



Roanoke, Virginia

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“The Advocate”

I Corinthians 13:1-13, John 14:15-21

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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.



John 14:15-21

¹⁵ 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This 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.

¹⁸ 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They 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.'

Sermon:

Young Liza and Jeremy were sound asleep one night, when it began to rain hard. Thunder rolled in, so loud that it woke the twins from their sleep. They leapt out of bed and ran into the living room, calling for their mother.

“Don’t worry, you two!” their mother said. “It’s just the storm making that noise. Go back to bed.”

“We want to stay close to you. We’re scared!” said Jeremy.

Their mom replied, “You know we’re always together, no matter what.”

“But how can we be together when you’re out here and we’re in bed?” asked Liza.

Their mom held something right in front of them and said, “This is how.”

Rubbing their sleepy eyes, the twins came closer to see what their mom was holding. “I was about your age when my mommy first told me about the INVISIBLE STRING,” she told them.

The twins didn’t see the string—they didn’t see anything!

“You don’t need to see the Invisible String,” their mom explained. “People who love each other are always connected by a very special String made of love.”

“But if you can’t see it, how do you know it’s there?” Liza asked.

“Even though you can’t see it with your eyes,” their mom answered, “you can feel it in your heart and know that you are always connected to everyone you love. When you’re at school and you miss me, your love travels all the way along the String until I feel it tug on my heart.”

“And when you tug it right back, we feel it in our hearts,” said Jeremy.

“Would it reach me even if I were a submarine captain deep in the ocean?” asked Jeremy. “Yes,” Mom said, “even there.”

“Or a mountain climber?”



“Even there.”

“Or a ballerina in France?” Liza asked.

“Even there.”

“How about an astronaut in outer space?”

“Yes, even there.”

Then Jeremy quietly asked, “Can my String reach all the way to Uncle Brian in Heaven?”

“Yes ... even there.”

“Does the string go away when you’re mad at us?”

“Never,” said Mom. “Love is stronger than anger, and as long as love is in your heart, the String will always be there.”

This sweetly profound children’s story, *The Invisible String*,ⁱ goes on to share that the twins make it back to bed and finally fall asleep. They dreamed that night of all the Invisible Strings they have, and all the strings their friends have—and *their* friends’ friends have—and *THEIR* friends’ friends have—until everyone in the world was connected. And from deep inside, the story concludes, they now could clearly see that no one is ever alone.

That’s a truth that all of us, regardless of age, want to be assured of. That no one is ever alone.

Our gospel passage for this morning is a part of what we call Jesus’ farewell speech to his disciples. This discussion with his disciples takes place on the night before his arrest. In the chapter directly preceding ours, Jesus says, “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 13:34-45). In fact, this commandment—Jesus’ “Maundy Thursday” mandate that his disciples love one another—is the only recorded commandment in all of John’s Gospel.

At the last supper, Jesus had been telling the disciples about his coming departure. He knows that in a matter of hours, and then again in the coming years, his friends will feel like “orphans.” Easter will be a joyous reunion, but the resurrection appearances won’t last forever. And as the years pass, people will be called to believe in a Jesus they have never seen or heard.

His first pastoral move is to assure them that love—their new commandment—will sustain them, define them. And his next is to promise the Advocate—the Holy Spirit.

It’s a powerful promise made to disciples who were afraid and uncertain about the future nearly two thousand years ago, and it’s a powerful promise made to disciples who are afraid and uncertain about the future today.

At various times across church history, and in various traditions of Christianity today, the Spirit has been interpreted many ways. Where I come from, when you see the words “Holy Ghost”



or “Holy Spirit” in a church’s name, you can be pretty sure there’s talking in tongues or there’s a little charismatic dancing going on in there. In other churches, the Spirit may be represented as a dove, and you see it in stained glass or hovering above Jesus’ head in depictions of his baptism. Some people equate the Spirit to a kind of vague spirituality that seems to be mainly a sense that there’s something “out there” that we cannot name.

John’s Gospel uses a very specific word to describe the Spirit: *paracletos*—literally, one who comes along side you.ⁱⁱ It sometimes gets translated as comforter, counselor, helper, 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.

For some traditions, defined this way, the Spirit’s role is to intercede for us before God. The Spirit, from this point of view, is one who pleads our case that, though we have fallen short, yet because of Jesus’ sacrifice, we deserve to be forgiven. 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...” (3:16). It is not the God I come to understand in Scripture and in experience.

