

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“Love One Another”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, June 16, 2019

John 14:15-27

‘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.’ Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, ‘Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

*Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
‘To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.*

*The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water:
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,*

*rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.*

Will you pray with me? Holy God, you offer us your Word, the living Word. And I ask that you be with us now as I share, as I reflect, as together we consider your call to us this day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Now as Joe Marting and David and Tom Glenn can attest too, there are a lot of requirements for ordination in our denomination. You have interviews with session and presbytery committees, you have exams, you have a psychological profile, (we won't go there) and three years in seminary, and we are required to take Hebrew. And if I'm honest, there were times when I was studying Hebrew that I wanted to pull my hair out. The language has entirely different letters, some of which change, whether they're in the middle of the word or the end of the word. There are many, many, many verb tenses. And then, of course, you read from right to left and start at the "back" of the book instead of the "front." So it is a different and very challenging. But I have to admit, over the years, I've come to realize that having a basic understanding of Hebrew and Greek has given me additional tools to explore the meaning behind particular words or passages and that Hebrew itself gave me deeper insights into the Hebrew scriptures, which in turn, informed my understanding of the gospels and the epistles. Hebrew also invited me to see God in new ways and that fact began literally in the beginning for that is what Genesis means, "in the beginning". In verse 26, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds, the cattle, the wild animals." We hear, let us make them in our image. Words in plural form. What does that mean? Some have said, "Well, is there more than one God?" Or, Is this one of those mysterious statements that tries to show us how the Trinity was present at the beginning of all there is.

John's Gospel also opens with a creation story. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him." It appears that God was not alone at creation. Jesus, the living word was with God. And then today in the reading from Proverbs, we hear wisdom proclaiming that she too was there at the beginning of time. "The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works before his deeds of old. I was formed at the very beginning when the world came to be."

Last week on Pentecost, you heard about the coming of what Jesus calls the advocate or the Holy Spirit. Ware told that the Spirit enabled those who were from different places to understand one another. Today's reading continues to focus on other dimensions of the Spirit as the one who teaches us about wisdom and truth. David read from the gospel of John, a passage that speaks about connection. Jesus is telling his disciples that he's going to die, but he wants them to know they will not be left alone. "It says in that day, you will know that I am in my father and you and me and I am you. "The spirit will come. You will not be left alone.

Now, I don't pretend that I fully understand the nature of God in the Trinity because sometimes thinking about all of this makes my head hurt. But I do take comfort in Paul's words. "Now we see in a mirror dimly" that there are indeed things that we cannot fully explain or understand. Yet scripture and our stained glass windows are filled with poetic insights, words of wisdom, words of trying to paint a picture of the indefinable. All of them invite us to reflect on this holy mystery. And so this week as I was considering what I would say, two things leaped out at me. One is that we find that at the beginning of time, there was more than just one. There was a we. A way of being in which one is also three. Thus, there is a community in the Trinity. The Trinity transcends time and space and existed before all this. So we are reminded we are not alone, but it also reminds us we don't make it all on our own, that life and faith is about "we" and not just "me." And from time to time, I think we need to be reminded of that, especially in this country which has a wonderful but tension-filled issue about individual versus community. We are built on courage and freedom and independence, yet we sometimes think about ourselves individually to the detriment of acknowledging that we are a people. It says in our Declaration of Independence "we the people," not me the person. At times we may think we make our way by ourselves, but the truth is we get there because of the support and care of others throughout our lives more in the beginning perhaps also at the end. The work of the spirit reminds us that how we live out our faith is not just about our individual relationship with God but also with our neighbor, and even with our enemies, Jesus says. A poet wrote, "No man is an island." While we may do much on our own, we are also called in faith to honor and try to understand one another. I think last week's reading of Pentecost is a reminder of that. No longer will the babble of different languages be able to keep people apart, for those open to the spirit would now be able to understand one another. Indeed, Paul says that Jesus came and lived among us and died and was resurrected for us all, not just me, not

just the Jewish people, but all people everywhere. The gift of the spirit then reminds us that we are profoundly connected to one another. By the presence of this we are reminded that faith is about service as well as salvation. It is about loving others as well as knowing that we are loved by God.

