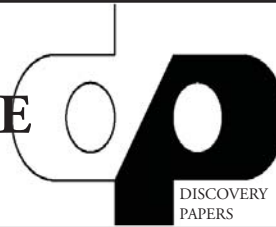




YOU ARE NOT ALONE



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John 14:15-31
29th Message
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It's the season of celebrating movies. The Academy Awards were a few weekends ago, where the best movies and performances of last year were declared. I recently found a few lists of the best movie scenes from 2013 and there was one scene that appeared on almost every list. One critic even claimed that this could be the most powerful opening sequence from a movie of all time. Let's watch it and see why we find it so powerful.

It depicts a scientist named Dr. Stone who has gone into space as an astronaut only to encounter disaster during a space-walk. Here is the opening scene from last year's movie, *Gravity*.

It's that last part of the scene that is so terrifying. If you've seen the movie, you know that most of it revolves around that particular fear. Spinning out of control in the vast emptiness of space completely alone.

I have a theory about why this scene is so powerful. I think it's because it taps into a deep seated fear that is within just about every one of us. Most of us are afraid that when it comes right down to it, we are alone. We are scared that we detached from anything else. That there is no one else out there. We are afraid that we are alone.

If we have faith in Jesus, then we believe that we aren't alone. We believe that there is something else— someone else—out there who loves us. Someone that we are connected to. But for many of us, there is still that nagging fear in the dark of your soul that you might be wrong. That when it all comes down to it, it might just be us, all by ourselves, floating helpless in space.

This Sunday marks the second Sunday of Lent. We are in the midst of a Lenten series on the Upper Room Discourse from the gospel of John as part of a larger year round series working through the entire gospel of John. This bigger series is called *Signs of Life*. Over and over again, we've been seeing the author of this gospel showing us signs that demonstrate how life is found in Jesus. The kind of life that we want to live is only available when you follow Jesus.

We have heard a lot about a group of people who have been walking with Jesus for most of his three year ministry

on earth. They are the ones that have assembled around him. They have found something remarkable about this man. Peter put it well in John 6:68 when he told Jesus, "*You have the words of eternal life.*"

Jesus has been the center of their world for 3 years. He has defined and decided everything about who they are. But now Jesus is leaving them. Now, he is going away. And they don't know what to do about that. They are worried about what it will look like to be alone, to be without Jesus. What does the Jesus club look like when Jesus is no longer around?

So Jesus speaks to them to comfort them. He helps them to understand how life is going to continue apart from them.

We live two thousand years later, but we have the same problem. Jesus isn't here in the flesh. None of us have ever seen him walking on this earth. So how do we, living in Silicon Valley, in the early 21st century, follow Jesus when he's not here? How do we maintain faith in a God that can't be seen while we live in a world that is convinced he isn't real?

How do we deal with our nagging fear that we might actually be alone? This morning we are going to see Jesus help us realize that we are not alone. You are not alone.

This morning we're looking at John 14:15–31. In characteristic fashion for John, this passage circles around and around many different themes. But there are at least three main points that John records Jesus saying to help his disciples know what to do in his absence. They are actually found in the first 4 verses: 15-18. The rest of the passage develops and highlights these ideas.

So we're going to look at three phrases from those first verses and pull in some of the ideas from the rest of the passage as we look at them. Jesus gives his disciples three things to address their concern that they are going to be alone. He gives them something to do while he's gone. He tells them that they won't actually be alone while he's gone. And he reminds them that he won't be gone forever: he's coming back. Then at the end, he adds one extra thought that helps explain how we to feel in his absence.

Those same ideas can help us with our fear that we are alone. We have an *activity*, a *companion*, and a *promise*. Each of these helps us see how God acts in our lives to address one of our deepest fears.

The Reminder of Obedience

The first statement that Jesus makes is a perplexing one. You really need to understand the context to see what Jesus is talking about here.

John 14:15—

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

At first reading, you might think that this sounds like something you would hear in a bad dating relationship. If I hear almost anyone in my life come up to me and start a sentence by saying, “if you love me,” then I am immediately worried about what is coming next. It can’t be good. They want me to do something for them. They are trying to get something out of me. All of my red flags go off, because this is a sure sign of someone trying to manipulate me.

