

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**May 29, 2011**  
**John 14:15-21**  
**“On That Day You Will Know”**

It is humbling to realize that for almost two thousand years, these words of Jesus have been spoken over and over again. There in an upper room, on the night of his betrayal and arrest, surrounded by those he loved, Jesus offered these words: *In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know ...* In time, these words were written down, organized into a gospel narrative and transcribed onto papyrus and paper. People gathered together in homes, in common rooms and fell silent as someone stood and spoke the words again: *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know.* The people listening were enduring hardships: the weight of Roman oppression, the rejection leveled against them because of their faith in this Jesus the Christ that led some to cast them out of the synagogues or that put them at risk of Roman torture and abuse. They sat there and listened to those words as ones who had not personally seen Jesus, but who found comfort and joy in the promises wrapped up in this scripture.

Now we are gathered together as part of Memorial Day weekend, which means that Jesus' promise, “Because I live, you also will live,” is heard by us precisely as we reflect on the many, deceased loved ones who are remembered as part of this somber holiday. I'm mindful that my father died one year ago. Olive Wells of this church died five days ago. Reggie Plato's mother died less than two weeks ago. Other deceased loved ones, Sarah Nelson, Liz Nordquist, Mary Lee Colvin, Jim Wilson, Tom Struthers all come to mind today. Take a moment to say silently to yourself who you are remembering this Memorial Day. Now listen to Jesus' words again: *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*

Why is it that these words have been repeated over and over again for literally thousands of years? Part of the reason is because Jesus didn't limit his remarks to analyzing the disciples' specific needs on that Friday evening in the Upper Room long ago. Instead he managed to reassure them and all of us with a threefold promise of presence. First, he tells us we will receive an Advocate, a Counselor; in Greek, the word is *parakletos*, which means “one beside you who speaks on your behalf.” Right away we are reassured that, even in Christ's physical absence, we will not be left alone.

Second, we hear the same promise described in a slightly different way when Jesus said, “*I will not leave you orphaned: I am coming to you.*” Orphans traditionally existed from day to day. They had no parents, no family support network around them. They typically begged; they moved on the margins of life; they had no time to think about the future as they struggled to just to get through the day. So at the heart of Jesus' words is

this promise that we will neither be left alone nor become like orphans. Our heavenly Mother, Father, our Creator, Parent, Keeper and Guide will be with us always.

Third, this one who is with us, Jesus says, is the Spirit of truth, whom the world neither knows nor receives. The Spirit of truth – as opposed to a Spirit of untruth, a false Spirit of lies, misinformation, fear, and darkness. Is there such a thing? Yes, I believe so, for there are evil words, evil practices, and evil spirits that move through nations and individuals alike. One example: I've been reading a book called *The Warmth of Other Suns* about the Great Migration of over 6 million African-Americans who moved from southern states to northern states during the heart of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By any definition, Jim Crow laws were things shaped by Spirits of Untruth. Surprisingly, the earliest of these laws wasn't enacted in Mississippi, but in Massachusetts, as a way to designate railcars set apart for black passengers. An example of the sheer madness of such laws is that trains in the 1950s traveling south to north, such as from New Orleans to Chicago, would stop in Cairo, Illinois to uncouple segregated cars from Louisiana and attach on integrated cars in accordance with the laws of Illinois. Black passengers were forced to disembark, reshuffle and haul their bags onto new places on the train – and then did the whole process in reverse when the train traveled in the opposite direction, from north to south.<sup>1</sup>

How was the Spirit of Truth evident in those times? It was there in the witness of those who escaped Jim Crow in the South and fought for change of James Crow attitudes in the North. It was there in the lives of those who preached and taught and suffered so that equal rights for all might be won. And in the times and places where segregation couldn't be outright fought and disobeyed, it was there in more subtle ways. Back in the 1930s, the great preacher Howard Thurman was asked by his young daughters why they couldn't play on a swing in a park like the white children. Choosing his words carefully, he told them, "The measure of a man's estimate of your strength is seen in the kind of weapons he feels he must use to hold you fast in some prescribed place."<sup>2</sup> Thurman named the injustice without resorting to hate or fear. He offered a deeper Spirit of Truth that it might enfold his daughters until that time would come when Jim Crow laws and racist attitudes would be swept from our land. The former has thankfully been accomplished; the latter still challenges us today.

