

May 14, 2023 Message for Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
“We are Not Alone” Betsy Gonwa

Bible Wisdom Teachings

- Acts 17: 22-31
- John 14:15-21

In today’s gospel, the disciples are gathered around the table. They don’t know what’s coming, but they’re worried about what might happen, especially the way Jesus is talking about going away.

Take a moment to enter into your own story and see if you can find a way to touch into what the disciples might be feeling at this moment. Has there ever been a time in your life when things were taking an unexpected turn? For the worse? A time when you were fearful that things were heading toward a disastrous end? A time when you were confused? A time when you were afraid of being abandoned? Or perhaps a time when things just weren’t going right?

Here’s what might be going through my head if I were one of the disciples . . .

I love You Jesus and I have come to trust you, but . . . I do not want to imagine living without You! You are our leader, our guide, our teacher. We need you. I need you! Here.

You have more faith in us than I do. No matter what you say, how can I not worry about what it will be like to live without You? I cannot even imagine life without You! I don’t want to imagine life without You!

I don’t want another Advocate. I want YOU to stay here now!

I would have no idea of what lay ahead. I would not know that very soon we would all be scattered and separated, each despairing alone. Each ashamed and in hiding. How would I make sense of what Jesus was saying?

Short answer. I wouldn’t. Most likely, I would only be able to make sense of it after the fact.

At least that is my experience in my own life. God’s promises can be hard to hold onto when I am confused and afraid. Or feeling alone. It is often only after the fact that I can see that God was with me. When I enter into this reading imagining I’m a disciple, I am reminded of times in my own life when things were falling apart, or I felt vulnerable. In those times, I have tended to think no one else could possibly have any idea of what I was feeling, and that no one could possibly understand what I was going through, and to clam up and go it alone. I think I feel alone even before I choose to go it alone.

This alone feeling is on me. On my failure to reach out to God. I know I am not the only one doing this. We all wear protective masks at times of vulnerability. Even, at times, with our loved ones. We always have a choice. To turn toward or away. To invite into the moment. Or not. To invite God into the moment. Or not. That's the gift of free will.

Brené Brown says we need to be selective, that we should only share our stories with someone who has earned the right to hear them. And yet, even though I am connected to family members and trusted friends, there have been times in my life when I have been unwilling to share my pain. Even unwilling to name it.

I believe my reluctance to reach out at these time is because I don't just choose to disconnect from others, I disconnect from myself, and from God, and from my faith. I can't be connected to myself or to God if I refuse to acknowledge the truth of how I am feeling in the depths of my being.

William Barry has written a book, *Praying the Truth: Deepening Your Friendship with God through Honest Prayer*. Its title says it all. Honesty with God means telling God about all our feelings. Barry devotes chapters to attraction, fears, successes, sadness, pettiness, anger, rage, sexuality, and our disagreements with God. I can add my own chapters: doubts, despair, anxiety, faults, failings, regrets. That is what many of the psalms are about, being honest with God.

When we are mired in shame, fear or confusion, we feel alone. That is how the disciples will soon feel. And Jesus knows it. So he is preparing them. Assuring them. Telling him they will not be orphaned. They will not be alone.

Feeling alone is part of being human. It happens to us all at times. And unfortunately, in those moments, our tendency can be to turn away.

As I read this promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit, I find it to be so powerful. Verse 20 "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." You will know! He says. Wow!

I imagine myself as Jesus, saying these words.

They think they need me. And I know how afraid they are of being left alone. Yet I am putting my trust in God. I know that Love is stronger than death. But they don't. They have been counting on me to be with them. And I am pretty sure I won't be, especially now that Judas has left.

They have been beaten down for so long and told that they are nothing. Yet I also know that they are capable! I know the power of the Father's Love in me. They will know it, too. How can I make them understand? What can I say that will help them through what is coming ahead? What can I say to help them trust?

He wants to encourage the disciples. He wants them to know that they will be able to carry on without Him. As I hear Jesus' words now, considering my own life, my faith is growing. My faith in myself with the Spirit in me to be able to live in love. I could just bask in this promise.

But I imagine the disciples are not basking in Jesus' promise. I imagine they are waffling. Wanting to be able to believe they can love, as Jesus believes they can, and doubting their ability to do so at the same time. They believed themselves to be capable, perhaps even powerful while in the company of Jesus, while Jesus was being followed by crowds, while he was teaching and healing, and standing up to the Pharisees. But, at this point in time, they see themselves as dependent upon Jesus, and powerless on their own. What will they do without Him?

We already know how confusion and fear will play out in the aftermath of Jesus' death. But they don't know that yet. They're just worried about it.

This is the point in time when the disciples are being invited to trust in what Jesus has been teaching them all along. To trust in Abba Father. It is what we are invited to each time we come face to face with a life situation that causes us to be afraid or confused, or to feel alone.

We all have opportunities to grow in faith. Sometimes we go it alone. And sometimes we seek community. Seeking community is seeking God, for where two or three are gathered, Jesus said, "there am I in their midst." And sometimes we call out to God in prayer. When I call on God, God usually answers my prayer through another living being – a person, an animal, a bird, even a tree or a flower. Sometimes through melody or lyrics. I receive encouragement, inspiration and support from the most surprising places.

But feeling alone is not the same as being alone. We can feel alone even when we are not at all alone. Feeling alone and staying there can send me on a downward spiral. Into fear, anger, despair. What Miriam Greenspan calls the dark emotions.

