

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard**  
**“The God Who Lives Among Us”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, May 17, 2020**

**Acts 17:22-32**

*Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.”’*

*Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.’*

*When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’*

**John 14:15-21**

*‘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.’*

Will you pray with me? Holy One, you offer us the living word. You move among us in the gift of the spirit. Be with us now as we consider what your word is to us this day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Facebook is full of all kinds of information. Some of the news is good, some of it not so good. Some of it is true and some of it is not true. There are pictures, ads, political commentary, messages, and pictures from family and friends. And there are also these wonderful sayings and meanings that touch us. And that happened this week when I came upon a vignette from Winnie the Pooh, a favorite childhood character of mine. It began with the phrase many of us may remember once before.

Christopher Robin is talking to a somewhat anxious and worried Pooh, saying, "You're braver than you believe and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think." And I have always found that a very touching saying. But this time, it was the longer version of the quote. The ending was, "But remember, the most important thing is even if we're apart I'll always be with you." I'll always be with you. I'll always be with you. And I think those words remind us touchingly of the power of the gift of presence, the importance of community, the power and importance of remembering one another. We are humans, as species who do not like to feel alone. For we are geared to be connected with others.

And that was something that Dr. Vivek Murthy discovered during his time as the surgeon general in the previous administration. During the time he served, he traveled the country to learn about the opioid crisis. And one of the things that surprised him was that he discovered the issue that connected so many of them was the sense of being alone, of loneliness. And that led him to write a book called *Together, The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. And this week, he was interviewed on NPR to talk about the book and topic of loneliness. And the interviewer asked him about the concern for increasing loneliness because of the stay at home orders. And Murthy said that it would not be surprising if more people felt that way because we're having less and less face to face contact and physical contact with others, which is difficult for people.

And as a physician, he also recognizes that loneliness can be a stressor that impacts our emotional and physical health. He went on to say that the problem is that loneliness is something we're uncomfortable talking about. We feel a sense of shame about it, thinking that others will think it is because we are not likable. And that, he said, is exacerbated by this necessary time of stay-at-home measures. And the challenge of loneliness could go to a new level. And he reflected on that for a while. But unlike many others, he doesn't see only doom and gloom as the outcome. He said, "This can take us down one of two paths. One is the worrisome one, marked by greater loneliness as we spend more and more time physically separated, but the other is the path of social revival. If we're willing to recommit ourselves to people and relationships, we have the opportunity to use this moment to re-center our lives on people and if we do that then I believe we can come out of this pandemic more connected and more resilient than before it began." He said the concern is, "are we willing to ask for the support and connection we need and are we willing to intentionally reach out to others and be aware of others who need more community?"

And I think this really connects with today's gospel reading. I think Jesus deeply and intuitively understood the need for human connection and compassion. With Jesus, faith was about relationships--relationships with God and one

another, and he showed this by his willingness to touch the untouchables and the outcasts. Consider the woman with the flow of blood, the paralyzed man near the healing pool, the woman at the well, the parable of the prodigal son - these events are not just about healing of the body, they are about healing of the person within, about reconciliation and reconnection, especially in a culture where people were often shunned and pushed aside and told to stay alone if they had something wrong with them. Jesus enters into their lives and changes them. He heals, he challenges, he teaches, he preaches. It is about reconciliation, reconciliation with God and neighbor, and that's a very powerful kind of healing. It brings together hearts and minds and eases isolation and I think that's what Jesus' ministry was all about, building community and connection and reconciliation. Paul was that way too. In the reading from Acts, he speaks to the people in a town who have many statues, one altar to an unnamed God. He tells them that's the God he worshiped and worships. He brought people into community like Jesus in profound ways because he saw that faith was open to all people of all nations and wanted so to bring together the Jews and Gentiles into one community.

