

“Practical Help for Difficult Times”

John 14:15–21

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Many of you know that before we accepted the call to come to First Baptist Church, Raleigh, I served a church in Winston-Salem. Dana’s parents had moved there to be near us, and one thing that held up the conversation with the search committee here was that Dana’s mother was in poor health. She had dementia and other problems for a decade.

Dana’s father was exhausted from caregiving and worried, as we were, that he might work himself to death, literally. So, he took great pains to show us where all his funeral and financial plans were, just in case he died first. It was an emotional moment, quite thoughtful of him, touching, in fact. But then, he did it again several months later, and we reminded him that he had already shared this information. And then, he did it a third time, saying he knew he had done this before, but he wanted to make sure we remembered.

So, given my penchant for injecting humor into any situation, sometimes wisely, sometimes not, I said, “Dan, I know what you have said about a traditional burial in Hopkinsville. But if you die first, we are going to have you cremated and scatter your remains (as a lifelong Kentucky Wildcat fan) at the University of Louisville Papa Johns Football Stadium.” He laughed pretty hard for the first time in quite a while, and as it turned out, we didn’t have to make good on that threat. Joann died fifteen years ago, and Dan at 95, is still somehow with us.

As difficult as it may be in the moment, trying to prepare loved ones for an upcoming loss by making plans and having conversations is a wonderful gift for the people closest to us, a way of taking some of the burden off them and pointing them to a way forward.

This is what Jesus is doing in our reading today and in the much larger section of the Gospel According to John we call the Farewell Discourse of which it is a part. His time is drawing near, and even though he will be raised after he is killed, as we know, the disciples will

have to live with his absence after he has ascended, after first grieving his brutal death. Jesus knows all of this will be difficult. So, he wants to do what he can to prepare them, and in the part of the Farewell Discourse we have read today he offers a couple of very practical helps.

One thing Jesus gives his disciples is something to keep them busy. At times of loss, there are many details we have to attend to — services to plan, finances to manage, legal documents to process, clothing and furniture to sort through — it can be exhausting! But the alternative is sitting in a room and absorbing loss, all at once. Meaningful activity distributes loss over time. Jesus offers his disciples this very kind of activity. “If you love me,” he says, “you will keep my commandments.”

Jesus does not say, “If you love me, you will say so, or profess the right beliefs, or put a bumper sticker on your car or a sign in your yard,” not that there is anything wrong with these things. But if his disciples love him, if we love him, we will live in the way he has taught us. We may bristle at this. The first disciples do. In John 21, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, and when Peter says he does, Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.” Three times Jesus asks the question, echoing Peter’s three denials when Jesus is arrested, and Peter is indignant. But Jesus’ point is that love is about action, not just emotion, it’s doing what he calls us to do.

It’s how we best express love for our mothers. This day brings different emotions for different people, depending on whether our mother is living, what our relationship with our mother is like, and whether we have been able to have children. But for those who feel only love, it’s a day when we cook meals or go out; send cards and flowers, or better yet, chocolate; speak words of gratitude; all of which is good. But what mothers want most is to be proud of us, see us living out the values they taught us, knowing joy and fulfillment. That’s what we do if we love our mothers, and that’s what we do if we love Jesus. We follow his commandments and thus stay busy in meaningful ways.

But what exactly does this involve? What does Jesus command us to do? To love God and our neighbor as we love our self; to serve one another as he has served us; to forgive those who hurt us and pray for our enemy; to treat others as we would have them treat us; to feed the

hungry and clothe those in need; to welcome the stranger and visit those in prison; to hunger and thirst for righteousness; to make peace; to endure persecution; to serve as his witnesses around the world and make disciples of all people; to deny ourself, take up our cross and follow him.

It is a long list, plenty to keep us busy, but it is all a fulfillment of the central calling to love God and neighbor, and it all moves in the direction of kindness and compassion, justice and healing. To be more specific, we express our love for Jesus when we volunteer in the clothing ministry or help with White Flag, visit a homebound person or someone in the hospital, help immigrants and refugees through CBF's Welcome House ministry or join a group like Wake Interfaith Immigration Network, do the right thing at work or school even if it doesn't help us get ahead or simply invite someone to church. Doing these things is how we express love for Jesus and offer the best witness to the world.

I think of a story about an agnostic journalist whose minister friend witnessed to him on his deathbed. When the friend finally paused and came up for air, the journalist said, "Are you talking about Christian faith, following Jesus in a way of life? I'm all for it. When does it begin?" It's a question many have asked, but if more people who claim to be Christ's followers expressed love for him in the way he desires, they wouldn't have to do so. If you love me, keep my commandments.