Jesus was preparing the disciples to be with those dark emotions. He was assuring them that they would have a loving companion with them always.

What a comforting and empowering message! You are not alone! You will never be alone! Even when I am no longer here, you will be companioned by the Spirit of Love. The Spirit of Truth is in you. You know this Spirit, for you have been abiding with it.

This is Jesus' promise. The Spirit will be with you. You will not be alone. It was a promise to Jesus' disciples and it is a promise to us.

The Holy Spirit is in us. Jesus promised it and it is true. It is not possible to separate what we do from what God does through us. Leo Buscaglia says, "Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around." I believe we underestimate the power of these small, seemingly insignificant acts because we forget that we are conduits of the Spirit. When we act, the Spirit acts, too!

In today's reading, the disciples are worried about Jesus going away, about being orphaned, about being left on their own, without him. Who were Jesus' followers? *[elicit answers]*

Right. The disenfranchised. Lepers, prostitutes, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the demon-possessed, all manner of shunned and ostracized people. His followers were especially afraid of being abandoned. They knew what it was like to be outcast, isolated, and alone.

I'd like us to shift our focus, and consider Jesus' promise in the light of the present day. I'd like us to think about those who might be feeling alone or abandoned in our society now. *[elicit]*

Last week, the Surgeon General declared loneliness and isolation to be an epidemic in our country. Not based on statistics, but on conversations he has had with individuals. In the letter introducing his report, the Surgeon General calls social connection medicine. "The keys to human connection are simple," he writes, "but extraordinarily powerful." I believe that what he is calling for, though he would not call it that, is an unleashing of the Spirit. For didn't Jesus heal through his touch, and through community?

Because of the separation of church and state, there is no mention of churches, nor of God or the Spirit in the Surgeon General's report. He is simply touting the benefits of social connection. But as we, as Christians, recognize that the Spirit is in us, then we know it is not just social connection that happens when we reach out to others. It is deeper. Because the Spirit is in us. It's never just us. It's always God working through us.

This past week, I was privileged to hear about and see the Spirit working in people right in front of my eyes. I was on retreat with about 30 young people who have given a year of their lives to serve the poor and marginalized. Through the Jesuit Volunteer Corp, they served in medical facilities, schools, and centers that serve the abused, the homeless, those citizens returning from prison, among others. One young woman I sat with who served at a middle school shared how she learned to just be with her students when they were upset. Part-way into her year, after spending a lot of energy trying to "fix things" for her students, she began to recognize the

value of being there, the value of being present. For it wasn't the math homework they had not completed that was the issue, anyway. It was so much more.

Then, on Friday, I attended a gathering of young people and adults who work in Restorative Practices. One person at the gathering likes to call what we do "transformative practices." Another term could be "healing circles." I was in awe of the young people at that gathering. What they are learning through their training in restorative practices is changing their lives and impacting their families and will, as it continues to spread, impact the whole of Milwaukee, and the world. The purpose of the gathering was to make connections so we can collaborate to spread the healing work of restorative practices and change the culture of our city.

I came away from these events with young people energized and encouraged. Like Jesus, confident in his disciples, I am confident that the work will continue. For I see the Spirit, even though by many it is not named as such.

In his introductory letter, the Surgeon General writes, "each of us can start now, in our own lives, by strengthening our connections and relationships. Our individual relationships," he says, "are an untapped resource—a source of healing hiding in plain sight." He calls our individual relationships a source of healing!

Some examples he gives of ways individuals can connect are what our Tippe community is already doing, as individuals and as a community.

"Make time to share a meal." – if meals are about connecting and gathering together for fellowship, well Tippe does that, including our coffee time after service. We have also gathered for meals in the past. And more opportunities for fellowship on Friday evenings and Saturday gatherings in the Tippe gardens are coming this summer.

"Perform an act of service" – Well, that's Hungry Hearts! And Divine Intervention and Arts and Science Literacy Camp.

"Express yourself authentically." – we are all invited to express ourselves in various ways as part of worship, at the check-in, sharing our wisdom, and sharing our concerns and joys through prayer for ourselves, and for each other. And more opportunities for expressing ourselves authentically will be coming in the gatherings planned for this summer.

We at Tippe already have programs to reach out to the marginalized in our community, and often this includes those who are alone, or feeling alone. We don't need the Surgeon General to point out to us what is lacking. We have already noticed. We are already doing the work he is recommending. But I very much appreciate his affirmation that the kind of work that Jesus did and that Tippe continues to do is desperately needed. That, in fact, it heals.

Coupled with the gospel reading today, reminding us that the Spirit abides with us and is in us," I envision myself "living and moving and having my being" within the world as one who heals, empowered by the Spirit.

Jesus was Love incarnate. He led his followers in the Way. His message was about living in love. Jesus' desire for his followers was for them to experience God's love, and to share God's love with others. That is what Jesus modeled for us, and the early church carried his teaching and modeling forward. Underground, in close and loving, inclusive, subversive, thinking-outside-the-box communities.

While we do not have to hide in fear for our lives, we are still called to abide in the Spirit, to be guided by love, to love our neighbors and to stand up to the powers that be

Yes, Tippe is a community that thinks outside the box, or as someone said last Sunday, a community of subversive rule-breakers. In that way, we are aligned with the early church, and with the movement that Jesus started. In our Tippe community, through our unique and creative outreach ministries, through our participation in Common Ground, through our gathering together in worship, and through each one of us as individuals as we reach out to those we encounter in our daily lives, the Spirit is unleashed!