

Presence in the Face of Evil
The Rev. Amy Spagna
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John 14:23-29

Liturgically speaking, we're in kind of a liminal space right now. The "already" of Easter is five weeks behind us, and the not yet of Ascensiontide and Pentecost is coming up on us fast. Jesus will decidedly leave the building, and for good this time. However, he will not do it without ensuring that his followers are cared for. He knows it's going to be hard on them, maybe more so than his dying was. So he's trying to soften the blow by telling them what's going to happen ahead of time, so they will believe it, and him, when it happens.

We've actually jumped back in the timeframe of John's gospel a little, to Maundy Thursday and the upper room where Jesus and the disciples gathered to share a last meal together. It's during that meal where John has Jesus deliver the so-called Farewell Discourse. It's his final lecture, spanning almost five chapters, and sums up everything he has said and done to this point. Jesus waits until Judas Iscariot has gone to get the police to arrest him before he launches into this, his final teaching. He tells the remaining disciples about Peter's denial. He gives them the new commandment to love one another as he has loved them. And then he tells them something else: he's leaving. He's going somewhere they can't, just yet. At the same time, he is not leaving them alone, will reveal himself to those who love him.

Which prompts a question from the other Judas, not Iscariot: "Lord, how is it that you reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" (Jn 18:22, NRSV)

Jesus answers him with a *what*, not necessarily a *how*. "Jesus says that he and the Father will come and make their dwelling with those who love him and keep his word."¹ The Greek word for "dwelling" here is the same one used at the very beginning of this chapter, where Jesus describes his Father's house as having many dwelling places which he will go ahead of the disciples to prepare. Clearly the two events, Jesus' departure and his continued presence with the disciples, are somehow related. At this point in the story, how he's going to do it is somewhat of a mystery. It leaves everyone scratching their heads, regardless of the era in which they are listening to him. What doesn't help us in particular is that we are hearing this promise pulled out of the context of the rest of the chapter. However, Jesus already answered the question of what we have to do in order to meet him halfway: "Love me, keep my commandments."

This is both a command and a promise: do what I say and I will be there. It presents the disciples who first heard it, and us, too, with a bit of a dilemma. The "do as I say" piece is easy. That he will be there, when he's already said he's leaving soon, is a bit harder to swallow. While we want to think about them as two distinct actions, it's not clear that Jesus himself does. They're tied very closely together, in the context of a passage which is intended to instruct and comfort both the disciples who were present in the room when he said it, and the ones who are living now and still struggling with it. Since it is a both/and proposition, then, it's hard not to wonder if it might be a situation

¹ Elisabeth Johnson, "Commentary on John 14:23-29."
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-Sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-1423-29-5> [accessed May 16, 2022].

where, "... as we keep Jesus' commands we receive his promises, and that as we hear his promises we are equipped to keep his commands."²

Even if that is the case – which I think it is, but I also think it needs to have a caution label attached about turning discipleship into a transaction rather than a relationship – it doesn't provide a good answer about how and where Jesus is, where God is, when bad things happen. It's hard to trust that they're present at all, in the face of a world filled with intense fear and hatred. It's even harder when fear and hatred motivate people to perpetrate evil deeds like murdering ten people in the middle of a grocery store just because they are Black. How are we supposed to love Jesus, keep his commandments, and trust that he'll be there in the face of an act like that? It doesn't seem to get us anywhere, not in terms of getting our elected leaders to finally do something about the toxic mixture of white supremacy and easy access to military-grade weapons which continues to be at the heart of these shootings. And it certainly does not help us to combat the very human impulse to want to get revenge on the people who commit them.

Love is the only antidote to that much hate, and to the anxiety, fear, and grief left behind in the wake of events like Buffalo, Aurora, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, and Sandy Hook. Jesus knew that – and so he sets up the commandment to love one another and the promise that he will be there in direct opposition to what he knew the world would send his disciples' way. They are what evil cannot stand, most especially not when they are put into action.

² David Lose, "Commands and Promises." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/commands-and-promises> [accessed May 16, 2022].

In his attempt to understand all this, my friend and colleague Andrew Gerns writes:

"Jesus shows us... on his journey to the cross, that he had God's power and God's authority which allowed him to confront evil on God's terms. By simply living and doing what he was called to do; by teaching, healing, forgiving, listening, and by welcoming the stranger and being a companion to the outcast he was doing all the things that evil hates...and drove evil crazy in the process! They wanted to run away! When Jesus was crucified, it looked as if evil won. But, in fact, as we see in the resurrection, evil was defeated. Forever!

"And we saw it, too!

"We saw it in every candle lit, every prayer offered, every first responder who put themselves on the line to care for wounded, injured, and dead. We saw it in every act of love, every grieving person hugged and cared for, every frightened person embraced. Once again, one man chose to do unspeakable evil. And once again, when the chips were down, thousands upon thousands chose to do the good."³

It is in that good where the promise, and the commandment, are found. It is where Christ reveals himself to the world and gives to his disciples the peace which the world cannot. It is what prompts us to believe him when what he says will happen, actually does – which in turn prompts us to do what he asked when we see him leave:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid" (Jn 14:27).

³ Andrew Gerns, "Looking Evil in the Eye." <http://andrewplus.blogspot.com/2022/05/looking-evil-in-eye.html> [accessed May 18, 2022].