But, in this case it is Jesus talking. So we should at least give him the benefit of the doubt and see if we can figure out what he’s talking about. Is he trying to manipulate us? Is this Jesus, with a pouty look on his face, holding the towel that is still dripping from washing our feet, batting his eyes and pleading with us, “*if you love me . . .*”? Is that what’s going on?

I don’t think so. I don’t think Jesus is being manipulative and whiny. So if he isn’t doing that, what *is* he doing?

Jesus is creating a link between love for him and obedience to him. Love and obedience are somehow connected. But how? Does our obedience prove our love? Is keeping his commandments the test to see whether we really love him?

I think that’s the way most of us read it. And when you read it that way, it sounds a little stressful. If Jesus is laying out a test for those who would follow him, then we need to know what the test is all about so that we can study well and ace it, right?

But does it make sense for Jesus to give his disciples a test right now? Remember the setting in which he says this. They are scared because he has told them he is leaving. They

are worried that everything is going to fall apart without Jesus. It doesn’t make sense for Jesus to add to their stress at this point. That’s not at all what Jesus was intending.

There’s a couple different ways in Greek to write a statement like this: an “if-then” statement. The way this one is written, you might expand the translation into something like this, “*if you love me—and let’s assume for the sake of argument that you do—then you will keep my commandments.*” When you read it this way, you realize that Jesus isn’t testing them at all. He’s doing the opposite. He’s trying to make them feel better. He’s trying to comfort them.

I grew up in Connecticut and every year my grandmother would visit us from Louisiana. She would fly up by herself and she’d always bring the same beat-up old blue suitcase. It was the kind that opened up and had two compartments: one on either side. I always remember that one side would always hold her clothes and the other side would have something from Louisiana for us. Bags of pecans. A special barbecue sauce you could only buy down there. And sometimes fresh strawberries because Louisiana is the Watsonville of the South.

To this day, when I see a bag of pecans or think about strawberries in a green plastic container, I sometimes think about my Maw-Maw visiting us in Connecticut from Louisiana. They are good memories because I loved her. Those things connect me to her. They make our love for each other real in some way.

This is the principle that Jesus introduces to the disciples. He says that if you’re worried about what’s going to happen when I’m gone, just keep doing the things that we did when we were together. Jesus gave them a whole new way to live. He tells them that when they live that way—when they do the things that he taught them to do—then they will stay connected to him. Those actions will cement their love for him. They will make it real and tangible, even in his absence.

Do you see how Jesus is trying to comfort his disciples? Jesus tells his disciples that when he is gone, their relationship with him—because that is what love is—will continue, as they keep doing the things that he taught them to do.

He says something similar in verse 21, “*Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.*”

And again in verse 23, “*If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*” This time he reminds them

that staying connected to Jesus is also being connected to the Father. Jesus made the Father real when he did the things his Father taught him. When Jesus' disciples obey him, they make both Jesus and the Father real.

So if Jesus is trying to comfort his disciples by saying that their obedience, grounded in love, maintains their connection with him, what does that mean for us? It means that one of the ways we realize that we aren't alone is by doing what Jesus did. Do as Jesus did.

I think it's really hard for us to read this verse like this. We immediately think it means that we need to prove our love. We go straight to feelings of guilt and shame because that's the culture that we live in. But Jesus isn't trying to make us feel guilty. He is giving us an activity to make our love for him tangible. He is trying to comfort us.

When we obey Jesus, we are connected to him. He is alive and present and real through our actions. When we love others. When we sacrifice ourselves. When we are honest, even when it's inconvenient. When we live with integrity, humility, and generosity. We make Jesus present when we do the things he teaches us to do.

It's like if next week every single one of you walked into this church carrying a bag of Louisiana pecans in honor of my Maw-Maw. She might be gone, but you could say that she would be even more present because of that gesture. You would say that there are signs of her everywhere.

