

Reflection on the Scripture: John 14:15-21

[\[The video of the reflection.\]](#)

If you love me, you will keep my commandments (John 14:15) Jesus said. Today's reading is in the middle of his farewell address. He is with his disciples in that upper room. Before that Passover meal began, he washed their feet, an act of such tender submission and intimacy that they struggled to allow him to do it. That when he told them what his commandment was. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (John 13:34-35).

We have been keeping Jesus' commandment. We have been loving one another by staying apart. This is our tenth worship service where we did not meet face to face, where we did not greet each other, and sing together. I miss you all terribly. Preaching to an iPhone on an ironing board is just not the same as standing in our sanctuary and having you all respond to me with your smiling eyes and the occasional laugh or puzzled look. I miss having Jocelyn and Yifan play the piano as you try to keep up with my inability to stick with the published bulletin.

In last week's Cabinet meeting, we began talking about returning to in person worship. Of course much depends on Governor Sununu and his advisors. But we are also learning that it depends on us, on our individual decisions and on our decisions as a community. So I wanted to share my own thinking, a bit of what the Cabinet discussed last week and ask for your help.

In today's reading, Jesus says, And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. (John 14:16-17). What sustains us and underpins our life together is a reality that the world cannot discern. The world's ways of knowing and its criteria for evaluating what is real and important don't allow for such a divine presence as we know. So we can't expect the world to understand or value our way of loving Jesus and obeying his commandments.²

The love we are commanded to demonstrate shows up through human bodies. That love is more than a feeling, even a feeling of certainty about union with Christ. The love Jesus commands is about a master washing the feet of his disciples, about a king dying the death of a criminal.³ It is by the grace of God

that we are permitted to gather visibly in this world to share in God's word and sacrament.⁴ Being together is how we support each other and how we remind each other of the love of God which we know and the world does not.

But to come to that knowledge, we had to change. The world argues that accomplishment fills up an empty life. Seek after prestige and pleasure, desire fortune, drive for worldly power and you will be satisfied.⁵ Knowing Christ meant

² Charles Cousar, "Sixth Sunday of Easter: John 14:15-21" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, ed. Walter Brueggemann et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 308.

³ Linda Lee Clader, "Sixth Sunday of Easter, Homiletical Perspective, John 14:15-21" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 495.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, quoted in Joseph S. Harvard, "Preaching the Easter Texts: Can I Get a Witness?." *Journal for Preachers* 37, no. 3 (2014): 10.

⁵ J. Lanier Burns, "John 14:1-27: The Comfort of God's Presence." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 172, no. 687 (2015): 314.

we had to change, we had to let that go as our primary focus. So we may need to change further to remain faithful to Jesus' command to love each other.

As I think about returning to in person worship, there are a few key principles. I don't want to set ourselves up to turn someone away. Not only does that mean we need to be allowed to have 50 or so folks gather in person, that also means that the on-line worship services have to continue in parallel. Because until there is a widely available vaccine, some folks are simply not going to be able to attend in person worship. I will continue to need help from you all to make both kinds of services possible.

And I will be wrestling with a personal challenge. Given that my parents are both almost 80 and have underlying conditions that make them more vulnerable, I face a reality that seeing all of you every week in person means that I can never see them. I know that no one is asking me to make that decision, not my parents, not you, so we'll to figure it out. I love my job as the minister of this church. And I love my parents. I'm sure there's a way to make it work.

No matter how we adapt in person worship, we have to face a reality that by gathering together we can unwittingly make someone ill, perhaps seriously. We have some guidelines about how to reduce the risk, staying six feet apart, wearing masks, etc. But we don't have a whole lot of experience yet with this virus. The choir that met one last time for rehearsal in Washington State in March

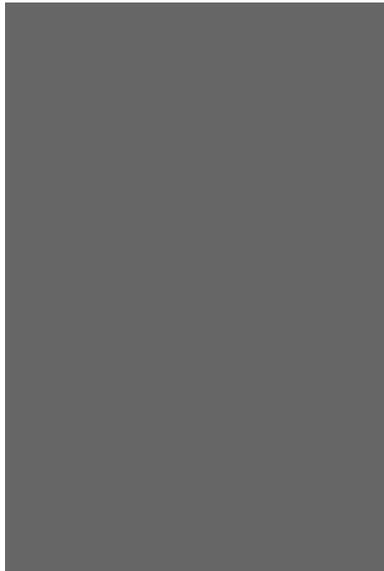
did everything right, at least as they knew back then. And yet 45 of 60 of them caught it from an asymptomatic carrier.⁶ Still, waiting until we have perfect knowledge of the virus is like waiting until we have perfect knowledge of God.

This is a complicated, hard issue for us to figure out. Fortunately, Jesus has promised us an Advocate, a paraclete is the word in Greek. A paraclete was a professional who was called in when things were extremely complicated, legally, technically, emotionally.⁷ Jesus has assured us that the Holy Spirit is with us, here to help us with the complexity of obeying Jesus' commandment to love one another in a world that does not recognize that commandment. The Holy Spirit helps us deal with the challenges of showing a love that means bodies need to be near each other, at a time when those breathing bodies need to be spread apart.

So I would ask you to call on the Holy Spirit over the next few weeks in your prayers. I would ask you to pray and reflect on what we are called to do as a community in this time of contradiction. How do we deepen our connection as a community when we have to stay apart, because some significant portion of our

⁶ Erin Bromage, "The Risks – Know Them – Avoid Them", Erin Bromage: Covid-19 Musings Blog, entry posted May 6, 2020, <https://www.erinbromage.com/post/the-risks-know-them-avoid-them> (accessed May 15, 2020).

⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 166-167.



community will have to stay apart for a long, long time? How do we change what we are doing now so that it is more satisfying? How do we change what we are doing now to better show our obedience to Jesus' commandment to love? How

do we, a small church with no expertise and scant resources, figure out the logistical tasks we need to attempt in person worship? Once we have a task list, how do we know that we have a good enough list that we should move forward with trying to accomplish that list? How sustainable does the effort have to be, given that the church is so reliant on volunteers to contribute their labor to the effort? How do we counter the natural impulse to say, this is too hard to figure out, so never mind?

We need to enter into a time of discernment, deep discernment, to figure this out. We will doubtless go more slowly than some would like, and too quickly for others. We'll probably start small. And we'll have to pace ourselves because we are such a small church and the changes the virus requires are considerable. But all of it, the discernment, the small start, the big changes are how we love each other. Not only will we be loving each other, we'll be showing the world, that community that does not know God, how God's love shows up in the time of pandemic. And we will try our very best to assist God in making sure that no one will be left orphaned (John 14:18), no one will be left without a church family to come home to.