

# WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

---

Preparing for Sunday, May 21, 2017 // Easter 6, Year A

## The Gospel: John 14:15-21

Jesus said to his disciples, "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."

## Background and general observations

*With this passage, we continue with Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" (John 13-17), picking up where we left off last week. This Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, is the last Sunday of the Easter Resurrection appearances. These appearances last for 40 days, from Easter Day until the Day of the Ascension, which is the Thursday after the Sixth Sunday of Easter. "Ascensiontide" lasts 10 days, culminating on the fiftieth day after Easter Day, which is Pentecost (Pente = 50). Thus, the church has structured its Gospel readings in such a way that this passage gives us the last words we'll hear from Jesus before the day he ascends into heaven and leaves the disciples in a 10-day period of uncertainty and waiting. On Pentecost, the waiting ends dramatically with the powerful experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit.*

*In this passage, Jesus is telling the disciples about this coming Spirit, the One Jesus calls the "Advocate." This "Advocate" is also called the "Comforter," and it is interesting to ponder the different ways these words might affect our understanding of who the Holy Spirit is and how the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives.*

*It is also interesting to notice that Jesus says the disciples are going to see and recognize things that the world will not see or recognize. The disciples will know the Advocate, because he will be "with" them and "in" them. Also, although the world will no longer see Jesus, the disciples will see him. We might ponder what it is that separates the follower of Jesus from "the world." What allows us to see what "the world" cannot see; or, what keeps "the world" from seeing what is revealed to us?*

*Finally, this passage begins and ends with a declaration that our love for Jesus is evinced by our keeping his commandments: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me." One way of thinking about this is that Jesus has invited us into a thorough identification with him — he is in us and we are in him. We are invited into a mystical union in which Jesus' life is our life, and when we are so united with him, he lives in us and through us, as we quite naturally keep his commandments to love each other and serve each other the way he loved and served us.*

## Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Gary Jones has written before about a friend of his, Larry, who is serving at non-commutable, 15-year prison sentence for white-collar crime—a former lawyer and claims adjuster, he embezzled a great deal of money from some of his clients. When he went to prison, his wife divorced him, and his children disowned him. They will not communicate with him or have anything to do with him. He has lost everything, and when he gets out of prison, he will be penniless and homeless. He wonders what it will be like to start all over at age 70 with nothing.

He and Gary talk in person from time to time and write letters to one another. In one exchange, Gary asked if he'd like to reflect on this particular Gospel passage, so that people who receive this Weekly Bible Study could benefit from his point of view. Here is some of what he wrote:

*I think the Holy Spirit is one of the most difficult concepts for us to intellectually embrace, but I can tell you, in those very lonely days when I find myself saying, "God, I can't do this," I know it is the Holy Spirit that suddenly causes me to turn to Psalm 27 or Isaiah 40, or I will be overwhelmed by a presence that tells me "I care." I know it sounds weird, and perhaps it is psychologically explainable as a coping mechanism, but to me, it is the Spirit of God.*

*And the directive: "love me, follow my commandments." I've written blogs a couple of times that focus on commandments<sup>1</sup>, and I always conclude the same thing. Namely, the Beatles were right: "All you need is love." It's from love that mercy, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, righteousness all flow. And that was Jesus' commandment: love God, and love others.*

*I think about love a good deal, Gary. The world, people, are way too angry, way too unmerciful and unforgiving.*

How do Larry's reflections speak to you and your own life situation?

2. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

What do you know about loving someone and *not* doing what they want you to do?

If you love Jesus or love God, is the expectation that you will *always* keep Jesus' commandments? Or, perhaps, is the expectation that we will regularly fail to keep the commandments, in which case we are to return to Jesus' first commandment, "Repent and believe"?

Is the Christian life, in your experience, about regularly failing and returning, failing and returning?

How would you describe your evolving relationship with God? It is like taking one step forward and two steps back, or taking two steps forward and one step back? What are other ways to articulate how you might feel drawn closer to, and then perhaps further from, a union with God?

Are there ways in which you first had to move further from God in order to then move closer? Have you ever misinterpreted your “two steps forward” or your “two steps back”? Have you thought you were distanced from God only to realize you were moving ever closer?

3. “I will not leave you orphaned.”

The word “orphaned” is particularly powerful. It is derived from the Greek word *orphanos*, literally translated as “deprived, bereaved.” The notion that Jesus will never leave us bereaved—that is, utterly and profoundly alone—is a great comfort.

Many people say that they have felt closest to God when they were feeling most abandoned or most grief-stricken. Others say that in these times, God seemed entirely absent. What has been your experience of God breaking through to you (or not) in times of your isolation and despair? What have you known of feeling orphaned?

4. “Advocate” and “Comforter” are both words used to describe and explain the Holy Spirit. They are both powerful, but “Advocate” feels like a stronger or more active word than “Comforter”; Advocate connotes action, while Comforter indicates a kind of stillness, of being held.

What good news, then, that the Holy Spirit is both. What do you know about feeling a need for an advocate and not just a comforter? And when have you wanted or needed comfort, embrace, or stillness instead of a more vigorous intervention?

Do you find yourself favoring one over the other? Has your experience of the Holy Spirit been more aligned with an Advocate or with a Comforter?

If the Advocate abides “with” us and “in” us, perhaps we are intended to be advocates for each other. When have you experienced someone being a kind of Holy Advocate for you? When have you been such an Advocate for someone else?

When have you experienced Holy Comfort from someone in your life, or offered Holy Comfort to someone else?

5. “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.”

Although Jesus will no longer be with the disciples physically, still he insists that they will see him. It is the difference in seeing with the eyes and seeing with the heart, by faith. Of course, “to see” is also another way of saying “to understand.”

Where do you see—and how do you understand— Jesus in your life and in the world today?

Why do you think some are able to see Jesus, while others do not?

What are the forces at work—in your life, and in the world— that keep us from seeing, or that keep us from a union with Christ?

What is it that “opens the eyes of our faith” and allows us to see what “the world” cannot see?