

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 16, 2021
John 17:6-19

O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear, and kindle it thy holy flame bestowing; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Each Friday on WAMU, our local public radio station, they air an interview from StoryCorps. StoryCorps is an oral history project whose mission is to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs the opportunity to record and share stories of their lives. Recently, we heard from a young woman from Philadelphia and her foster mother.¹ Jade Rone grew up in foster care and spent the majority of her childhood living with one foster mother. When she was 17, her foster mom died, and she found herself searching for a family once again.

In 2015, Jade was placed in the home of Stacia Parker. The early months of their relationship were rough, as they both learned to trust each other. Their connection eventually deepened into a mother-daughter relationship, with Stacia becoming a devoted grandmother to Jade's two young children. In 2019, they participated in a StoryCorps interview to remember when they first met.

Jade recalled what it was like for her in the wake of her longtime foster mother's death. She said, "Nobody asked me how I was feeling. I just felt like I didn't matter. So, when I was doing bad in school, I kept it to myself." After Jade came to her new foster house, things were different. Stacia said, "I knew you were quiet, and I knew that because you were quiet and petite, that people had not paid attention to you... You wouldn't use your words. You had no requests, not even specific food. I said, 'This is unusual for a teenager.'" Stacia then recollected, "Do you remember the day that you came to me and said, 'I don't want to live here?' You told me that the things I wanted from you were impossible." "That sounds like something I would say," Jade replied. Stacia explained, "As an African-American female, society was already going to marginalize you.... So, I was trying to develop your voice."

Then the interview moved to the heart of their relationship. Jade said, "You asked me questions about what was going on. You asked me, 'Ok, so you're failing this class. So, what do we need to do?' I'm like, 'What do you mean, what we need to do?' 'Cause nobody put 'we'. It was always, 'You need to fix this.' Jade then asked Stacia what she has taught her. Stacia replied, "You've taught me the power of love. You really helped me see that not only do I know what your needs are, but that I know how to meet them." Jade said, "I'm glad. I want to thank you for everything. Because if you would not have pushed me, I don't think I would be anywhere near where I am right now. I've been searching for a mom all my life. Then I got you and we've been...it's been bumpy." Stacia said, "But, I'll be here." And Jade replied, "I know you will."

The underlying message here is of a mother, who chooses to be in relationship with a young woman, and says, "I see you. I know you. I love you. And I will always be with you." To which, the daughter, who chooses to be in relationship with this woman, replies, "I know this and I trust you."

I see you. I know you. I love you. And I will always be with you. These are powerful words that we all desire to hear. Just this sort of love and faithfulness is what we all seek – what we have

¹ <https://storycorps.org/stories/finding-a-mom-and-the-power-of-love-reflections-from-a-foster-mother-and-daughter/>

always sought. And this very same pledge is what Jesus made to his disciples following the Last Supper in Jerusalem the night before his crucifixion.

Our gospel lesson this morning is from Jesus' concluding prayer for his disciples at the end of his extended farewell discourse. This long goodbye is really quite lengthy, spanning four chapters in John's gospel. In it, Jesus explains that he is "going to the father" (14:28) in reference to his journey to the cross, the victory of resurrection, and his ascension into heaven to be with the Father. But before his time comes, Jesus gives his disciples words of assurance and the promise of his continuing presence. Yes, I am leaving, Jesus tells them, but "do not let your hearts be troubled.... I will not leave you orphaned." (14:1, 18)

Concluding this discourse, Jesus prays over his disciples. And it is clear from the tone of the language, that he is using prayer as a way to tell them what he thinks they need to hear. He warns them of the trials ahead for him, and for them as they take up his mantle and continue his ministry of reconciliation and sharing the good news. He reminds them of their special relationship to the Father when he prays to God that, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine... while I was with them, I protected them in your name." (17:10a, 11b) But now that he will return to the Father, Jesus prays that God will protect them and sustain them through all the many challenges ahead.

Earlier in his farewell discourse, Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit, who will sustain them in his absence. He says, "I have said these things to you while I am 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." (14:25-26) Also known as the Paraclete and "the Spirit of Truth", the Holy Spirit will be a teaching and guiding presence within the community of the faithful, whose primary purpose is to help Jesus' followers re-member Jesus and his teachings.

In our collect at the beginning of our service, we prayed, "O God, the King of glory... Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before." Jesus' promise of his presence and protection through the Advocate made to his disciples is also made true for us here and now. For the Holy Spirit is still active in the world today and is our Advocate, Helper, Companion, and Comforter. The Spirit also functions to link past and future. As the Holy Spirit reminded the disciples who Jesus is and made Jesus real to them, it also brings Jesus' actions into the present. In doing so, the Spirit is a continuation, and also an expansion, of Jesus' ministry and teaching. The Holy Spirit will be an abiding presence in and among the community of the faithful, guiding them into the future.

I see you. I know you. I love you. And I will always be with you. Like the chosen foster mother to the chosen foster child, Jesus pledged his relationship of knowing and loving them to be eternal, as will also be his presence through the Spirit. Like Stacia, Jesus chose the disciples for relationship. He got to know them – to see them as they really were – and loved them. They were not family by genetics, but became family by choice and relationship. Through this knowing and loving, trust developed. And, like Jade, the disciples chose to become one with their chosen parent – to graft their branch to his vine, as they became one with each other and lived in each other. From this, the beloved community is born and perpetuates itself through the workings of the Holy Spirit and throughout time.

Loving all that is seen and known in another, leads to trust. This trust is sustained and nurtured through the Advocate to develop life-giving community – community in which the loving presence of Christ is always present. That is the promise of this Sunday – that all that has begun in the community of Jesus will not only continue in Jesus' physical absence but be increased and magnified through the sustenance of the Spirit.

Last Sunday we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension in which Jesus fulfilled the first part of the promise – I will go away. Next Sunday, we will celebrate the Feast of Pentecost and the fulfillment of the second part of his promise – I will not leave you orphaned. Today, however, like on Holy Saturday, we sit with the disciples in between the promises and wait in the desert

emptiness. While the disciples must endure their desert time in faith, we know it to be true. We merely need to remember our own personal experiences of the Holy Spirit alive and at work in our lives, in our beloved community, and in the world.

The signs of the Spirit's presence as Holy Comforter and Advocate have been so abundant over this past year. We've written about the Moments of Grace that we've experienced during the early time of pandemic. We've experienced the austerity of Lent and Holy Week in profound ways during this time of lock-down and uncertainty, only to be surprised yet again in the signs of resurrection that surrounded us daily. As the beloved community, we've shared each other's trauma and sorrow, born each other's grief, and walked the long and anxious path of global pandemic, all the while realizing that God never once left us comfortless.

Amen.