The passage from Proverbs is from one of the books called *Wisdom Literature*. Like Psalms and Ecclesiastes, the writings that attempt to speak to truth and faith and knowledge. Proverbs itself, if you've never spent time with it, you might find interesting. The first nine chapters speak about the role and work of wisdom. The spirit is often referred to as lady wisdom because the word in Hebrew *hokmah* is a feminine word as is *ruah*. And in Greek, those same words, *pneuma* and *sophia*, mean spirit and wisdom and they are in the feminine form. Thus God created male and female and we are reminded that their words, feminine and masculine, describe the Trinity. Lady Wisdom speaks about knowledge, but not facts but about life, about what it means to live honorably and faithfully. "Simple one," she says, "learn prudence here for I will speak noble things, from my lips will come what is right, from my mouth will utter truth--words that describe life and the gift of humanity and living with one another." What struck me is the attitude of joy and connection that Lady Wisdom speaks of. "I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in God's presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in humankind." Wisdom speaks with tenderness and determination about sharing life in faith with others. In fact, when we consider psychology and the steps of development in life, one important part is realizing that as we grow, we learn the world does not revolve around us as individuals, but that others exist and they matter. It's how we learn to be in relationship. Wisdom invites us to learn, to understand, to recognize our relationships with others is the way in which we find the deepest meanings in life.

There was a fable* I shared at baccalaureate a number of years ago that spoke to me of this very thing. And it begins this way: *There once lived a very wise man in a small village. He was a gatherer and teacher of wisdom and people came to him for counsel. But as his son grew up, he realized that his son did not have a sense of direction and he became more and more concerned, until one day he said, "My son, you are grown up. You need to understand life and you need to take on your responsibilities." And then he drew his son close and said, "I want you to find the purpose of your life. Then you will find a life full of meaning." So the next day, the father gave him a bag filled with four pairs of clothes, one for each season, some food, grains, money and a map. Then his father said, "I want you to go find a treasure. I've drawn a map of the place where it's hidden. Go and find it." "Aha, this is what my dad's been trying to tell me." He thought. "If I find this treasure, life will be great so the next day he set out early because he knew he had many rivers to cross and mountains to climb before he reached his destination. And weeks and months passed. He saw a lot of people. Some helped with food. Others gave him shelter. And others tried to rob him. But he never stayed long anywhere because he knew he had to go and find the treasure. Winter arrived and the weather got harsh periodically and he would rest for a bit. But he was anxious to find that treasure. And finally, he reached the place his father had described and spotted the tree his father had marked on the map. And for days he searched and searched, digging around that tree. And finally, he accepted that there was nothing there. Tired and angry and devastated, he headed back home. On the way back though he saw the same changing landscapes and seasons. But this time he stopped to look around. He witnessed glorious sunsets, unravelled in peaceful evenings. He learned to hunt for food and protect himself from the weather. He calculated the time of day with the sun's position. He met some of the people who had helped him before. But this time he stayed and worked with them to show his gratitude. He realized how wonderful they were because they had helped him and others without expecting anything in return.*

When he finally arrived home, he went straight to see his father and found him resting. He walked up and whispered, "Father." And the wise man opened his eyes and got up and embraced his son and said, "So how was the journey? Did you find the treasure?" And the son said, "The journey was amazing, father. But forgive me. I've disappointed you. I could not find any treasure. Maybe somebody got there before me." And his father said, "No. That's because there was no treasure in that place." "But why did you send me to find it?" "Well, consider this. Did you enjoy living out on your own in the midst of new people and changing seasons? Did you make some good friends on the way?" And he looked at him and said, "Of course not. I had no time for that. I wanted to find the treasure before anyone else." And then he was quiet for a moment and he looked at his father and said, "But you know? On the way back it was different. I learned new skills and met people and made friends so much so that I forgot of the pain of not finding the treasure. I found joy on the way home." And his father said, "Exactly. You wanted to know how to lead a life and attain your goals. But if you only go after something that you think will make it all perfect, you will miss out on the real treasures on the way. Life is not just about the future. No magical treasure will enable you to live without a care in the world. There are more important things including sharing the journey with others." And the son began to understand.

I think in this story we hear about wisdom. Wisdom tells us that "I was filled with delight, day after day, rejoicing in God's whole world and delighting in humankind." Wisdom tells us that delighting in everyday life and focusing on others and not just ourselves, can help us rejoice and find meaning. The spirit is the promise that Jesus made that we would not be left alone. We are not left alone. And that we alone are not all that matters.

We are reminded that in those times, when the seasons are challenging or painful, that God is with us. The spirit of God that lives and moves through others as well, sharing the journey with us. Even in moments of doubt or struggle, God is there offering strength to sustain us on the journey of life. The Spirit that inspires and comforts us and offers us peace goes with us as well. Wisdom is to be our friend and guide. The Spirit that offers us peace from beyond this world. The Trinity is part of a holy mystery that calls us into relationship, not only with God but with one another. We are not alone. We are not to live alone. Thanks be to God.

*The fable is based on a piece found in Theeurekalife.com blog.