Jesus offers to keep his disciples busy in his absence as they follow in his footsteps, and then he offers them companionship in the form of the Spirit, the Comforter, the Advocate. I will not leave you orphaned, Jesus says, I will ask God to give you another Advocate, the Spirit of truth who others may not see but those of you who love me will. Jesus assures his followers that they, we, will not be alone.

Scripture speaks of God's Spirit in many ways. Genesis 1 says the Spirit is present at creation. So, there is a sense in which the Holy has always been present in the world. But what Jesus is describing here, what happens on Pentecost, is an outpouring of Spirit in a way that all the faithful can embrace and receive strength from in a personal way.

We think of the Spirit comforting us and strengthening us, protecting us from harm, but the literal meaning of the Greek *paraclete*

goes further. The Spirit is our Advocate in the legal sense, one who stands up and argues for us. For example, in Romans 8:26-27, the Apostle Paul says that when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us. In John 14, Jesus says the Spirit will be "another" Advocate. Jesus himself is the first Advocate, according to 1 John 2:1 and a great deal of early church tradition. Jesus is the one who advocates before God on behalf of frail and sinful creatures like us.

It is a powerful word of assurance as we seek to remain faithful to Christ in a world where we no longer have a flesh and blood man named Jesus walking among us and where his ways so often seem contrary to everything around us – the meanness and hostility, the all-consuming self-interest and insatiable lust for vengeance, the willingness to accept poverty and violence as natural parts of life. We need more than a comforter to persevere in faith in this world. It is easy to become discouraged. We need an advocate!

But there is also an affirmation of our calling to advocacy here. It is a word many churches struggle with because it bumps up against political life, and we have this mistaken idea that the most noble path is to avoid any perception of political involvement. To be clear, avoiding partisan politics in the church is a noble venture, though I must say many conservative churches, like some liberal or progressive churches, don't bat an eye at being partisan.

But public issues in and of themselves are not partisan, or at least they shouldn't be, and all public issues express some human concern, which is God's concern. As BJC leader James Dunn used to say, God is Sovereign over the whole world, not just our individual lives! When we embrace advocacy, carefully, simply speaking up for those who have no agency or voice, we are taking up the work of the Spirit.

This is why CBF has been engaging more in advocacy for victims of payday lending and immigrants, to name just two issues, speaking for people with little agency and calling us as a nation to follow our own laws and constitution. It's why we have hosted advocacy groups like we have this week — one focused on Alzheimer's Disease research and the other on suicide prevention — and why we have assisted groups in the past advocating for housing, education, racial justice, and gender

equality. It can be tricky at times, when not everyone wants to be an advocate for some group or cause. It can be messy. But Jesus never avoids anything simply because it is tricky or messy.

Obviously, we are not Jesus, we do not have his degree of certainty on any matter, or at least we shouldn't. But we do have a calling to follow our conscience, our sense of what God wants us to do. In a way, this gift of advocacy, on our behalf by the Spirit and by us for others, helps us to embrace fully the first gift of something meaningful to do. We express our love for Jesus by keeping his commandments, a part of which includes not just helping others in need but speaking up for them.

Earlier this year my friend Sam Harrell wrote an article in his publication for the ministry African Exchange entitled "Working Where Grass Is Trampled." The title was taken from an African proverb which says, "Where elephants fight the grass is trampled." Sam's contention is that when global powers quarrel or are disrupted, the marginalized in the world suffer the most. He applied this concept to the sudden elimination of USAID and specifically how this affected his work in Kenya. I heard an interview a couple weeks ago with a former leader of USAID who said that at that time, their best estimate was that 750,000 people had died, many of them children, because of the elimination of this resource.

But Sam focused on how Africa Exchange had labored to find funding for desperately needed projects. Water and food security work in Sub-Saharan Africa, he said, is not "waste, fraud, and abuse." It is a matter of life and death. In God's grace, with multiple partners and much work, they found new resources for a pipeline project and other work. "The grass may be trampled," Sam wrote, "but the seeds of resiliency are persistent. For more life. So that all may thrive." And then he added this quote from the Center for Action and Contemplation, "The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better."

I like that. The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. That's following Jesus' commandments and thus expressing love to him, and it is a great way to overcome our feelings of discouragement and stay busy with the Spirit's help in this time of great need.