

This morning we hear about the final night of Jesus speaking with his disciples before his death continues with these words:

John 14:21 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.” 22 Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?”

Our story begins with a private moment between Jesus and his followers, listen!

John 14:23-29

23 Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

25” I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

28 You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29 And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

One of the most formative events of my life occurred when I was 13; my father died suddenly while I was at an Arkansas Travelers baseball game. It was April 16, 1963, the opening game of the season for the Little Rock AAA farm club of the Philadelphia Phillies. I was there with my good friends Larry and Steve. When I was called over the PA system to go to a location that I can’t remember, I was told that my father was really sick and my neighbors were coming to get me. When they got there, they told me my father was dead. It was the last thing I had expected, and I was totally in shock. My world was crashing down. My world crashed. I was unprepared, as if one could ever truly be prepared for such a tragedy. In one sense, having been raised without a mother, now I was a real orphan.

Becoming orphaned is what the disciples feared. That's why Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them orphaned. He again tells them what must happen: that he will be arrested, interrogated, tortured, executed by the Romans, and raised by God. He wanted them to know what to expect and what was expected of them. He was trying to help them prepare for what the next few days and the more distant future would bring. And by extension, help us prepare for a life of faith.

Even though Jesus tells his disciples plainly what's up, they seem only to pick up that he is leaving them. They can't get their head around that; it is too much to take in. What they can hear is that he is going, and they will be orphaned, alone and isolated, and all they have lived for during their time with him will have been for naught.

But isolation and loneliness are not just problems for Jesus' disciples; they can strike everyone. Many people today feel more isolated and alone than ever before as we continue to divide ourselves into 'us' and 'them.'

Public figures, as well as those we see regularly and those we love, often say things that are better left unsaid. Many deplorable things are uttered without any thought of the consequences. This type of behavior perpetuates itself and strikes at the heart of our country. Our world would be so much better with civility, respect, empathy, and understanding as core values. These build connections, not separation and division.

With all the technology, especially social media, at hand, you'd think connections would be built, but sometimes it makes matters worse. At its best, it can be marvelous. I have managed to stay in touch with many folks and reconnect with important people from my past whom I had lost touch with.

However, social media often fails to foster connections and sometimes promotes more division and increased isolation, as people with differing opinions frequently share rude, hurtful, and hateful comments and unfriend those who are expressing their views.

One of my pet peeves is the prevalence of Zoom meetings. They are great when gathering is impossible or impractical, but since the COVID-19 pandemic, they have become quite common, and I believe they are overused. I prefer in-person meetings to Zoom meetings whenever possible. I enjoy face-to-face interactions. I yearn for in-person human connection and the genuine presence and engagement it fosters. It could be that, or perhaps I am just old.

Even the ubiquitous cell phone doesn't always bring the kind of relationships we desire. That device can make us readily available, but it can also be a distraction, hindering rather than fostering communication.

It reminds me of a line from Jimmy Buffett, he sings:

“Everybody's on the phone, so connected and all alone.”

And that is what the disciples fear: being all alone, isolated from the one they loved, their teacher, guide, and leader. Not only are they losing their friend and leader, but they are also losing hope. When he is gone, they think that what we were living for is gone, and they will be alone.

So Jesus tells them that when he is gone, they won't be alone. They won't be like one who is orphaned. God will send the Holy Spirit, or Advocate, John's word, or Paraclete, Greek word. And the Paraclete or Advocate will stand by them, stand with them, and they will not be alone, their greatest fear.

The Advocate will be with them like Jesus was. Indeed, John's first letter describes Jesus as an Advocate, one who stands by us. So, the Spirit, the Advocate, will be a spiritual presence that is with them, and keeps Jesus in their hearts as a real presence. The Advocate won't be embodied but will still be present.

Every time I hear these words, I think of Ben E. King's song *Stand by Me*:

When the night has come  
And the land is dark  
And the moon is the only light we'll see  
No, I won't be afraid  
Oh, I won't be afraid  
Just as long as you stand, stand by me

The Advocate will come and keep us connected to Jesus and one another. We will not be alone. The Advocate will stand by us and with us.

Everyone, especially children, needs advocates as well. That is why teaching is such a meaningful vocation. Here is a place, second only to the home, and sometimes more than the home, where children are shaped and formed, supported and nurtured with significant relationships and connections.

Adults can also find it helpful to have an advocate accompany them to the doctor, assisting them in asking questions and ensuring they understand the doctor's explanations. Sometimes, nerves can cause us to forget, and an advocate can help us remember what to ask and what the doctor said. The same holds in managing other areas of life, personal and social. Those who need guidance with legal paperwork or those seeking asylum from oppressive and even murderous environments need advocates.

Advocating for another is a gift of love we can give and receive when we stand by others and when others stand by us.

The Advocate bestows upon us a relationship of mutual self-giving love, which shapes our identities. Last week, we heard Jesus tell the disciples to love one another. This week expands on that love as he points them to himself and God, whom he calls his Father, and says, “As you love me, and keep my word, my commands, we will come and dwell with you and in you. And the advocate fulfills this promise

We will not be left alone.

Many churches today are coming unglued. Jesus knew that only love could provide the glue for the connections the disciples needed and God desired. They needed to live in love. And I am convinced that it is the only real glue for the church.

This glue is not unique to a small church where everyone knows everyone, and we can genuinely care for one another. Even in large mega churches, small groups provide this essential opportunity for people to genuinely love God and one another, based on the depth of those relationships.

The Advocate dwells within us, strengthening the love that is within us, and this holds us together and enables us to love more fully.

Jesus says, “It’s not a bad thing that I’m leaving you; it’s a good thing indeed. You will be better off than before with the presence of the Advocate.” I wonder how many of the disciples believe this. Later they can remember he said it. I think they would rather hang on to Jesus than risk losing his presence. They may hear his promise, but it may take some time for them to believe it.

So, how might we experience the presence of the Advocate in our lives? I think we can find it in our daily devotions, our lives of prayer and study, our deeds of kindness for others, our acceptance

of others, and our efforts to work, march, and vote for social justice. Any activity that leads to loving connections is a place for us to experience the presence of the Advocate.

I see it in the birthday cards sent to those who receive Meals on Wheels so that they will feel less isolated. I see it when you buy the Special United Way Paper each year; I think of it when you support the CSPCA. I see it in the care that is extended to our congregation in the medical and legal areas. I see it in the invitation to join us. I see it in the gifts and visits to our friends at home, and I see it in Interfaith Caregivers and the Greater Olean Association of Churches. I see it in our banner in front of our church. I see it in the Dr. King Celebration each year, and I see it in the National Day of Prayer, as well as in the many other ways you support one another and the broader community and world, including those who choose to get involved in politics and social justice. And I see it in all of you who gave and give of yourself in your vocation and volunteering to make the world a better place for all people. I see it where you try to keep hope alive.

We can treasure those times people care for us as the work of the Advocate, and see our standing with others as the Advocate working through us.

I am convinced it is a circle we can enter at any point and continue our journey. Maybe we let our love for God overflow into the love for others, and perhaps we trace back our love for others to our love rooted in God's love for us.

We are all joined together, thanks to the gift of the Advocate's presence with us. And this presence deepens our relationship with Jesus, his Father, and one another. And that overcomes the fear of being alone, isolated, or orphaned. It replaces that fear with connections that are essential to our lives.