

May 17, 2020  
**The Accompanist**  
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John 14:15-21

<sup>15</sup> “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> 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.”

Jesus hasn't stopped talking. He's still at the Last Supper table with his friends. They are no doubt nibbling on leftovers, checking wine bottles to see if they're all empty, while Jesus continues explaining his departure. He's promising that he will return. He's telling his brothers to believe what he's telling them, while they wait for all these things to happen. Abide. *Abide* was Jesus' particular word for the waiting. To *abide* is to wait believing, assuming, knowing – the way one knows the sun will rise – that Jesus will do what Jesus says he will do.

And we know he did. We know that he left that last supper table, and everything that he told his friends was going to happen happened. He was arrested, tried, executed and buried. He rose and came back to them. And knowing it ought to have made believing it easier. But it didn't then. And it doesn't now.

We have these same promises from Jesus. We know he kept those promises and yet, when our own lives get sideways, we get sick, our loved ones get sick, the whole world gets sick, 20 million people lose their jobs, kids can't go to school, or any of the non-pandemic troubles and tragedies which come through the door, we find ourselves at that same Last Supper table with full bellies and empty hearts, grieving, and afraid, and maybe a little bit angry that Jesus couldn't leave well enough alone.

Reading the gospels, it matters to remember that John wasn't writing for the disciples. He was writing for the church. For us. For the friends of Jesus trying to remain friends with Jesus in a world where the ways of Jesus sometimes seem absurd, if not impossible. I'm not here to tell you otherwise. I'm here to say you are exactly right. The command-

ments of Jesus are impossible for people as timid and fearful as us, for people as prone to grief over the little and the huge losses of our lives.

Impossible. And Jesus knew that. It's why he promised what he promised. Another *paraclete*, he called them. Someone to abide with us, to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

First let's pray, then take a look: *The Shy God, some call you, O Holy Spirit. Ever-present One who waits to be invited, to take up more space yet, within us, among us. We cannot do without you. Thank you that we never have to. Amen.*

I re-watched one of my favorite movies this week: *Lars and the Real Girl*. You can find it on Netflix, and it is positively precious. The preacher says there's only one law that matters: *to love one another*. Then an entire community is put to the test of obeying that law. It's a practically perfect cinematic example of people trying and failing to live out Jesus' commandment to *Love me by keeping my commandments*. Jesus knows how difficult it will be, yet commands it anyway and promises to help.

Most English translations read something like this: *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever*. The tricky word there is *paraclete*. *Another paraclete*. It's definitely not *Holy Spirit*, the term Luke uses in Acts. "Para" is *beside* or *alongside*; "clete" is *caller* or *one who calls*. "The caller beside you" is very awkward. Your Bible might use *Advocate*, like "the one who stands next to us in court"; or *Helper*; or *Comforter*. My favorite is by Johannine scholar Karoline Lewis. She translates it *accompanist*.

Sit with that a minute – the Holy Spirit as your life's accompanist. Holy Spirit within and among us as our Accompanist: the One who brings the music so we know what we are supposed to sing; the One who tells us when to sing and when to keep silent, when to sing loudly and when to sing softly; the One who patiently teaches us the sound of our own voices; the One who keeps us in tune, on key and in harmony, always exactly the right distance in the background but leading everything we do. Honestly, the metaphor seems never to run out.

*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever*. And then Jesus goes into this long sentence about how the world doesn't know the paraclete **while you do**, he says. I used to imagine this line as yet another with which Jesus shoves me out the door to go tell other people how lost they are. Now I realize he's comforting them, being the very comforter and accompanist he's telling them about.

*You have seen me. You have heard me. You have known me. You don't have to be afraid like someone who has no idea what I'm talking about*. The word he uses here is *orphan*. At least one translation uses *bereft*. Also good. Both are words for people without what is most essential to life. What is that essential, that essence without which we won't

survive – which is, someone who cares whether you live or die? Another person in the universe upon whose mind you are.

Years and years ago, an auntie trying to adopt her orphaned nieces and nephews told me, “Every child should have someone who checks his shirt in the morning, who looks at him in a way that says *he matters*.” Parents die. That can’t be helped. But orphans – whether or not people become orphans is a choice human beings make toward one another, a choice Jesus made toward humanity. *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*

Again, depending on the day (right? – depending on the day), believing Jesus is with us actively abiding in the truth that he does what he says he will do, it depends on the day. When life serves up a healthy family, paying work and the freedom to do whatever makes us feel useful, abiding in Jesus comes pretty easily.

But when life starts taking back the good stuff, and we get stuck, or we get sick, or nothing seems to be working like it’s supposed to, we can feel pretty alone, and if not alone, cut off from the One who promised to help us with all this crap. Then what?

Then, maybe, it’s time to dial down the volume of the anxiety and worry, and turn up the volume on what we have known before and remember who we are. We are not sheep without a shepherd, friends. We are not the people of this world who have neither seen nor heard the spirit of truth.

The advocate, the helper, the comforter, *the accompanist* who has been alongside us again and again, through other trials and troubles, who has been alongside God’s people through far harder times than these, is here now. Their presence does not depend upon our hearing, seeing, believing. Their presence is a promise kept.

And I know you know this part, just like his first friends gathered round that table. We often don’t recognize him with us until the moment has passed, when we can look back and say, “Oh right. Now I can see God was in that mess the whole time.” Whatever you are going through, I promise God is in the mess with you. And as messes go, this pandemic is bad, but God has handled worse. And God will handle this one.

What remains to be seen is whether we shall behave like orphans, whether we shall treat one another like orphans, *like sheep without a shepherd*, or like a choir, listening, watching, holding this note for as long as our accompanist deems necessary. So, you know the song, I bet, about the people in this world who need the Lord. It’s a pretty good song, so long as we remember there is no one in the world who needs the Lord more than you do, more than I do.

And the Lord is already within and among everybody. Jesus says so right here: *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. I will not leave*

*you orphaned; I am coming to you.* The work of faith is abiding in that truth. It sounds so simple. It's so hard. But, thanks be to God, Jesus has not left us on our own to accomplish it. In our lives and in our life together, we have all the patience, faith and courage required to face whatever this day brings.

Would you pray with me?