

Easter 6

Sermon on John 15:15-21

May 17, 2020

“All things are possible with God.” The first time I heard this was not from the mouth of one of my seminary professors. No studied theologian. Not even from the place where it is found in the Bible, which btw is Matthew 19:26, in case you want to look it up. No, where I heard it first was from a person who planted the tiniest seeds of faith in me early on. You see, it was my mom who told me this when I was young. Now, it might not seem surprising to you that my mother told me this. Maybe you heard the same thing from your mother or another adult in your life. But my mother is the same woman who also told me, “I don’t believe in organized religion.” But in a way I am grateful for that bit of wisdom just the same. Because it too was a seed planted early that helps me to understand that church and religion are not actually the thing. That God is much bigger than all that and has a much more personal relationship with each of us than can be fully understood by religion.

It’s why I resonate with the reading from Acts and the faithful Athenians. Who didn’t even seem to know the God to whom they built altars. The God they must have had some sense of but could not define, except as one “unknown.” It feels like that when I try to be in touch with how my childhood faith began. There was this God through whom all things were possible. I trusted this because I trusted my dear mother, who had always been faithful to me and my needs. But what did I know of this God, except that God was up there somewhere and quite removed from my daily life.

In today’s readings we encounter statements of divine promise, which runs up against the limitations of human reason. That is almost the theme of John’s gospel as Jesus

repeatedly tries to teach a bunch of clueless disciples about the plan God has for the salvation of the world. He uses plain, earthly language to talk about the things of God. But it only confuses them. In Acts Paul speaks to a group of learned people, who have studied much but still don't quite grasp the fullness of God. At least they were honest about their limitations. Even setting a reminder in their midst in the form of an altar to an "unknown god."

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus tells his closest confidants as they struggle with the reality of Jesus' going away. And though he prefaced this promise with another promise — "I am the way the truth and the life," they are shaken. Last week Pastor Jon highlighted the disconnect from earlier in this same chapter, when Jesus' attempts to comfort the disciples by telling them not to let their hearts be troubled. But how can we do that when the events of the current moment are so troubling? How can we not be troubled when we feel so alone?

Right now my parents are dealing with health issue after health issue. It seems they are in and out of the hospital every week for the last month. Thankfully it is not Covid-19 related. But the pandemic just adds another level of anxiety to an already difficult situation and an isolating factor that compounds this anxiety. It's a lot. The other day I was talking to my mother on FaceTime and I was telling her that I had just prayed with one of our members for healing. And she said, "I could use some of those." My sister is the one having to drive them back and forth to the hospital. She is the one trying to manage the immediacy of the crisis under their roof. She is stretched to her emotional end. Even her cat has chosen this time to be sick and near death. And I feel both alone in these feelings of worry for them. And at the same time I feel as if I have been the abandoner, leaving my family orphaned. What can I do from so far away?

I'm not the only one feeling orphaned or maybe even like the one who is far away. I know some of you also have family members in the hospital. And you wish you could be with them. And they are feeling orphaned as they are visited only by medical staff but not by dear family and friends. So, it is right for our hearts to be troubled. And for us to have feelings of hopelessness and wondering about what to do and about where God is in all of this.

Childhood faith is funny. Jesus tells the disciples in another place in the Bible to receive the kingdom like a little child. But if we stay in that faith of a child that does not question, we will often find it lacking when it runs up against the harsh realities of the world we live in. Children are sheltered in a sense from all of it by parents who bear the brunt. Who despite their own fears and wondering, instill in their children the belief that all things are possible with God. But even children feel the stress and strain these days. My childhood faith trusted the words, but knew only that God was far from me. It took me some years of living to come to trust in some new promises. Most importantly that God is not far from us, but very close.

Jesus' words, "I will not leave you orphaned," hint at the relationship God has with us in Christ. That we are God's children too. The challenge is how to get in touch with that relationship when we experience the isolation and loneliness. It so often feels like we are in that phase of faith that Paul describes to the Athenians — Desperately searching for God; grasping and seeking and groping. Unsure where to take hold of this God we are supposed to believe in.

Like so many things when it comes to God we often have it backwards. Because it isn't we who need to seek and search and grasp for God. It is God who seeks us and

takes hold of. This divine grasp holds us so tightly that our whole being is wrapped up in the divine promise that, “In God we live and move and have our being.”

And the real good news is that none of it is dependent upon our ability to trust these promises in any moment. Because even when we don’t know the words of faith to speak and cannot comprehend how God is at work in our lives, the Spirit interceded for us. Jesus tells his disciples that they will always have the Spirit of the risen Christ with them. He tells them that the Spirit is their Advocate.

To be an advocate means to speak on behalf of another. To plead the case of someone else. To put their situation in the best light and lift them up. That is what the Spirit does for us when it comes to the things of God. She is the tether that keeps us connected in every moment to the God who is not far, but always close to us.

Another childhood truth is that Jesus dwells in our heart. But the real truth is that Jesus doesn’t reside in our hearts, but we are invited to abide in the very heart of God. So that no matter where we go. Or what life brings. And how far we feel from our faith and from Jesus, we will never be separated from God’s love and care. We will not be left orphaned by the God who seeks and saves the lost.

So no matter how you feel this week. Whether you feel ready to trust that all things are possible with God. Or if you feel orphaned and a bit lost. Like God is unknown to you at this particular time.

Know this — none of us is unknown to God, who grasps us in an unending embrace. And does not leave us alone.