

## LEFT BEHIND

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John 14:23-29

In this congregation, we have people who hold or have held all manner of jobs, and occupations, and careers. In one way or another, you have all done interesting things. In this church you can find business owners, artists, writers, professionals, musicians, public servants, church professionals, people who work with non-profits, and more. However, the one profession that clearly dominates this congregation is the field of education. It is astounding to me how many educators are members of this church. It shouldn't be that surprising. Historically, Presbyterians have placed a priority on the value of education. In this congregation we have teachers at every level from pre-school to high school and into higher education. We have administrators and principals. We could start our own academy with the educational braintrust of this church. But we don't need to. We already have a school. We have a pre-school program that is has been in operation for 32 years. We view the pre-school as being part of our Christian mission in this community.

Right now, we find ourselves at the end of the school year. On Thursday, our pre-school held their graduation ceremony here in the sanctuary. They allowed me give the welcome and opening prayer. If I had a chance to say more—to deliver a full graduation address—I would say to those kids, “You are now five years old. You've learned everything you need to know. Now go out and get a job.” That's probably why they don't let me speak. At this time of year—the end of the school year—students have wrapped up their classes and are preparing for the next step in their journey. For some, that means graduation. For most, it means moving on to the next year of study.

At the end of each year, we take the point of view that it is the students who are moving on. They are leaving their teachers and classrooms behind and ascending to the next level of their education and lives. But what if it were the other way around? What if we took the point of view that the students remain in place and it is the teachers who are moving on?

To some extent, this is what we find in our reading in the Gospel of John—Jesus, the teacher, is preparing his disciples for his eminent departure. But before we look at that let us go forward in time to the book of Acts where we find the description of Jesus' actual ascension into heaven—that moment when he departs this earth. This coming Thursday is the day we call Day of Ascension. It is the fortieth day after Easter. In Acts we read that the resurrected Jesus remained with the disciples for forty days teaching them about the kingdom of God. This is what happens on that fortieth day: *As [the disciples] were watching, [Jesus] was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

It sort of makes sense why Jesus ascended into heaven. It is obviously the completion of his incarnation. God came to us in human form. Eventually, it is time for God to return.

Our reading for today from the Gospel of John confronts this idea of Jesus going away. In John's gospel, chapters 14 through 17 are known as the Farewell Discourse. The Farewell Discourse takes place at the table immediately following the Last Supper on Passover. Jesus explains to his disciples that he will be leaving very soon. The disciples, of course, are upset that their teacher is departing from them and they have many questions for him.

This week, as I have studied this passage from John, I have identified two notable reasons for Jesus to leave his disciples. His followers clearly would have preferred for Jesus to stay with them. He had changed their lives. He had opened their eyes to a new reality. Through him, they secured front-row seats to witness the kingdom of God. But Jesus makes it clear that he needs to move on.

The first reason that I find that he must do this is for their own good. Those of you in education know that the student-teacher relationship cannot last indefinitely. That would not be healthy for student or teacher. At some point, it becomes the teacher's job to say, "I've taught you all I can. It is time for you to fly on your own." In this passage, Jesus is attempting to prepare the community of his followers for life in his absence. He wants them to understand on the theological level why he must leave. But his concern is also pastoral. He cares for them.

Just because the student and teacher must separate from one another does not mean that the relationship is severed. Jesus assures the disciples of his continuing bond to them. Even in his absence they will remain connected to him as well. This enduring connection between them is accomplished through love. With the disciples, the blessed tie that binds them to Jesus is love. As Jesus explains, *Those who love me will keep my word*. It is their love for their teacher that will keep them close.

There are occasions in my life when I will draw on a bit of knowledge I acquired in school. And when I do, I am reminded of the teacher who shared that knowledge with me. And I remember that teacher with a sense of love and appreciation of what they did for me. This love connects me to them. This is what Jesus means when he says, *Those who love me will keep my word*. Those who love Jesus and follow his teachings will always be connected to him.

In preparing his disciples for his absence from them, the first thing Jesus does is to call them into obedience. When he is gone, they are expected to continue on the path of ministering to the world. This is the path that Jesus set them on. When a student, for example, completes their course in geometry, the teacher expects them to continue to carry the precepts of geometry into their lives as best they can. The Pythagorean Theorem must always be  $a^2+b^2=c^2$ . Just because you are no longer in geometry class can you declare that  $a^2+b^2=$ Bigfoot. (Unless, by using Algebra you

have previously defined Bigfoot as being equivalent to the sum of the squares of the sides of a right triangle. But I'm clearly going off on a tangent, aren't I.) In the Farewell Discourse Jesus encourages the disciples to carry on even after he is gone. That is their job; that is their calling—to share the message of Jesus to the world.

In the Farewell Discourse, Jesus promises his anxious disciples that they will not be alone. Just because Jesus is leaving them does not mean that they will be abandoned or forgotten. They will not be orphaned. As we read today, Jesus reassures them saying, *I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 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.* God will always be with them as the Holy Spirit. The Greek word translated as Advocate is *paraclete*. It can also be translated as Comforter or Helper. It means one who stands alongside. Even in Jesus' absence the Holy Spirit will stand alongside the disciples and be with them. They will not be forgotten.

One of my daughter's friends from high school graduated and went off to college. It didn't work out. For whatever reason, it was a bad fit between student and institution. The young man left after the first semester and came home not sure of what to do next. His high school heard about his situation and urged him to come and talk again to the college counselor. The school explained that even though he had graduated, he was always part of the school and they would always help him. With the counselor's assistance, he found another college, was admitted, and is now doing well there. The high school proved that they were willing to be his advocate, to stand beside him. He was not forgotten. For the community of Christians left behind after Jesus ascends into heaven, the Holy Spirit is to be their Advocate and Comforter, the one who will stand with them offering encouragement.

As I said, I identified two reasons for Jesus to ascend to heaven and depart from his disciples. The first is for their own good—they cannot forever remain dependent on their teacher. The second reason is that in Jesus' absence the disciples are able to graduate to a place where they grow and develop. They can become independent and strong. They can become leaders of the Christian community. They can partner with God in the business of faith. Earlier in this gospel, Jesus says something remarkable. He tells the disciples, *Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father* (John 14:12). Jesus is encouraging his disciples telling them that while he has done great things, they have the potential to do even greater things. The ascension of Jesus into heaven is not the end, it is the start of something new.

When Jesus ascends into heaven, the disciples no doubt felt that they had been left behind with no one to lead them. But that is not the case. Jesus had taught them and prepared them, the Holy Spirit stood beside them with guidance and

encouragement, through love they were connected with their teacher. Whether they knew it or not, they were fully equipped to go into the world.

And they did. Those first followers of Jesus who started out as fishermen and tax collectors successfully piloted the church from Jerusalem out to all people, teaching the good news of Jesus Christ.