

“Not Alone”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 9, 2010
Scripture: John 14:23-29

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *We welcome the chance to love one another, Holy God when we share similar perspectives or political views. Yet, you ask us to keep your commandments even when the love you ask us to share is risky. Strengthen us and reassure us that your Spirit is with us, teaching and leading us into your way of love. Amen.*

On Friday of this week, I shared the last Chapel time with the students of First Friends, the Preschool of First Church. Knowing that this was my very last time with the children who would be starting Kindergarten in the fall, I felt that we needed to address the idea of saying goodbye.

And so I read them a story called, “I Hate Goodbyes”. The story talks about how hard it is to say goodbye to important people in your life. Since it is a children’s book, the focus, of course is when mothers or fathers have to go on business trips, or when grandparents come to visit for a couple of weeks and they have to leave to go back up north. Saying goodbye to people who have become important to us, regardless of our age, is hard.

As I read that story to our preschoolers, I was reminded of the words we read this morning from the Gospel of John. You see, the disciples find themselves in a similar situation. Jesus is on his way to his death, and on his way, he bids farewell to his disciples. It is a long, poignant scene that we witness here in the Gospel of John. And the scene is made all the more poignant because the ones to whom he speaks – his disciples, his 12 closest friends – are also the ones who have had a hand in his betrayal. They have not only betrayed and disappointed Jesus through their repeated misunderstanding (in the Gospel of

John, nobody ever seems to “get it” when Jesus is talking), but they more actively betray him when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus. Despite their declarations of fidelity, all of the disciples flee into the night, says Matthew. The disciples, who have been so close to Jesus during sunnier times in Galilee, are nowhere to be seen when Jesus is dragged into court, whipped until he is almost dead, and then brutally crucified. Time and again, throughout the story, these so-called disciples are anything but disciples. Jesus has given them his words of life and he has shared with them the deepest truths of God. Furthermore, he has not only spoken to them, but he has enacted signs and wonders before them. He has revealed to them the depths of the heart of God. Still, even here at the end, they just don’t get it. Jesus speaks to them, in this last speech, about the way that he is going. “We don’t know the way, and we don’t know where you are going,” the disciples say, true to form, ignorant all the way to the end.

And I guess you would have to be a contemporary disciple of Jesus to know the peculiar comfort that comes to contemporary Christians by listening to these stories of the stupidity, the failure, and even the betrayal of these first disciples. Let’s face it, if we were sitting there that night with Jesus, and he was giving us our final exam, who here could hope to pass with flying colors?

I know that I have flunked the exam many times! Repeatedly Jesus told us not to put our trust in riches, not to attempt futilely to heap up treasures here on earth. And yet I do. When I watch my friends retiring, I wonder if and when I will be able to do that. Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow, and yet I am concerned that I won’t be able to live comfortably on my pension.

Jesus told us to turn the other cheek when struck. Yet when someone hits me, or hurts me, I try to strike back hard enough to knock that person down – if not literally, at least figuratively.

Jesus told us to take up our cross and follow, but for me, faith ends being mostly a cushion rather than a cross – something to soften the blows of life, a comfort amidst the storm, something palliative, to make life go down a little easier. Am I the only one?

Did you come here this morning hoping that Jesus would make your life a little more difficult and complicated? I know I didn’t!

And so, as Jesus speaks his strange words about peace, a peace that passes our understanding, about love, but love that is quite different from our love, about glory, that has a cruciform shape, as much as I am embarrassed to admit it, there are times when I feel more sympathy for the disciples than for Jesus. Their stupidity, their denial and betrayal of Jesus – all of that is a great comfort to me. They just don’t get it. It’s good for my self-image – that they are as dumb as I – maybe even dumber.

And yet, it is to these disciples that Jesus promises an “Advocate”. He gives them the sad news that he is leaving them. The world that he came to save is attempting to push him out of the world. The darkness that he came to enlighten will attempt to engulf him. He is being dragged away to a humiliating end.

But before he goes, he tells his disciples that this is not the end. He will continue to be with them, though he is away from them. Though he will no longer teach them face to face, he will continue to teach them. Although they will no longer walk the roads of Judea together, he will walk with them. They think the door is about to close between them and Jesus, and yet Jesus says he is now opening another door for them. This is the end of the way, and yet he tells them that he is still the way. They are horrified at the prospect of his death, but Jesus tells them that in this death is life.

To those who could not give Jesus proper understanding, faithful discipleship, courageous obedience, he gives them an Advocate. He

promises never to leave them alone. He pledges to be close to them, even closer than he is now. He, who has to have been so frustrated with his disciples' lack of comprehension when he taught them, is going to send an Advocate, who will be their teacher, who will instruct them and show them everything.

I think what this means is that God knows the Christian life is too difficult to be lived alone. We are not to try to understand the Bible, to have community here in the church, to take up our cross, to witness for Christ, to live the Christian life alone. When it comes to following Jesus, nothing is done alone.

That's why when you are baptized as Kiefer will be this morning, we say a prayer inviting the Holy Spirit to be upon you. At your baptism, we promise you that God will give you the Holy Spirit to teach you, strengthen you, guide you, and equip you to be a faithful disciple. Nobody expects you to do this alone. You have an Advocate.

Jesus doesn't say I am leaving you a book of instructions. He says I am leaving you a teacher, a guide, a friend – the Advocate. This Advocate will teach you all that you need to know.

Jim Somerville in an article published in the "Christian Century" said that the Advocate is the one whose name you call when you are thrown into jail on false charges. The Advocate is the one you call when the school bully beats you up on the playground. The Advocate comes to your rescue, your defense, and your comfort. That's what Jesus had done for the disciples while he was with them. In his absence, he has sent another to do for them what Jesus would do if he were still there to do it.

Sometimes when you consider the huge tasks to which Jesus calls us, his great expectations for us, you get the impression that the Christian life is an heroic affair... that only the best and the brightest could possibly aspire to

be a disciple. But, look who Jesus called to be his first disciples – very ordinary people who were really not at all quick on the uptake. How on earth did he expect those twelve to do all the things in which he was leaving them in charge?

But, that's just it, my friends, Jesus didn't expect them to be faithful by themselves. He didn't expect them to do anything by themselves. In fact, in the Gospel of John he tells them that they can't do anything by themselves.

There are days and times when each of us feels as though we are working alone and that even God doesn't know what we're doing. But the truth of the matter is we have the very presence of God working with us in the form of the Spirit. In this long interim when Jesus has ascended to heaven and left us in charge, we have a partner in the Spirit who is here to encourage us to keep working. We have a partner in the Spirit who loves us in every way that Jesus does. All we have to do is believe. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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The First Presbyterian Church
of Dunedin
455 Scotland Street
Dunedin, Florida 34698
(727) 733-2318 fax (727) 738-4297
WEBSITE: fpcdunedin.org
E-mail: office@fpcdunedin.org
Victoria ByRode, Pastor