Obedying Jesus makes our love for him tangible. It makes signs of him everywhere. I'm not talking about dry, dusty legalistic obedience. That doesn't make love real. That's just empty effort. I'm talking about living in line with who he is because love him.

Keep in mind that love is something that grows. It develops. This happens in any relationship. Our obedience will grow and develop and deepen as well. Jesus is about to leave his disciples alone. So he wants to set them on a path where they can express their love. This activity gives them something to do and something to grow in so that their relationship with Jesus doesn't stop when he's gone.

John 14:15—

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

The Presence of the Spirit

This activity isn't all that Jesus gives them. He also

tells them about someone who will come to keep them company while he is gone.

John 14:16 and 17—

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

The second thing Jesus does is to tell his disciples about the Spirit: a helper whom the Father will send to be with them while Jesus is gone. This is the first of four descriptions of the Holy Spirit found in the Upper Room Discourse. We'll come back to the Holy Spirit in the later section where his activity is described in more detail, but we want to see what Jesus has to say about him here as well.

The word used here to describe the Holy Spirit is an interesting one. It is the Greek *parakletos*, or transliterated as “paraclete.” John is the only author who uses this word. It's unique to him. There are several words that are good translations: helper, advocate, counselor, mediator, and intercessor. The general sense is of one who comes alongside another in order to help them in some way. So in light of the fact that he is leaving, Jesus says that he is sending this Spirit to keep them company while he is gone.

There is a lot that can be said about the Spirit, and we'll say more later when Jesus mentions him again. What I want us to focus on for this morning is the simple idea of the presence of the Spirit. The Spirit is a person—one of the three persons of the Trinity—who is with us all time. The Spirit is God being with us all the time.

It's hard to speak abstractly about the Spirit. So let's think about the people that we spend time with, the people that we are present with and how that presence affects us. That might help us understand what it means that the Spirit is present with us.

A lot of times, we think about the Holy Spirit as changing us. As if he is a magician with a magic wand that he waves and suddenly our heart has been changed. We are different because of something inexplicable that he has done. There's probably a sense in which the Holy Spirit affects us directly, but after thinking about this passage, I started thinking about the Spirit differently. What if the Spirit is just with us? And along the way that ends up changing us.

I act differently around different people. The people

that I am with have an effect on my behavior. If I don't know you very well, I'll be much more reserved than I am with my kids. I act different around adults and kids. I act different when I'm with my extended family. Who we are with changes our behavior.

So if I'm with the Spirit, how does that change how I act? Does it mean that I'm a slightly different person when I'm with the Spirit than when I'm not? Absolutely. God being with me changes me.

Now, I don't want this to sound creepy and parental—as if Jesus giving us the Spirit is like our parents chaperoning the school dance. Or as if we put on our best behavior because God's around. It's not like that. We have a relationship with the Spirit. He's not there as a chaperone. He's a friend, a companion, a helper. We like him there. We want him there. Being around him makes us different. He is like a friend that brings out the best in us.

As you spend more and more time with someone, this change starts to go deeper than just behavior.

I'm often very aware of how different my life is because of who I married. I'm not sure I realized this when I was younger. When I was dating, I was focused on picking a person. I didn't realize that the person you pick has a huge impact on your path. I'm incredibly grateful for the way my wife has affected my path, but I wasn't aware of it when I was younger.

The young adults that I spend a lot of time with seem to be more aware of this. But sometimes it makes things harder. If you're single and you've got your life working a certain way, a lot of times, you want a companion. But you want someone who will come into your life and live it with you. You want to tack on a boy or a girl alongside your current life. You want to follow your path, but you want a companion and eventually a lover to follow that path with you.

The problem is that it doesn't really work that way. When you marry someone, you become partners in life. Your path changes because of who you are with. You make decisions that you wouldn't have. You choose certain paths and avoid other paths. And in ten years, you end up in a place that you would never have expected. Your partner changes your path.

The Spirit is like that, too. Or at least, he should be. You don't just have your life all figured out and make your decisions and do what you want to and then bring the Spirit along. If you want that, get a dog. That's why they

call a dog “man's best friend.”

