

Home Alone  
John 14:23-29  
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You know how, when kids are little, you have to be careful what you say around them because they'll pick up on the meaning of words a lot faster than you think? Well, we discovered the same is true about dogs. When our dog, Jack, was just a puppy, we learned very quickly that he understood a lot of human words. I think he got his brains from Leigh and his looks from me. For a while, we actually kept a list of words on our refrigerator that you can't say around him, because he knows what they mean. Words like "walk," "treat," and "peanut butter," which made him go bonkers with excitement. He got that from me, too.

Another buzzword for Jack was "bye-bye." If he saw us putting on our coats or grabbing our keys, he sat up and waited for us to say those magic words. But if we made our way to the door without saying them, he got this look on his face like we had just banished him to a Turkish prison. "What? You're going bye-bye and you're leaving me here? You're not taking me?"

I wonder if the disciples had that same look on their face as Jesus talked to them in our passage today. It takes place during Jesus' long discourse at the Last Supper, before he is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the other three gospels, Jesus and his disciples spend very little time in the Upper Room, sharing a meal together before leaving. But John spends five chapters in the Upper Room, including Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and offering additional teachings and prayers. In John's gospel, Jesus uses this meal in the Upper Room, probably his last quality time with the disciples, to prepare them for what is to come.

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus has reminded the disciples that he will be going away. He's told them this before, but now his leaving is imminent and he needs to impress upon them the fact that he's not going to be around much longer. They don't take it very well. "You're going bye-bye and you're not taking us?" They're full of questions and fear as they realize Jesus actually means it. Jesus assures them that he will return for them, saying in v. 18, "I will not leave you orphaned, I am coming to you," but that promise must have felt empty to those being left behind. He has promised to come back for them, but how do they know for sure? That promise becomes much harder to believe when Jesus is no longer present to remind them of it. You say you'll be back, but how do we know? The modern term for this is separation anxiety. We don't want to be apart because we may never come back together. The disciples are going through separation anxiety.

In v. 23, where our reading starts today, Jesus is addressing that anxiety. A disciple has asked Jesus, "How will we know when you've come back? What if we miss it?" Jesus responds, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." In other words, if we want to make sure we see Jesus, we have to do the things Jesus has called us to do, like caring for the poor and welcoming the stranger. We have to be obedient.

That word may chaff our individualistic sensibilities. As Americans, we wear our freedom like a badge of honor, sometimes to a fault. I don't say that without acknowledging both the privilege of our freedom and the cost it took to achieve it. But I believe we sometimes choose the secular concept of individual freedom over the spiritual concept of the body of Christ, where we are but one of many connected together by Jesus. Sometimes we act as if "I" comes before "we." But that's antithetical to what Jesus is saying here. "If you want to be in the car with me,

you have to let me do the driving.” Too often, we’re willing to relegate Jesus to the backseat, rather than let him chart the course. “Those who love me will keep my word.”

Jesus is trying to give the disciples a way to stay connected to him, even when he’s not around. In fact, the question the disciples faced in this passage is the same question we struggle with today: How do we have a relationship with Jesus when he’s not here with us? How do we love someone who’s no longer here? When I think of my loved ones who’ve gone before me, I think of the ways they are still with me. My grandfather gave me his watch, which I wear on special occasions. When I do, I’m reminded of the wisdom and guidance he passed onto me and I’m reminded to keep his word. Maybe you make your grandmother’s favorite recipe or visit one of your parent’s favorite places or tell one of your friend’s favorite jokes. There are things we do in our lives that carry on the legacy of those who’ve gone before. That’s what Jesus is saying to the disciples, and to us. “Live out what I taught you, keep my word in your life, and I will live on through you.” I know so many people who are desperate to know Jesus better. What he says here is, “You want to know who I am? Do I what I did. You want to know where I am? Serve the people I served.”

