

NEVER ALONE

John 14:15-21

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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(online worship only)

One of the most influential persons in my life is a man to whom I was not related by blood, but he is a part of many of my early memories. He and his wife served as adopted grandparents to me and my brothers. They were close family friends, the right age to be grandparents, and did not have children of their own. So they were with us for many holidays and special occasions. He was a voracious reader and a world traveler, and I'm sure that he influenced my love of books and travel. He died, in fact, while in Moscow, Russia – on a trip sponsored by the World Council of Churches, when I was in high school. I haven't seen him for over 40 years, but I feel his presence very close to me.

I also feel the presence of my grandmother who died around 25 years ago, after a life rich in both quantity and quality. It's been long enough that memories of her don't cause pain; instead I am filled with happiness when I remember her cooking, her laughter, the times we spent together.

Almost every Sunday morning when I drive to church, I do a series of vocal exercises I learned in a class when I was working on my Doctor of Ministry in preaching degree. It's a practice that warms up the vocal chords, but you sound pretty silly when you do it, so it's a good thing to do

alone in the car. As I do, I remember my classmate Rhoda who died way too young but who made all of our classes so much fun. She's with me every Sunday morning as I prepare for worship and I'm so grateful to have known her.

There are others who are with me, too, part of what the book of Hebrews calls my cloud of witnesses – my cheering section, if you will. Who's in yours? Who are the people who are no longer physically alive but who – even yet – are very real in your life?

And how do you explain that? How do you explain that some people live on in you while there are others, even those you have loved, whom you rarely think about? Does it NEED to be explained? Or is it ok to just say that there are mysteries in life which we are willing to let stay as mysteries?

Most people can understand the concept of God. Whether they believe in God or not, whether they feel close to God or not, we can describe God in ways that seem to make sense. God is the creator. God is the law-giver. God is the one who advocates on behalf of those who are most vulnerable. We understand these roles God plays.

And no matter what you think about Jesus – was he divine? Partly divine? Not divine at all but just an exceptionally good human being? – no matter where you fall on that continuum of belief – you can understand that

Jesus of Nazareth was a real person who lived in a real place and time. He left behind a legacy – stories he told and stories told about him.

But how do you understand the Spirit, the Holy Spirit? Not with logic. Not with pictures. Not with descriptive words.

Jesus tries, in our passage for today, to describe what the Spirit is like. It's his last night on earth before the crucifixion. He's with the 11 disciples – Judas has already left the room. He's explaining to them that he's not going to be with them anymore in the flesh, but he's not abandoning them either. He uses the word, "Companion." "God will send another companion, who will be with you forever." And he continues...I find these next words poignant, personal and powerful, "I won't leave you as orphans."

When Jesus is no longer physically present, God arranges for a surrogate, if you will. We'll read more about the story of the gift of the Holy Spirit in two weeks, on Pentecost Sunday. But the Spirit is given here, too, on this night. It's given not with the dramatic flair of Pentecost – no flames, no speaking in tongues, no roaring wind. Here it's a gift given with the intimacy of a friend who is departing. Almost a death-bed gift, if you will. Jesus loves these disciples so much that he wants them to know that he's arranged for their care..."here's who to turn to when I'm gone."

Here is how I understand these matters in my life and mind. I think of the Holy Spirit as a conduit. It is the way we can connect to God's power and energy. Spiritual practices are the means of that connection. We can connect through prayer, through meditation, through time in nature, through music. Some people connect through acts of service, or study, or even fasting. We each "plug in" as it were in different ways. The point is to feel the connection, and well – let's just go with this metaphor – to let yourself feel that you are being fully charged.

The gospel writers tell us how Jesus did it – it was always through solitude. When his battery was just about to run out completely, he would go away by himself – he'd take a boat and go out into the middle of the sea of Galilee, or he'd hike up into the desert wilderness. He'd spend time alone, and with God, and then, he'd be ready, prepared again to engage the world, to let himself be spent for the sake of love.

I hope that you are aware of the times when you feel spiritually connected. Times when you feel your spirit soar. It probably happens when you're fully present with the people you love the most, maybe around the table, laughing and sharing stories. It probably happens when you're in a place you love in nature or when you hear music that touches a place deep within you. You feel that you've been elevated, lifted above the normal routine, even for just a minute. You feel transcendent.

Those moments keep us going. I know that some of our graduating seniors are missing those transcendent moments. They're missing the Mission Trip, and mission trip worship, and especially the Friday night on the mission trip when all of the seniors are celebrated. They're missing their last opportunity to be campers at church camp and other moments that help them connect with the God of love and grace.

So, to you seniors, and to all of us living through this strange time, hear the good news that comes from the gospel of John. We are not alone. We have a companion, an advocate, a comforter, a counselor, a helper – the Greek word John gives us can be translated in all of these ways. The Spirit of God is with us and in us, so we are never alone.

Let me list those synonyms again – God is present with us as a companion, an advocate, a comforter, a counselor, a helper – and we need God in all of those roles right now. It means that God is a shoulder to cry on when we just need to share how disappointed we are at all that we are missing. It means that God welcomes all of our emotions – there's no need to hold back.

But a good counselor doesn't let us feel sorry for ourselves for long; we're living through a pandemic, but we're not victims or martyrs. Instead, we are partners with God, and after God dries our tears, we will be sent out into the world – with our masks on – to embody the love that God has

shown us. And the best news of all is this – when we are the hands and feet of God, serving others in the name of love, we realize that we feel better. We feel like ourselves again, fully alive.

To the class of 2020, know this. You have received wisdom that many of us had to wait a long time for. You already know that life's plans often go awry, that you can't count on the external things of this world to bring you happiness. You are learning that joy and love are the most infectious gifts of all, and that you are not alone.

As a closing prayer today, here is our ALUCC choir singing a blessing. As you'll hear, they made this as a get-well gift for our choir director Mary Fancher - it's also a wonderful graduation gift for each of you. After this benediction, Nate Taylor will introduce our senior video.