But the Spirit is not your puppy dog. He's a person. And when you are aware of his presence in your life, you make different decisions. You end up taking risks or choosing paths that you never would have chosen on your own. And ten years down the line, you end up in a completely different place than you ever thought you'd be.

When the Spirit helps you make decisions, your decisions will be different. Your partner changes your path. This is what happened for the disciples. Jesus changed their lives. So as Jesus leaves, he promises them someone who will continue to bring him to mind. Someone who will keep them company in the same way that Jesus himself did. That's why Jesus says in verse 26 that the Spirit will “*bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*”

Have you ever had a friend that you miss and then you meet someone that reminds you of him or her? Maybe they use the same phrases or have the same accent. That's what the Spirit does. The Spirit reminds us of Jesus. So Jesus says that you don't have to feel alone because you can be with the Spirit. Be with the Spirit.

Honestly, this idea has been the most striking thing for me in the past few weeks. I've found myself in all sorts of situations, stopping and realizing that the Spirit is with me. Sitting on a bench at a park, the Spirit is next to me. Driving my kids to school, the Spirit is in the front seat. Working “alone” in my office, the Spirit is in one of my chairs, keeping me company. Lying in bed, about to fall asleep, the Spirit is there.

Try to realize that this week. Try, at least once every day, to simply stop and realize that the Spirit is with you. Think of him going with you, doing what you do, but being God at the same time. Maybe it will be a comfort at times. Maybe it will be a reminder at times. Maybe it will be a challenge at times.

This week, recognize the Spirit's presence in your daily life. Jesus has given us a companion to remind us that we are not alone. Take some time and notice him

The Promise of Return

The first thing that Jesus offers us to help us deal with his absence is an activity to help us remember him. The next thing he offers is a companion that helps us maintain our relationship. The last thing he offers is a promise that he won't be gone forever. He wants his disciples to know that his leaving is only temporary.

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

Now, there are some different opinions as to what Jesus is referring to here when he says *“I will come to you.”* Some people think that he’s referring again to the sending of the Spirit. But nowhere else does Jesus speak of coming to his disciples in the form of the Spirit. The mostly likely case is that he is talking about he, himself, coming back to earth.

He’s talking about a similar idea in verses 19–20 when he talks about his disciples seeing him a little while after not seeing him and again in verse 28 when he repeats, *“I am going away, and I will come to you.”* Jesus wants them to understand that he is going away but not forever. Think for a moment about the setting that Jesus spoke these words. For the disciples that Jesus is talking to, he is speaking of the immediate future. He wants them to know that his death won’t be the end.

But John wrote this gospel 60 years after the resurrection. His readers didn’t need to know that he wasn’t going to stay dead. They already knew that. But they do experience the absence of Jesus. Several weeks after Jesus rose from the dead, he left again. He ascended to the Father.

So they need to know that the ascension wasn’t Jesus’ last goodbye. When John writes these words of Jesus, he has two different cycles of leaving and returning in mind. One is the death and resurrection and the other is Jesus’ ascension and return to earth. Twice Jesus leaves. Twice he will return.

It’s as if Jesus’ death and resurrection was kind of like a practice run for him leaving again. It was a trial for what things would be like when Jesus leaves for a longer period of time.

When Rachel and I were first married, we pretty quickly adopted a rescue dog. It was actually one of first big conflicts as a married couple: she wanted a dog and I didn’t. So we got this dog and we quickly realized that our dog had some issues with separation. We couldn’t leave the dog alone without it barking and yelping and driving itself crazy. So we trained it to be alone. We left for short periods of time and then we returned. Then we left for a longer period of time and returned again. Finally, the dog learned that when we left, we weren’t leaving for good. We would always return.

That’s what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples. When he leaves, he is never leaving for good. He will always

return.

For Jesus’ disciples, this promise meant that when he died, he wouldn’t stay dead. For John’s readers, that meant that even though they lived during a time when Jesus wasn’t around, they could expect him to return. For us it means that even though we live in a culture where God is denied and criticized as absent, that will not always be the case. Jesus will return.

Our puppy had it a bit easier than us. He didn’t have to learn to wait for two thousand years. But the principle is the same.

