

Jesus Calls us to Keep His Word, and Gives us Something More
Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, May 1, 2016
The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C, John 14:23-29

John 14:23-29 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. You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

The month of May brings several celebrations—celebrations that remind us of life lessons that stay with us for a long time. Mother's Day is next week. And soon moms and dads will send graduates off with parting words and life lessons. Some lessons are given with great formality with special letters or speeches. Other lessons stick with us from childhood. I remember my mother teaching me as a child to put the tub of sour cream right back into the refrigerator after using it, rather than leaving it out and risking spoiling. To this day I still get nervous if an open tub of sour cream sits out at the dinner table. Some of Mom's lessons stay with us whether we want them to or not.

There are other lessons, too—lessons taught more by example than by command. I remember one morning as a boy when I wanted my mom's attention, and she asked me to go play elsewhere for a while. "This is my quiet time, Tom," she said, "my time with God—to pray and to read the Bible." I'll never forget the realization that she took God seriously.

But, of course, eventually, we grow up, graduate, leave the nest and go out on our own. We don't always have the wisdom of mom and dad with us. The day your parents see you off to college or the new job, they leave you with all the wisdom you'll need—wisdom about clean laundry and homework and friends—wisdom about character and safety. One of those messages I recall is "remember who you are—remember that we love you and remember that you are a beloved child of God—remember how much God loves you!"

Leaving the nest is not exactly what happened to the disciples when Jesus was crucified and risen and ascended. But you can hear a similar affection in Jesus' words to his disciples as he prepares them for these last events. The gospel reading we heard this morning is from a larger and longer passage from the last supper. Jesus assures his disciples of his affection for them, and encourages them for the time ahead. In this passage, Jesus presses them to keep his word, so that God the Son and God the Father will make a home with them. Jesus also promises them something more.

Jesus had good reason to prepare his disciples and to press them to keep his word. Later that night, when he was arrested, the disciples fled and were devastated by his persecution and crucifixion. We read that even after Jesus rose from the dead, many disciples who met him still struggled with doubt and fear. Their hearts were troubled indeed, and they needed the reassurance of Jesus' peace. How would the disciples go on? When the Lord ascended into heaven, departing again, the disciples still had to determine how they would await his return.

They would feel what we sometimes feel—they would feel on their own, and in need of Jesus' words and reassurance.

Jesus emphasizes to them in this passage: “Those who love me keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” Jesus says that his word is God the Father's word. “Keep my word,” Jesus tells them, almost like a parent's parting advice to a child.

For Jesus, and for these Jewish disciples, “keeping” the word had a deeper meaning than simply “remember what I told you!” When the Jewish tradition speaks of “keeping” the Torah, they mean retaining and preserving the Torah, yes, but also guarding the Torah, learning the Torah, understanding the words and teachings of God and integrating them into one's life. When the greatest commandment is given in Deuteronomy, the passage reads in part “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*” This is an illustration of what Jesus means when he tells his disciples to *keep* his word.

God wants us to remember his teachings, as I'm sure mothers want their kids to remember to do the laundry. But God wants us to *keep* his word, to let it seep into us and persist, like my mom's teaching about the sour cream. God wants us to keep his word by reading the Bible, yes. But God does not want us to simply keep the Bible on the shelf, but keep God's word in our lives. We keep God's word by the way we live, by our daily practice of prayer and care and generosity. We keep God's word by knowing God so closely that what we do at home or at work or at school breathes with God's presence and wisdom. “Those who love me will keep my word,” Jesus said.

Of course, keeping God's word is not easy for us. Like wayward college students out from under mom and dad's nearer presence, we face a lot of confusion and disconnection from God. Like adults whose kids have left the nest or whose parents have died, we face a lot of loss and uncertainty about the way forward. So often, even as we try to remember and live Jesus' teachings, we feel on our own and without the strength to take or even find the way forward. We want that peace that Jesus gave, not just as a distant memory, but as a present reality. We really want Jesus with us personally to make things clear. But Jesus' earthly ministry is on hold right now, and we feel on our own.

Ah, but we are not on our own! Jesus' message to us is more than simply the admonition to keep his words. Jesus does not simply leave us with parting wisdom and then leave. Jesus gives us more than advice. Jesus gives us more than just the Bible. Jesus says to his disciples “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.” We hear this passage in church on this Sunday because we are getting ready for Pentecost—ready for the gift of God the Holy Spirit with us. Jesus does not leave us on our own to keep his words. God the Holy Spirit comes to us to make his home with us, to be with us, to teach us everything and remind us of all that Jesus has said.

When we find ourselves disconnected from God, discouraged in our faith and disconnected from others or broken inside, we can open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and learn from God's wisdom and guidance. When we feel as if we are on our own, we can reach out for the presence of God close by us. God sends his Holy Spirit to stir up our hearts with joy and strength and power and wisdom.

When we open ourselves to God's presence as scripture is read in worship or in small groups together, the Holy Spirit is there, teaching us and helping us to keep God's words of wisdom. When we open ourselves to God in prayer, bringing to God our hectic and distracted lives, the Holy Spirit is there, teaching us and reminding us of God's deep peace.

When men gather in the Brotherhood of St. Andrew to talk about life and God, the Holy Spirit is there, teaching and reminding of God's words of joy and laughter. When Stephen Ministers listen with their care receivers, or when volunteers share breakfast with recovering addicts at MUST ministries, the Holy Spirit is there, teaching with insight, and reminding us of God's mercy. When we gather after worship or at picnics or receptions and share what God is doing in our lives, the Holy Spirit is there, teaching us and reminding us of Jesus' promise to be with us always.

In all the transitions of our lives, as kids leave the nest, as friends move away or as aging relatives die, we are left with more than their memories and life lessons. God continues to move in our lives as he did when we were together. God does not leave us on our own. He gives us his word in Holy Scripture and he sends God the Holy Spirit to sustain us in the next stage of our journey.

When we take active steps in growing disciples of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is there, helping us to keep God's word and bringing to us the voice of the Living God who says to us once again remember who you are—remember that you are beloved children of God! Remember how much God loves you! Remember that God will be with you always in wisdom and strength and peace.