In this morning's chapter, Jesus is talking with the disciples after the Passover meal they've shared and it's the night before his death. I think they know something's up but they're not quite sure what, but Jesus knows. He knows the end is coming and he's trying to prepare them for the fact that he is going to leave them and no longer walk and talk and be among them. He tells them that he's going to die and that was something they did not expect and could not have possibly prepared for. His words turned their world upside down and they don't want to hear it. They push back, but Jesus persists. In many ways, he is like saying a farewell with love and a legacy. Remember King David's farewell words to his son Solomon as he prepares to die. He offers words of promise and love, encouraging Solomon in the days to come to keep the faith and the promise that God would be with him and Jesus tries to do this as well. I think it's an incredibly poignant and tender passage because he is also trying to let them know that this is not the end of the story. He reaches into the fears they're experiencing and offers words of hope. He says all will not be lost. You will not be orphaned. I think the use of the word orphan here is a powerful one, referring to one left without someone to care for them and about them, for someone who will feel alone. But he said you won't be alone. The advocate will come. And the word here that is used is *paracletus*, a word that can have several meanings. It can function in a legal sense like one who advocates with you before a court of law, or it can be about relationships speaking of one who brings help, consolation, comfort, and encouragement. But in the end, the world's most basic meaning is to come alongside of another. So Jesus offers them a powerful promise. They will not be left alone. There will be one with them who comes alongside them, sharing with them in the future in times of loss as well as times of joy. And can't we relate? We are dealing with losses. The loss of life as we knew it, the loss of flexibility and movement, for some the loss of jobs.

Jesus offers words of encouragement and hope in the face of loss and change. He reminds those gathered there that the love and life they have shared will not die, that his teachings will go with them, that the love they shared will live on, and that the advocate will be with them. These are his legacies that he entrusts to the ones he loves, the ones he calls, "my friends." Chris Koeting, who is a colleague in ministry here in the area, writes for the Post Dispatch on religious issues periodically. And this week, he talked about our need to grieve in the days to come for all that has changed and for those things we have lost and indeed for the people we may have lost. Indeed, some of us in this congregation have experienced the loss of a loved one. And it's a very different time for grieving. But we're reminded in this passage that we're not alone, that even when the community cannot gather to celebrate a life at this time, we can be together in the spirit as in the body of Christ. And indeed, there are other losses, the moments of

expected celebration for graduation or birthdays or businesses that have to be closed. For some, the reaction is pain or anger, and others, a sense of melancholy.

I was struck by the parallels between what Jesus speaks of in the passage and the issues of loneliness and struggle as touched on by the surgeon general. Truth, he said, loneliness is a natural signal that our body gives us similar to hunger or thirst. That's how important human connection is. Our ancestors knew there was safety in numbers, but when we feel alone and it continues, it can cause a state of stress which can impact us not only emotionally, but also physically. The gifts of presence and connection are important and profound for all of us in different ways.

There was a powerful story in the Washington Post this week about just that. The story of brother Robert Bathe who serves as a chaplain and bereavement coordinator at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. Being a Carmelite monk is his second career. Earlier he was a ground analyzer for a county, working with those who needed assessments of their soil and water. And one day he had arrived at a farm and found the farmer slumped over his tractor. He was still awake when he approached him and the man asked him to pray the Lord's Prayer with him. And shortly thereafter, Mr. Warren died. And that event changed Robert's life. He felt a calling to a new vocation, that of being present with others so that they are not alone, particularly in difficult moments. So each morning brother Bathe leaves the hotel room that he stays in near the hospital. He stays there to keep from infecting those in his Carmelite community. In his brown robe and a mask, he walks down the street on the way to the hospital greeting everyone. Some he touches on the hand, others he prays with. Regardless of circumstance, he acknowledges each person he passes. At the hospital, he looks in on COVID patients giving them a thumbs up from the window outside their room if they're awake and alert. He talks to heart attack victims and others who were seriously ill and those who are dying. Brother Bay does not want people to die alone. So when needed he carefully suits up and enters into the room with doctors and nurses in the closing minutes of someone's life. Like doctors and nurses, he aims to offer healing, but with a somewhat different focus, offering the gift of presence to ease loneliness, anxiety, and fear.

Jesus reminds the disciples that while they will struggle, they too will not be left alone. He reminds them through his actions and words about the gift of community, the importance of connecting, comforting, and walking alongside others. He reminds them of the power of love and presence, day in and day out, even as he prepares to leave them. This is a time for us to remember the power of this passage shaped by Jesus' compassion and concern and love. A time for us to remember the words about the power of the gift of peace from beyond this world that we are called to share with others. It's a reminder of the power of love to transform us, and a calling to share it with others. There are many ways to do that, through calls or cards, emails, or Zoom meetings, acts of kindness, and caring. We are called to be the people of faith, who walk alongside others, offering and receiving when we need it, the gifts of hope, love, and peace. This is what it means to be the body of Christ in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.