Right now, our faith requires belief. It requires staying true to the fact that there is a God that we can’t see or feel but that is real. But that will not be the situation forever. Revelation speaks of a time in history when Jesus will return and everyone will see him. Revelation 1:7 says, *“Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.”*

Every eye will see him. Jesus will return and he will no longer be invisible. It will be obvious that we are not alone. The final way that Jesus gives us to remember that we are not alone is to say that eventually it will be clear that is the case. For now, we can look for Jesus to return. Look for Jesus to return.

It is so easy as a Christian to forget that our lives are not just about this world. It’s tempting to think about the first two things that Jesus talks about and stop there. We know what to do while Jesus isn’t here. We have the Spirit as a companion while he’s gone. And that’s it. Our focus ends there and all we think about is this life.

But Jesus repeatedly talks about the fact that he is coming back. That is a major point of his message. He is leaving so that he can return. We can’t forget that.

During this season of Lent, as we look forward to Easter, we can remember that the Easter celebration is also a reminder that we will celebrate in a similar way when Jesus returns again. On Good Friday we mourn his death. On Easter Sunday we celebrate his return. But on Saturday we wait. And wonder. And hope. And believe.

We are living in another kind of Saturday: waiting for Jesus to come back. But Sunday is around the corner. He will return. That is his promise to his disciples. That’s his promise to us. Looking for him to return reminds us that we aren’t actually alone.

Conclusion

We started out by watching the opening sequence of the film *Gravity*. That horrific image of floating alone in space. Isolated. Out of communication. Detached. How do we live like that? How do we battle that deep fear that we are ultimately alone?

Jesus knows that it is going to be difficult for his disciples when he leaves. He wants to help them handle the loneliness that they will face. What the disciples were about to experience is what we experience every day. None of us have seen Jesus walk on the earth. None of us has looked at his face. All we know is life without a physical Jesus.

Jesus' words to his disciples have offered us three different ways to address that fear. First, he has given us an *activity* to do in his absence that makes our love for him real. It maintains that connection. Second, he has sent a *companion*—a friend. The Spirit is with us—everywhere, all the time. His presence is a reminder of Jesus. Finally, he has *promised* that he will return. This period of absence will not last forever.

But here's the difficult part. This doesn't sound like good news to everyone. Even to some of us, when we are honest, we don't want some of these things. Jesus' first statement sounds like a test. It sounds like we need to prove our love. The giving of the Spirit sounds like Jesus doesn't trust us. It feels like God is looking over our shoulder every minute. And the return of Jesus sounds like being called to the Principal's office or getting in trouble when Daddy comes home.

This is what concerns me the most. A lot of the world and many of us don't read these words as comforting. We feel guilt and shame and embarrassment. We never think we're good enough. We never think we measure up. Having Jesus around just reminds us that we are failures.

God's heart breaks when that happens. He wants to comfort you. He wants to be with you. He wants to be connected with you. Jesus died on the cross so that you don't have to feel guilt and shame. Be free from that. Open yourself up to God's loving presence.

Jesus' last words to his disciples in this passage are a bit of an epilogue. They help us understand what Jesus is really offering.

John 14:27—

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

Jesus doesn't say I leave you with a chaperone. In fact, he says that he is different from what we are used to in the world. He doesn't want us to be troubled. He doesn't want us to fear.

Peace is the antidote to that dreadful fear of being alone. Peace is what we can have instead of loneliness and guilt and shame. The Greeks thought of peace as the absence of conflict. But Jesus is offering more than that. The peace that the Bible speaks of is much deeper.

Peace isn't just the absence of something; it is the presence of something. Peace is a sense of well-being, a sense of wholeness, a sense that all the pieces fit together. That is what Jesus offers. He can help us not be alone.

Even though we can't see God, even though we've never seen Jesus, even though everyone around us says that God is a figment of our imagination, we are not alone. When we do what Jesus asks of us, we are connected to him. We can be aware of the Spirit always by our side. And we can hope in and expect the return of Jesus—when everything will be set right and God will be seen.

Jesus isn't here. But you are not alone. Be at peace.