



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

THOSE EYES

John 14:15-21

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How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard. - A.A. Milne (Winnie-the-Pooh)

As we continue in the Upper Room this week, we feel the poignancy of Jesus' farewell to his friends. To anyone who has sat down to share final words or hear parting wisdom, there is a pregnant quality of power that imbues every word with potency and expectation.

There is a sense not only of sorrow
but of supernatural expectation and presence.
It is a sense of something that is close by...
closer than in normal times;
it is not altogether pleasant
neither is it a moment of dread;
it is something visceral,
cerebral,
spiritual,
and gripping.

Jesus' words were filled with a hunger to convey so many things, firm instruction, compassion, commitment, and encouragement to persevere. With all the questions that pour forth from the disciples, we can tell they knew something fundamental was changing. Jesus knows the disciples tend to make things harder for themselves, and for others, and so he pours in a tremendous amount of advice and instruction at this meal and then he offers them a gift – The Holy Spirit.

It will be this Spirit that will help them – in the months and years ahead – when they lose their way, become discouraged, and are tempted to give up. This Spirit gives not only practical support but a true sense that Jesus is still with them, even though he is gone. And in this way, as Jesus explains, the Spirit gives life.

It gives firm hope that, no matter what happens, Jesus will be victorious in the end. This Spirit

promises to give them an inner confidence that others can see and feel, even though they don't know what it is. It is like having a little friend in your pocket who puts joy and hope on your face.

A few years ago, while walking through a mall in Georgia, I saw this young man with a great smile on his face and a bounce in his step. Others saw it, too. It turned out he had a sugar bear in his pocket; a tiny marsupial that looks like a giant-eyed baby squirrel! It crawled onto his shoulder and down his arm. Then the man shook his arm and the sugar bear launched itself, glided around, and landed back on him. It was the coolest thing ever! The man knew it and he was the one who had it! (Matt and I returned home begging Wendy for a new pet! You probably know her response!)

The Holy Spirit is that type of presence, but even greater. For this Spirit is also known as the Advocate, so it offers something more than a mere wistful aura and feeling. An advocate stands up for us in court. To have a master counselor at your table when your life is on the line is a source of incredible confidence. Like having Perry Mason at your table. You know you are going to win!

If the people at the mall had never seen the sugar bear, we never would have known what made the man so different. You all know people of a special and deep faith that go through life filled with a hopeful confidence that others cannot understand. This is what Jesus is explaining to the disciples. The world will not understand your faith and hope because they do not know the presence of God in their hearts.

This can mean a very different sense of a final farewell. One person told me of a dying woman in the hospital room next to hers. It was filled with agony, despair, and wailing at the final goodbye because to them it WAS the final goodbye. They

had no peace in their heart, no hope; and the last word was loss and despair. However, we have this incredible Spirit of life with us to carry us through.

But with this gift of the Holy Spirit comes an expectation. Like a parent giving parting advice to their college student, there is a lot of advice Jesus gives. This text begins and ends with the correlation of love *and obedience*.

The relationship between disciple and teacher should not degenerate into sentimentality or into wistful nostalgia... love expresses itself in obedience in keeping Jesus' words.

(Charles Cousar)

Jesus intends for us to live out the instructions he gives to us, perhaps most clearly, in the “Sermon on the Mount”. Do not judge, give without expecting anything in return, love your enemies, bless the poor, and go beyond expectation in service. For the Spirit to dwell with us, we need to be living out the Spirit of Christ on a daily basis. But this is not about my obedience, or your obedience, but *ours*.

In verse 17, the phrase the Spirit will be “in you,” can also be translated “among you”. Perhaps Jesus intended this double meaning. The spirit is found in each of us, as we submit to his will, but it is also found whenever two or three are gathered.

The spirit of Christ is found in the in between places that connect us one to another and, in that sense, we can truly see how those without the gift of this faith will not have Christ. For we find it and share it as we come together in our communal nature. That is why it is so hard to be apart from each other in worship! The Spirit is found in sharing this calling, in the singing, in the praying, in the baptizing *together*.

Note this among-ness happens with real people, not perfectly-pious people who always get along. These disciples each have individual failures, as they wrestle for prominence, and group failures, as they flee *en masse* when things get hard.

Jesus knows he will be gone and it will be difficult, so he gives them a gift of this paraclete –

this advocate – who will fight for them and will not leave them EVER!! This is what Jesus promises, along with the call for obedience.

Jesus is not grasping for this obedience as a power-hungry tyrant. It is this very obedience that enables him to abide in us, that opens our heart to him.

Now, in this state of ignorance, we can hardly blame the world. For without the sustenance of a loving community of Christ, without the nurturing feeding of the Lord’s Supper of Christ abiding in me, where would I be? Who would I be? Whatever good there is in me, and in you, is Christ working through us and the Spirit’s love shining through.

We cannot convince the world based on some high-minded moral philosophy, but only on the presence of God in our hearts. Our obedience is meant to serve as a witness, to show Christ’s presence. As Jesus said, “They will know who you are by your love for one another.” (John 13:35) And, in the end, that is the essence of Jesus’ command and of this passage.

Jesus’ command to love – to love God, love each other – and Jesus’ deep love for them.

I imagine the disciples not only heard it in Jesus’ words, but felt it in the timbre of his voice and the intentness of his tone.

Indeed, Jesus drives deep into love, mentioning it eight times in these few verses. Jesus did not spend much time during his ministry talking about his love for his disciples. He is too focused on the task of teaching and healing. But, in this setting, he needs to share his heart and make sure there is no doubt in the disciples’ mind about how he feels.

Many of you know what that is like. For the most part, men keep their feelings inside of them and so when they are shared you know something has changed. At this meal, the disciples sensed things were changing with their relationship with Jesus. He was going away.

For my father, he was not leaving this earth, but when he started sharing his heart, I knew a part of

him was leaving this world. It was not his body, but his mind. Dementia has taken hold, as you have heard me share before. It continues to be a long parting. But, several years ago when it first began, for the first time in his life he started speaking about love. Not just golf and theology! We always knew it was there. But never had heard the words. He started speaking about how much he loved Carol, his girlfriend for over 20 years. His girlfriend who, when his mind maintained emotional boundaries, he perhaps would not admit that he loved so deeply. But now he gushes forth and he has moved in with her and they are planning to get married.

He has even spoken in gushing, loving terms about “Abi-GUY-EEL” my mother Abigail’s Portuguese name. Believe me, that has never happened in the over 40 years since their divorce!

But recently there was a very difficult farewell. At the beginning of March, my brother Nato and I went for a visit. As we were leaving, as we were saying goodbye, I looked into his eyes and saw something I had never seen before. Tears. Tears of deep love and deep longing, sadness at our parting.

Nineteenth century author Mary Evans (aka George Eliot) wrote, “Only in the agony of parting do we look into the depths of love.”

More than anything, I want to know what it was like to look into Jesus’ eyes when he shared these words of love with his disciples. Amen.