Spirits of Untruth work by pulling things apart. Jim Crow and racial segregation. One ethnicity against another. Us vs. Them. Me First, You Last. If the Spirit of Untruth separates, it is the Spirit of Truth that pulls things together. That's the powerful message of Jesus' words. Jesus said *If you love me, you will keep my commandments*. Love and obedience combined. Jesus said, *You know the Spirit because he abides with you and will be in you*. Knowing God equals abiding with God. Jesus said, *Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them*. The love of the Father, the love of the Son, the love of us as disciples – all combined, fully reconciled, making us whole at last.

The common theme throughout Jesus' words is that he will be present with us – how he will abide with us, the Advocate is with us, the Spirit of Truth shall keep us. But one part

of the entire passage still troubles me. It is Jesus' phrase, *On that day you will know*. What day is that? Well, right before that phrase, Jesus said, *In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live*. These words were spoken on Good Friday. Jesus would soon be crucified and buried; so for a little while the world would not see him. But then he appeared again, resurrected, seen by the disciples. So was Easter long ago the "day" that we will know these things?

Another option: John's gospel was completed near the end of the first century. It was read to women and men who never saw Jesus in the flesh but who, through the testimony of others, believed that he was the Christ, the Son of God. Is the time of God's future Kingdom, when all is made well and Christ is one with God and we are with Christ and therefore also one with God – is that future day when we will fully know and understand these things?

I think the answer must be more than those two options. Yes, new life in Christ began that first Easter day. That's part of what we preach every week. And yes, new life in Christ reaches its fullest expression in the oft-predicted-yet-still awaited future kingdom of God. That's part of the message that comforts us at funerals or when we remember deceased loved ones on Memorial Day. But Jesus spoke about an Advocate, one who is with us forever – and forever means both now and on into the future. Jesus spoke about a Spirit of Truth, who challenges the divisive, segregationist messages of this present world with a reconciling message of new life now. All of this is good news – good news spoken to disciples in the Upper Room; good news spoken to the church through the centuries; good news spoken to us this very day. And if this is truly good news, shouldn't our lives reflect that fact? Shouldn't we begin with joy, and then allow love, obedience, faith, and fellowship with the living Christ to follow from that?

True story. I was recently in San Francisco for a Covenant Network board meeting. This is the Presbyterian advocacy group working for the right of all people – men, women, gay, straight – to be ordained as leaders in our church as they've been given gifts by God. We had spent a long afternoon poring over details and worrying about whether our denomination was headed for further conflict. As we left the church meeting hall and headed back to our hotel, our brows must have been quite furrowed with concern. Suddenly, as we turned a corner, so help me God, a tall man with unkempt hair, a big walking stick, carrying a black book that could have been a bible, passed us and then said loudly, "Why are you all looking so glum? You need to smile and be more cheerful!" Then he was gone, assuredly having no idea that he'd just chastised a quartet of Presbyterian ministers with a holy word. This John the Baptist character called us to remember the truth as it's been proclaimed for hundreds and hundreds of years. We are not alone. Love and obedience go together, yes, but the initial fruit of this union is joy. Joy expressed in our common life of faith, in our deeds of compassion, in our fight for justice, in our times of prayer – joy that we truly are with Christ and can see Christ and walk with Christ each day.

It is not a matter of first getting things right and then you'll be joyful. Christ is with us now. The Spirit of Truth is beside us as an Advocate now and forevermore. Be joyful

now; love Christ and keep Christ's commandments. And on this day you will fully know the power behind Christ's promise when he said "Because I live, you also will live."  
Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, The Warmth of Other Suns, 2010, pp. 41, 200.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 41.