So, I wonder if it’s meant to be understood the other way around. Perhaps it is the Spirit who intercedes on God’s behalf before *us*. Perhaps the Spirit is the one who comes to remind us of our identity as children of God. Perhaps the Spirit is the one who helps us see the Good Shepherd, to recognize that we are one of his sheep, and remember God’s promise to be with us and care for us no matter what. Because, Lord knows, that can be a hard identity to hold onto, especially when we are stressed or frightened, unsure about our future when it feels like everything has been turned upside down.

Or maybe it’s that the Spirit, the Advocate, 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 no matter what.

As David Lose points out, if the Spirit is advocating to us to believe in God’s promises and trust that we are worthy of God’s love, then that creates in us the ability to not simply survive the challenges of today, but to flourish in the midst of them.ⁱⁱⁱ Even more, the Spirit’s work of advocacy creates the possibility that we can do the same for others. The Spirit invites us into the same work helping, comforting, counseling, encouraging, and lifting others up. Perhaps this is why Jesus moves immediately from commanding his disciples to keep this new commandment of love to the promise of the Holy Spirit. No one can love others as Jesus did apart from the advocacy, help, and encouragement of the Spirit.

Think about it with me. Where do you see the Spirit at work? We live during a frightening time, with loss of income, loss of connection, and loss of life. But we also live in a time of profound sacrifice, encouragement, and generosity. You, Second Presbyterian Church community, have given over \$10,000 to local ministries in a time of uncertainty and scarcity. If that’s not evidence of the work of the Spirit, I don’t know what is.



Brothers and sisters, you are inheritors of this advocate Spirit Jesus promises. And you cannot receive this Spirit and remain unchanged. The Spirit is among us, abiding within us, creating holy places where authentic, self-sacrificial human love can take root and flourish.

Today, we celebrate the end of our Sunday school year at Second Presbyterian Church. For these 10 Sundays we have been worshiping apart, our SS classrooms have sat empty ... BUT our education hasn't ended. The Spirit has made us flexible, nimble, creative even, I dare say. Although George, Rachel, and I wish we'd had a crash course in videography and virtual meeting platforms 11 weeks ago, to be exact, the technology available to us allows us to stay connected and to grow and learn together.

The Open Door, the Wired Word, and Covenant Conversation have continued their studies through email and Zoom. The Journey Class continues to share prayer requests over email. The pastors have posted additional weekly adult SS content. Children's SS is taught at home, and youth have watched videos, joined in Zoom discussions, games, and devotions. Who knew we had it in us? Do I like the old ways of doing Christian education better? You bet ya. But will we go back to doing things the same old way once all of this is behind us? I hope not.

I'm not saying that I want to continue home and virtual Christian education and worship exclusively—but I do think we will do things differently in the future because of our experience now. And I believe—I know—that the Spirit is at work somewhere in midst of it all.

As your pastor for Christian education, I can't begin to tell you all the dreams and nightmares I've had about summer educational events gone awry for the coming months. But I feel like I am coming out of that fog to a horizon that's expanding. I am stretching to see beyond the traditional methods for learning I've always treasured, and am opening myself to the ways God's Word can still be made alive for this body of faith even when our bodies aren't all here in one space together.

The Spirit, the Advocate, is working to help us see. I miss you, Second Presbyterian Church. I miss your faces and your handshakes and your hugs—I know you miss your church family, too. And while it can feel a little like we're orphaned—missing our church family week after week—Jesus reminds us he has not left us alone. He has promised us nothing less than the Holy Spirit, who walks alongside us everywhere and always.



Our benediction comes from Methodist pastor and poet, Jan Richardson.

“Blessing the Distance”

By Jan Richardson

It is a mystery to me
how as the distance
between us grows,
the larger this blessing
becomes,

as if the shape of it
depends on absence,
as if it finds its form
not by what
it can cling to
but by the space
that arcs
between us.

As this blessing
makes its way,
first it will cease
to measure itself
by time.

Then it will release
how attached it has become
to this place
where we have lived,
where we have learned
to know one another
in proximity and
presence.

Next this blessing
will abandon
the patterns
in which it moved,
the habits that helped it
recognize itself,
the familiar pathways
it traced.

Finally this blessing
will touch its fingers
to your brow,
your eyes,
your mouth;
it will hold
your beloved face
in both its hands,

and then
it will let you go;
it will loose you
into your life;
it will leave
each hindering thing
until all that breathes
between us
is blessing
and all that beats
between us
is grace.

ⁱ Patrice Karst. *The Invisible String* (Camarillo: Devorss & Co.), 2001.

ⁱⁱ Craig R. Koester. “Commentary on John 14:15-21” (workingpreacher.org), for May 17, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose. *...In the Meantime: “Easter 6A Spirit Work”* (davidlose.net), May 14, 2020.

