

May 14, 2023

STEP INTO THE LOVE

John 14: 15-21

“What a wondrous time is spring when all the trees are budding, the birds begin to sing, the flowers start their blooming.”

Spring is a beautiful time of the year; it is a reminder to us of the remarkable beauty that is a part of our world and our lives. After a long and sometimes difficult winter, during which there is often much complaining and anxiety, spring is a reminder of the newness and vitality of life.

One of the things about spring in which I take great delight; is seeing people emerge from what in some ways can be called their winter hibernation – life spent mostly indoors - and embrace life outdoors again with much joy and purpose. I particularly like to see people in their yards, cutting their lawns, pruning trees and shrubs, clearing and turning over soil and adding nutrients so that the beauty and fruitfulness of their trees and garden can emerge. For we all know that if we are to see the best in our plants, whether they are decorative or for food, we have to care for them.

We, like the trees and flowers that burst forth with life and beauty at springtime, are a part of God’s wondrous world – indeed the Bible says that we are wonderfully made.

But like everything else, for the wondrous beauty that is our being – inside and out, to emerge and bloom and be shared, we have to be cared for; not just left to survive the best way we can.

As far back as our history goes, human lives have been organized in units that allow for mutual care – that is God’s design. We are part of families and communities where we can find care and support. The worst thing that can happen to anyone is to find himself/herself outside of the circle of care, existing on the edges, or beyond the edges, abandoned and forgotten, abused and exploited.

That was the fate of many orphans in the time of Jesus and still is the fate of many orphans in many parts of the world today.

An orphan is a child whose parents are dead or have permanently abandoned the child. For many, what that means in actuality, is that they are without any protective affiliation – they have no one to protect and provide for them, no one to care for them. They are left to survive the best way they can, and often they face a life of misery and isolation.

Jesus understood the plight of the orphan; how difficult and destitute and dangerous life could be for them, so he uses the image of the orphan to highlight the depth of his care and compassion. Speaking to his disciples, he said to them “I will not leave you orphaned”.

What would have prompted Jesus to feel the need to so reassure his disciples, who were not children, but grown hardened adults?

Here, Jesus is talking to his disciples on the evening before his crucifixion. After sharing a meal with them, he is now preparing them for his departure. He is about to leave them, and they are distressed and troubled.

That is what the threat of loss does - it dislodges our sense of safety and security and leaves us feeling anxious.

The fear of being abandoned, of finding one's self outside of the circle of care, existing on the edges, isolated and forgotten, is a fear that crosses all boundaries – be it age, gender, status. And it is a fear that we often face in many ways.

We may have lost, or be preparing for the loss of a loved one to death. We may have lost someone with whom we were in a significant relationship - a child or a sibling, or spouse – because of a breakdown in the relationship. We may have lost a close and trusted friendship because of some unfortunate incident. And then there are the personal losses of job or health or abilities we once had. We may be struggling with spiritual emptiness, emotional isolation; all of which are losses that can make us feel less secure, that can even push us or make us feel that we are outside the circle of care.

Jesus knew that his disciples must have been feeling anxious. We have all felt that way from time to time; it's a common reaction when uncertainty is in the air. So he not only sought to reassure them, but he also offered them the help that they needed. He not only told them that he would not leave them orphaned – abandoned and isolated – he also told them that he will ask the Father and that the Father will give them another Advocate - the Spirit of truth, to be with them forever. (John 14: 16)

Dr David Lose, President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, draws attention to the fact that the Greek word translated “Advocate”, in this passage can have several overlapping meanings. It can function in a legal sense, meaning one who represents you and argues your case for you before a court of law. And it can function more relationally by speaking of one who brings help, consolation, comfort, and encouragement. All of these, however, derives from the most basic meaning of the word, and that is to “come alongside another.”

I will not abandon you, I will send the Spirit, who will come alongside you, and will be with you forever – who will come alongside you whatever happens and wherever life leads you, says Jesus.

Think about that for a moment. Hear those words of Jesus and apply them to your own life and situation. God, by His Spirit, coming alongside you! Coming alongside you in all of life's moments!

Coming alongside you as comforter; bringing hope and comfort in times of difficulty and pain.

Coming alongside you as counsellor; offering guidance and direction, helping you to find your way in the uncertainties and confusions of life.

God, by his Spirit, coming alongside you as teacher; leading you into the truth about life, so that you can embrace your joys with thanksgiving and your sorrows with strength.

God, by His Spirit, coming alongside you to empower you in your vulnerability, so that you can have the humility and faith to receive help when offered, and the courage and compassion to offer help when needed.

God by his Spirit coming alongside you when others are turning away from you; coming alongside you when you feel like giving up.

God, by his Spirit, coming alongside you in all of life's moments.

Christ assures us that we will not be abandoned. I will not leave you orphaned he says, I will send the Spirit to come alongside you.

But just how does that happen? How does the Spirit of God come alongside us?

The Spirit of God works through people, prodding and moving, empowering and enabling them to extend acts of grace and kindness, justice and love.

From time to time, and often in circumstances that we least expect, God places such people in our lives. People who accept and encourage us, who laugh and cry with us, who pray for us and support us, who make us feel loved and valued - people who stand by us in all of life's moments and ask nothing in return.

In the lives of such people, the Spirit of God comes alongside us. But we have to learn to trust God and open ourselves to receive such people with love. We have to be diligent not to allow fear or prejudice, anger or unforgiving, to cause us to turn our backs on people, to shut people out of our lives or treat them with indifference; for we don't know who the Spirit of God might be prompting and moving to come along us.

And just as important, we must be responsive to the prompting of the Spirit of God, to be one of those people through whom the grace of God is extended to others. We must seek to be one of those people who come alongside others; extending kindness and love.

When we stand alongside another person, it means that neither of us is standing alone. When we hold another's hand, it means that we are being held as well. We cannot touch someone's life without being touched ourselves. When we come alongside each other, we are drawing the circle of love and inclusion wider.

When we come alongside each other to comfort and encourage, we are living into the Spirit's presence. We are building a community of the Spirit where the presence and power and love of God are experienced.

When we come alongside each other to comfort and support, all our lives together are enriched and made more beautiful.

I will ask the Father to give you another advocate to come alongside you. I will not leave you orphaned. It was just what the troubled disciples needed to hear - they will not be left to face the world alone. Neither will we!

Thanks be to God.

Rev. Sydney Elias