

E6A 2023 John 14:15-21 &N Acts 17:22-31

At last week's spring concert, the high school choir sang an arrangement of Glenn Burleigh's *Nia*, which in Swahili means *purpose*. The song, which they dedicated to the graduating seniors, asks the question, *What was I born to do?* and, echoing scripture, ponders ways people are called to make a difference in the world. It builds to the verse that we are born to the love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and concludes: *If I love God, I can love all people*. In a world where there's not much to make us hopeful, those students at least have the right aspiration. But don't mistake that passion for youthful idealism or sentimentality; that song summarized what all of us, of every age are to be about, what chapter upon chapter, book upon book of scripture says: *If we love God, we can love all people*.

John's gospel for this morning takes us back to Maundy Thursday, so named for Jesus' mandate to the disciples that they love one another just as he has loved them. When Jesus says, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments*, that is the commandment to which he is referring, that they love one another, so much that everyone will recognize them as disciples by their love. John, who never uses three words when thirty words will do, tries to describe the relationship of love between the disciples, Jesus, the Spirit, and the Father. To us, who in our human relationships are used to no such thing as a free lunch, these verses can sound like a series of doors the disciples have to unlock to get to God: if you do this, then I'll do that for you, and if I do that, then the Spirit will do this, and if the Spirit does this, then the Father will do that... Yet the God of steadfast lovingkindness does *not* deal out grace in a transaction. Instead, Jesus assures us that the Lord is *already* making all of these things happen, all at once. The disciples are already in relationship with Jesus, so they are also already in relationship with God the Father. And because Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are about to change the way in which he will be present with them, he promises that they will continue living in the same love they have already experienced, because the Spirit will be with them forever.

Different translations give us different words to describe the role of the Spirit: Advocate, Helper, Comforter, Intercessor, Counselor, Strengthener. At different times and in different circumstances, the Spirit needs to be all of these to the disciples, just as Jesus has been to them, because he has given them this commandment to love as he has loved, and that is not always an easy thing to do. Jesus loved the disciples—love symbolized by washing their feet—even though these friends were about to abandon, deny, and betray him. Wouldn't you rather just get new friends instead of loving people who let you down the way the disciples failed Jesus? Yet Jesus says love like I have loved. Thankfully, we don't have to accomplish this monumental task of loving on our own: the Spirit who advocates, helps, comforts, and strengthens loves in,

with, and through us. We *can* love all people, not by our own strength of will, but because God has come to help us.

This morning's reading from Acts shows us that the Spirit really can do the extraordinary work of loving through us, even when loving so generously does not come to us naturally. Last week we read in Acts about the stoning of Stephen, including the little detail that the crowd laid their coats at the feet of Paul (then Saul) while they did it. Paul's life was transformed dramatically between that point in the story and this one, but Paul always described himself as a zealous follower of God's law, including the part that prohibited the worship of idols. The verses right before this mention that he was deeply distressed to find that the city of Athens was full of idols. Yet, in one of his more gracious and measured moments, Paul avoids the temptation to rail against the Athenians' idolatry, instead acknowledging how religious they are, and how earnestly they search for the Divine, and offering them not condemnation, judgment, and damnation but the good news of God's love. If ever there was a role model for how to enter into dialogue with people of a differing faith, this is it. If we love God, we don't ridicule, condemn, coerce, convert, or legislate against all other people; we love them.

As convoluted as John makes it sound, Jesus' point is simply that the disciples are already equipped and will continue to be equipped for God's life of love. Jesus says the Father will give them *another* Advocate (Helper, Comforter, Counselor) because Jesus has already advocated for, helped, comforted, and counseled them. Everything needful has already been accomplished; so they can trust that God will continue to be at work. The *if's* in this gospel passage are not conditional; *if you do this, then some day in the future, I'll do that for you*. We'd understand Jesus better saying *when* or *because*: *because you love me, you keep my commandment [to love]*. Our love of God is inseparable from our love of people—family, friends, enemies, strangers. How can we say we love the God whom we cannot see if we don't love the children of God whom we can see all around us? Or turn it around: how can others learn that God is love if those of us who call ourselves disciples treat them with hate or even just indifference? And because God knows our love is sometimes weak, God strengthens us by the sending the Spirit to dwell powerfully in us.

The concert choir challenged the graduates to go out and do what scripture calls us all to do: feed hungry children, give shelter to the homeless, care for aging parents, be our brother's keeper... all examples of love in action, and all rooted in our essential purpose of loving God. We can't do that well on our own, but we're not on our own. It's the very Spirit of God living in us that empowers us to say, *If I love God, I can love all people*.