

“What Keeps Us Going?” 5-1-16

Psalm 67

John 14:23-31

After graduation from college I went through what I would describe as a wilderness passage. There were several paths available but no clarification as to which one to take. I bought time by signing up to play bass with a professional Christian rock group. The draft breathing down my neck, an option waiting to serve four years playing with an Air Force band, which some of my friends encouraged me to do, or simply take my chances and be drafted were some of the possibilities.

I could understand the Psalmist who prays to God, “Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Why do you hide your face?” (Psalm 44:23-24). At least it felt like that.

I wonder what Jesus’ disciples are feeling when he tells them that he is going to leave them. Throughout John 14 Jesus is preparing his followers for his absence. As they face this reality he is also calling them to obedience, encouraging them to carry on after he is gone. My question has to do with how. How do we love and follow a God that we do not see?

I need to know that God will not abandon me, that I am not alone in the universe as I seek to find my way. Jesus tells us that “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you” (John 14:18). Mignon McLaughlin, in his book, “The Neurotic’s Notebook”, refers to hope as “the feeling we have that the feeling we have is not permanent” (Homiletics, May-June, 2016, p.12).

As we listen in on Jesus’ preparation of his disciples, he tells us something very important. He is leaving, but he is not leaving. “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”. The word “Advocate” indicates one who is called to be around, at the side of another, to be a support and aid. In a larger sense, an Advocate takes up the cause of another, gives guidance, providing a path out of trouble. I needed a path out of my wilderness.

Sometimes that path emerges and sometimes it still remains a mystery. The next thing Jesus tells us is this: “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”. On a very troubled and anxious evening in Oklahoma City, a deep peace flooded my being. No answers. Just a peace transcending a troubled soul fearing an uncertain future and the words from 2Corinthians 12:9; “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness”. But that proved to be enough for the moment.

We find continuity here between what Jesus teaches in his earthly ministry and what Jesus will teach us and do in his absence. Biblical commentator Richard Burridge makes this observation; “Not only does Jesus prepare a place for us in God, but he also makes a place for God in us” (Homiletics, p.15).

As the church we are not simply a collection of individuals. Nor are we just an organization. We are, by virtue of Christ's Spirit abiding in us, an organism. "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".

One can say that Jesus might describe his body, the church, as a field hospital, his Spirit filling us and leading us into the world to those who most need his grace, hope, and healing. Jesus' church is not a stationary institution occupying a certain territory which has to be defended against encroachment. It is mobile, filled with the Spirit of Christ, directed by his love for people in the world around us. Pope Francis, though he is atop a very structured institution, writes that the church as Christ's people is "an evangelizing community getting involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others" (Christian Century, March 16, 2016, p.33).

Jesus neither calls us to withdraw from the world nor to be captured by current political and economic structures. The role of Christ's body is not focused upon primarily gaining influence among the powerful so that we can change the world from above. Jesus eschews that avenue. He calls us to work from below, stealth-like, as salt and light. Jesus does not design the church to be a social protest group or a social change agent exclusively. Those things are by-products of a community following and honoring its Lord.

William Cavanaugh writes a book, "Field Hospital: The Church's Engagement with a Wounded World". He sees the church not as a 'player' in the game of the powerful, but Christ's body in the world "which is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (Christian Century, p.32).

This is difficult to purely execute. In reality we live in a tension between institutional, as well as personal, family and career demands. The danger lies in what one social commentator observes: "The dizzying pace of our lives, the increasing demands of the workplace, the nomadic career paths that lead us to place after place, the new technologies that keep us in constant touch conspire to turn us into T.S. Eliot's "hollow men". We possess all the superficial accoutrements of success, but have no inner life. We inherit the earth, but lose our souls".

Jesus cares about the quality of our inner lives. But he is also a realist. Jesus acknowledges another ruler, "the ruler of this world", who he reminds is a thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). There are forces working against our spiritual formation in Christ as well as the ministries as a church we are given to do. Yet Jesus confirms for us that the powers of darkness have no power over him or, ultimately, us. In contrast, Jesus tells us, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". We live in the flow and wake of his life-giving force.

No matter the challenges and forces that I felt against me as a young person seeking to find and follow God's path for me, or be it a church striving to be faithful as it deals with the injustices amidst a broken world, Jesus is alongside in the Spirit standing with us and guiding us through the challenges of our calls.

Professor Teofilo Ruiz, instructor and head of the Department of History at UCLA, teaches a course on “The Terror of History”. History and life are filled with continual vicissitudes. Wars, plagues, disturbances of nature, oppressive governments, and injustice hover over much of human experience. We seek to explain, find order, and relief from it all. Humanity turns to religion, religious experience, getting caught up from time to time in apocalyptic expectations of the world’s end, or finds a path of manipulating the events of one’s life and protecting it through the dark side of witchcraft, Satanism, Astrological signs and the like.

Jesus tells us to turn to him, not a political, religious, spiritual, or philosophic system. We follow a person who meets us in the day to day mess of life, calling us into his life, purpose and mission.

A Carolina country boy who possesses a great talent for carving dogs out of wood is asked by an admirer what is the secret of his art. The boy replies, “I just take a block of wood and whittle off the parts that don’t look like a dog”.

But I would agree with Sue Monk Kidd who contrasts Jesus as a spiritual whittler in our lives. In spiritual whittling, she observes, the shavings are not discarded. Jesus doesn’t reject the parts of ourselves we might call shavings, but integrates them. The mistakes, the failings, the sins, the disappointments, the lost hopes and dreams, all become part of the soil of our lives producing growth as we trust the Spirit’s work. Through it all in our encounter with the Mystery, we wait, pay attention to the little nudges, often remaining silent in the depths of those inner places of our souls, all the while trusting ourselves to God’s mysterious working (Kidd, “When the Heart Waits”, Homiletics, p.17).

Looking back, that is what I was experiencing. The direction of my life unfolded as I sought to seek and trust God through the fears, anxieties, mishaps, sins, and missteps. The call to ministry emerged over time and God’s direction became clear. The same is true for a church striving to be faithful to God’s call, posturing itself to listen to God’s voice amidst all of the noise.

Throughout life God provides the unseen Divine presence for us, the Advocate. The Advocate is Christ’s presence coming alongside, supporting and aiding us, taking up our cause, giving guidance, and providing a path out of trouble. As Peter writes in his first letter, “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable joy...” (1Peter 1:8).

The Advocate gives us memory, the memory of Jesus’ words, helping us recollect his teaching, remembering all of who Jesus is, what he teaches, and calls us to do and be. As one commentator phrases it, “the obedience into which we are called and through which we are supported is a cursive process, flowing , graceful, and interconnected in relation to God’s ongoing presence, upholding us from the past, into the present and on toward the future” (Homiletics, p.16).

That is what keeps all of us going.

