

Pastor Darby Lawrence
Sixth Sunday of Easter, 18 May 2020

St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Bloomington, Indiana

John 14:15-21

'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. 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.

'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. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

I keep trying to find words to describe what life feels like today, and what this all means. Of course, this is part of my job, I guess. If a pastor's preaching does not address the world people actually live in, they will not have anything to say that people can relate to.

As part of this process, I was reminded of Dante's Inferno and the quote inscribed on the gates of hell – "Abandon all hope, ye who enter" – but I realized that this is not really what I was looking for. While it may certainly feel like that sometimes, abandoning ALL hope is not what is called for. But abandoning *some* hope might actually be wise right now. Abandoning false hope is always a good idea, just as it is always a good idea to reject the devil and all his empty promises. Allow me explain.

In an article in Vox.com, by Constance Grady, entitled *Why it's so hard to read a book right now, explained by a neuroscientist*, she interviewed Oliver J. Robinson, a neuroscientist and psychologist based at the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London. Robinson said,

"The pandemic that we're in is the most uncertain thing possible. You don't know when it's going to end, whether you're going to get it. You don't even know what it is, really. And all of a sudden, everything in your environment is dangerous. Door handles are dangerous. Other people are dangerous. It's the most uncertain thing.

It's also completely uncontrollable. I can't control whether another person's going to jog at me on the other side of the street. But what I can do is seek information. I can go on Twitter, I can go on the internet, I can search nonstop, trying to resolve this uncertainty.

The problem is that you're never going to actually resolve it. It's not like tomorrow someone's going to go, "Here's the solution to coronavirus. Here's the vaccine." What we're doing is trying to resolve this uncertainty that is unresolvable. And in

the end, you're just promoting this anxiety. You're trying to find the answer; you can't find the answer; you hear about this conspiracy theory, that conspiracy theory. It just gets worse and worse and worse.

So why are people having difficulty concentrating? That's part of the explanation: They're trying to resolve an uncertainty that is unresolvable."

It's the absolute uncertainty about what the future will bring, the fact that we control so very little, and our inability to resolve what's going on that's so maddening. The future just ain't what it used to be.

Nadia Bolz-Weber posted something this last week about how COVID has affected her. She writes:

"I realize now that when this global pandemic all started, I think I was trying to be as optimistic as possible, believing it the best way to get through. So I told myself, It's ok to spend a couple weeks at home, because after this we will be able to go to Holy Week Services!

Then it was, "Well...I still can't wait to preach Pentecost at the Cathedral at the end of May!"

Then it was "Well, at least my gigs in June will still happen."

Then it was "Well...ok not the June gigs, but the July ones for sure!"

Then it was "Jeez...at least there's that festival every September I love."

Then a friend who is in music business mentioned that the concert promoters are all saying Fall 2021 is the earliest they think we can return to concerts, festivals, and big events.

And the exact same day I read a piece about how dangerous singing is. SINGING. And how even if we do get to go to church again this year . . . there can't be singing.

I had hooked my hope on something in the future and as each hope dissolved, I'd find another hook. Until finally, reality sunk in....

I know that Jesus himself said, *who by worrying can add a single hour to the span of your life? So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.* But sometimes I have to have that {stuff} confirmed over and over before I remember to believe it."

Nadia goes on to talk about the "Stockdale Paradox." James Stockdale was an admiral in the US navy and spent 8 years as a POW in a North Vietnamese prison camp. When asked who among his colleagues struggled to make it out alive, he wrote,

"The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go.

And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart...."

Nadia continues:

"So the "Stockdale Paradox" is the ability to hold two opposing but equally true things at once:

You must have faith that you will prevail in the end
And at the same time you must confront the brutal facts of your current reality."

That's the hope I want you to abandon. Not *all* hope, just the hope that things are going to get back to normal any time soon. Just the hope that you can pick a date in the future that will help you see the end of it. COVID is a lot like gravity: it simply is, and it does what it does. And we will prevail.

So how do we continue to believe that we will, in fact, prevail...eventually, and, at the same time, confront the brutal facts of our reality? How is that even possible?

Let's listen to Jesus today. *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...* Yes, the Spirit of truth, another advocate, will be with us forever. That is the gift and the promise that Jesus gives us today and always.

