by the promises of God. But how? If the revelation of God is lodged in the incarnation, what happens when Jesus is gone?

Jesus tells them what will be their link between the historical Jesus and the future life of the church after Jesus' departure. God will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

This is going to get a little long and drawn out for the disciples not to mention very confusing. Following the crucifixion, Jesus is gone. He's dead in the tomb. The disciples can hardly process all that has taken place before they are told that he's not dead. He has risen. Although different, he's back with them for a time. And then he's not!

Before his death and resurrection, Jesus gives a warning "I am telling you this now before it occurs so that when it occurs, you will believe." (Because it's going to be confusing.) But you will not be alone.

Without trampling on our Pentecost celebration in a few weeks that is all about the Holy Spirit, I want us to think about the work and purpose of the Holy Spirit as Jesus puts forth in our text this morning. Exactly, how are we to grasp a presence that we can't see? The Greek word that is translated as Advocate or Holy Spirit in the New Revised Standard Bible from which I read is "Parakletos" (Paraclete) from the verb "parakaleo." It only occurs four times in the New Testament in John's writings and the definition in the Greek is **the one who is called to our side.**

So, the Holy Spirit is a companion. The theologian, Shirley Guthrie says that often we depersonalize the Holy Spirit and think of it as something like electricity that plugs us into the power of God that makes the light shine in our hearts and recharges our batteries. No! The Holy Spirit is a companion, with whom we are in personal relationship. In this relationship, there is a voice that keeps Jesus's teaching alive within us. The Holy Spirit is a companion that has breath and continues to breathe the resurrection hope into us. The Holy Spirit is voice and breath giving us God's continued presence beyond the flesh and bones of the incarnation. This is the future Jesus promised to the disciples.

But let's get real. As we prepare for Pentecost in a few weeks, exactly how do we know the voice of this companion whom God has placed at our side? The author Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "Often in our faith communities, we discuss the Holy Spirit. We even created a detailed doctrine. We commemorate the Holy Spirit. It's all over the language of our liturgies. But the

more we discuss and commemorate and intellectualize the less likely we are to be truly in touch with the Holy Spirit and its guidance for our lives.”

Many voices and spirits surround us. How easy it is to confuse the Spirit’s voice with our own collective wishes, desires, and ambitions. Look at what’s happened in the church as leaders who claim to have been ‘led by the Spirit’ were only defending their own ideological biases and even worse their own hunger for power and exploitation.

The Holy Spirit is not the only spirit at work among us. There are others, our own individual spirits, the spirit of the times, the spirit of a particular interest group as well as those dangerous spirits like envy, greed, lust for power, spirits, and voices that demean, diminish and shame. How are we to know?

Hear Your Voice

One of the things most missed when there is a physical departure is a person’s voice. Our voices are so uniquely individual.

A member of the church I pastored kept the same message on her voicemail for three years following the death of her husband. Every time someone called that home and got the voice recording, they heard a greeting from John. Her children were upset, “Mom, you really need to change that voicemail message.” “I just can’t.” she would say. “It’s the only place where I can hear your Dad’s voice, and sometimes I just need to hear his voice.” She eventually changed the message, but it was hard to let go of being able to hear John’s voice. We have experienced that. Some days I just want to hear my Mom’s voice. I am sure it was hard for those disciples to let go of hearing Jesus’ voice because it gave some certainty to what they were doing.

So, Jesus is preparing his followers to receive the Spirit, this companion at their side in world that has a lot of influences swirling about us trying to dominate hearts and minds. The disciples aren’t exactly sold on this idea and rightfully. “Okay, Jesus! So just how are we going to know that it’s you speaking to us.”

Jesus answers the question, but it’s rather subtle and could be missed. “Those who love me will know my stories and keep my word and my Father will love them and we will come to them and we will make our home with them.”

We are not alone! God makes a home within us. But this relationship doesn’t stop there. **We** are called to be the flesh and bones in today’s world. The voice of the Holy Spirit needs to be our voice and the church’s voice in the world. This is how we share in the Incarnation. The church is called to be God’s voice and we are the church!

So, when we speak we are aligned with the God who has made a home within us? Are we furthering the kind of life that is willed and created by God?

Our words are not always kind, loving, and sweet words for this gift of the Holy Spirit is not meant for complacency or peace of mind alone. This voice will speak comfort, hope, and grace, but it will also speak truth to power and call out injustice and confront wrongs. The peace that

Jesus was speaking about is not a “put up your feet and relax” kind of peace. It is the peace that comes with right relationships and the love of God. It takes work and courage and setting aside some of these other voices and allowing our voice to be God’s voice.

When we act, to whom are we listening? Do our actions reflect this companion’s guidance?

Next to St. Vincent de Paul Church in the heart of Baltimore, there was a beautiful piece of land right next to the church, hard to find in a city. It would have made a lovely garden, and many of the church members wanted that to happen. But instead they made a park for the homeless. They are still committed to loveliness because they believe that these people who sleep there at night should have loveliness. But it’s not lovely at all times. The priest said, “We just felt that we needed lots of benches instead of bushes, blankets instead of mulch, human food instead of plant food. **We just had to put some skin on what the Holy Spirit was telling us to do.**”

God is not going to die. God is not going to get new orders and move away. There are no temporal limits to God’s love and God’s presence. We do and will always have access to God because in the Holy Spirit we have been given a companion for life who will always give us a fresh experience of where God calls us to be.

So, let’s continue to learn to listen, grapple with God’s presence, put some skin in this game and some flesh and bones on the guiding voice of this dear companion who is by our side... for life. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Works Cited

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