But Jesus knows his disciples, so he knows they need some encouragement in order to press on through their separation anxiety after he’s gone. So he reminds them that God will not leave them orphaned, but will send them another one to be with them. The Greek word for who will be sent is “paraclete,” which is translated as “advocate” or “comforter.” The Greek word itself literally translates as “one who is called alongside.” The paraclete, the Holy Spirit, will come to us, teaching us everything and reminding us of Jesus’ presence with us. I love the imagery of the Holy Spirit’s constant and abiding presence with us. This is more than just our conscience or the little angel sitting on our shoulders. This passage speaks of one who will walk alongside us, urging us on, advocating for us, helping us when we need it.

I experienced this when I ran my first-ever 10K race, which is about six miles. The race, which was in Cincinnati, started and ended in the Reds stadium, and I was running it with my two friends, Jeff and Michael. Both of them were much younger than me and more experienced runners, so I was glad to have them alongside me to encourage me. Well, that lasted about a mile into the race. After we got passed by a couple old guys using walkers, they decided I was going too slow, and the two of them took off and left me by myself. “You’re going bye-bye and you’re not taking me?” Thanks, “friends”! I trudged my way through the course by myself, but by about mile five, I was done.

Just as I was about to stop running, I saw someone coming toward me, running the opposite way of the rest of the runners. It was Jeff, who had circled back to run the last mile with me because he didn’t want me to finish the race by myself. His presence bolstered my energy, and we ran into Great American Ballpark and crossed the finish line together. Actually, right at the end, I sped up and finished slightly ahead of him so that I could say I beat him. I know for sure I never would have finished that race had Jeff not come alongside me. That is what the Holy Spirit does for us as we run our race, and what we are called to do for others.

As we do this, as we stay obedient to God’s call in our lives to be Christ-like for others, we continue the presence of Jesus in this world. Jesus didn’t call us to replicate his work; he called us to carry on the work he started, to build upon it, taking his acts of grace and mercy and extending them through our hands and hearts into the world. Until he comes again, whenever that is, we have been left in charge, trusted to carry on his name and his work, and everywhere we go we see the faces of the ones he has given to our care, the ones who are wondering how to have a relationship with Jesus when he’s not here, the ones who are struggling to run their race.

We have not been left home alone. We are not abandoned. By our presence, by our work, by our witness, we are saying to others, “He IS here.”

And in this work of Jesus, which can feel so overwhelming in this violent, conflicted world, Jesus reminds the disciples and us that we have been given what we need. In v. 27, he says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” This is more than just an empty platitude like, “Everything will work out.” Because that’s not always true. What Jesus is telling his followers is that they already have what they need to face the difficult circumstances of his absence. They have the peace of Christ.

The peace Jesus has left us is not the same peace the world tries to offer. The peace our world often offers is simply a temporary cessation of conflict or an artificial sense of serenity achieved through chemicals or possessions. But what Jesus offers here is “shalom,” that rich, deep Jewish concept of wholeness that is characterized by mutual respect and care for each other. It’s interesting to note that in our passage today, every second-person pronoun is not singular, but plural. So every time Jesus says “you,” he doesn’t mean “you,” he means “y’all.” “Peace I leave y’all; my peace I give to y’all.” We are not called to work for our own peace; we can achieve that by simply locking ourselves in our homes and turning off the TV. Instead, we are called to work for the peace of others, for the peace of all, and that work forces us outside of ourselves and into relationships with others, where the Holy Spirit can work through us to comfort, to advocate, to walk alongside. The peace we have been given is peace we are called to share.

How do you remember those who’ve gone before you? How do you honor their legacy? Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my word. If you want to stay connected to me even after I’m gone, you will love each other, especially those that are hardest to love. If you want to feel my presence when I am absent, you will work for peace, not just with folks like you, but with others not like you.” With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can make that peace real here on earth, even if only in fleeting glimpses. We have not been left here alone. We are the bearers of God’s peace in this world and we have the Holy Spirit to guide and encourage us. As we tell his stories and carry out his actions, we testify to Christ’s ongoing work in this world. “Those who love me will keep my word.” Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.