Remember last week when I mentioned how much I would *love* to have someone inside of me who would give me the best advice, who could help me when I'm struggling? Yeah, that's the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not Jesus, but he brings Jesus to you. The Spirit is not the incarnate one but is the one through whom Christ becomes incarnate in YOU.

The disciples had Jesus as their advocate, loving them through the end. He is going to physically depart from them, and he knows that they will feel "orphaned" without them, they will feel abandoned when he ascends to the Father. But the sense that he gives in this section of John is that it is actually to the disciples' *advantage* that he leave, because, unless he leaves, we will never receive the Spirit, which, Jesus assures us, is even better than having him with us in the flesh.

I believe this is because, while Jesus could only be in one place at a time, the Spirit can be all places at all times, keeping us connected to God (putting the love and peace of Christ into our hearts and minds) and keeping us connected to each other, binding us together with love. As Paul writes, "Now all ya'll are the body of Christ and individually members of it." We have become the body of Christ in this world, both as individuals and as a community. We have been comforted by the presence, strength and guidance of the Spirit of Christ, and now we can share this gift with the world.

Last week was more of a lament, as voiced through Thomas and Philip. Today is the comfort that always comes when we bring our laments to God.

The word Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit is *paracletos*, literally, one who comes along side you. As David Lose writes, "*It gets variously translated as comforter, helper, counselor, and encourager. But perhaps its most literal translation is simply "advocate,"*"

the one who pleads your case, who takes your side, who intercedes for you, and who stands up for you."

My daughter went through a horrible experience a few years ago. The guy she was dating ended up having some mental health and substance abuse issues and one day had her pinned down and threatened to choke her to death multiple times before she managed to escape and reach out for help. Charges were filed and then she got to enter into our legal system. She did not have a lawyer, but she was appointed a victim advocate. This is the person who guided her through the legal system, helped her write a victim impact statement and read it at the hearing when she was not able to. This advocate was invaluable to her during the harrowing experience.

One of the ways of understanding the role of the Advocate (the Holy Spirit, as is expressed in John), is that the Advocate intercedes between us and God. David Lose expresses it this way: *"The Spirit, from this point of view, is one who pleads our case that, though we have fallen short, yet because of Jesus and his sacrifice we deserve to be forgiven."*

He also points out the problem with this understanding, *"But the picture of God this implies – God as needing to be persuaded to love and forgive us – feels so foreign to John's confession that "God so loved the world that God gave the only Son..."*

He goes on to point out two different ways that the Advocate can be understood:

"So perhaps it's actually the other way around. Perhaps it is the Spirit who intercedes on God's behalf before us. That is, perhaps the Spirit is the one who comes to remind us of our identity as children of God, as sheep who recognize the voice of our shepherd, those for whom the good shepherd lays down his life. Because, Lord knows, that can be a hard identity to hold onto, a hard identity to believe is really ours, especially when we are stressed or frightened, unsure about our future and it feels like everything has been turned upside down.

Or maybe it's that the Spirit comes along side us and advocates for us in the face of all the challenges of the world, reminding us of Jesus' promise to be with us and for us in the face of all the things that conspire to make us doubt our worth in God's eyes, let alone the world."

It is in these two understandings of the Advocate that we find our true hope. For me, this is the only way that I can get through the day. That's the only way that I can have faith that we will prevail *and* confront the brutal facts of our current reality.

But more than that, if it is true that the Spirit advocates God's will that we trust God *and* that we are worthy of God's attention and love, then we can do more than just get through the day: we can thrive! We can even stop worrying long enough to notice that there are others who need our love and attention, who need to be reminded that they can trust in God and that they are also worthy of God's love and attention. They will know this because we will show them what it looks like!

We can only share what we have, my dear friends, so remember the promises and gifts that God has given you. You have been welcomed, named beloved child, given a peace that cannot be taken away, and equipped to be the body of Christ in the world. You do not need to resolve the unresolvable. That's God's job. You do not need to be in control. That, too, is God's job. And you do not need to know what the future is going to bring (as if you ever could!). That's God's job.

Your job is to go and tell what you have seen and heard. Your job is to share the love and forgiveness and grace that you have received.

I want to close today with one of my favorite prayers. You may have heard and prayed it before as well. I invite you to pray it with me now.

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.