

MORE THAN A MEMORY

JOHN 14:15-22

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

At nearly every graveside service a portion of this text is read as a means to provide comfort to the grieving family and friends. Jesus is speaking to his followers just days before his crucifixion and he reassures them that he will not leave them as orphans when he dies. Often I have said at funerals that the deceased may have died but their memory and legacy lives on.

When I was a child one of my sisters had the album to the Broadway play, Camelot. On Broadway King Arthur was played by Richard Burton, not to be confused by Richard Harris who reprised the role in the movie Camelot. As the story comes to a close King Arthur pleads that the world not forget what an idyllic place Camelot had been. Now a broken man, Arthur begs us to remember the most beautiful kingdom on earth:

Ask ev'ry person if they've heard the story,
And tell it strong and clear if they have not,
That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory
Called Camelot!

Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot
For one brief, shining moment
That was known as Camelot.

Keep the story going begs King Arthur. Pass it on to your children and your children's children; and in the very remembering, you will keep the dream alive. In the midst of the despair around you, recall this time, this special place. And, perhaps-who knows-perhaps this one brief, shining moment will come again.

We're tempted to hear Jesus singing Arthur's song as he gathers with his disciples for the last time. Jesus knew he would soon be betrayed by one of his closest followers-betrayed, arrested, and finally killed. Here at the Passover table, Jesus spins out his last words to his closest friends. We can well imagine Jesus calling them to remember the wondrous wisp of glory they had shared, when light had come into the darkness of the world. With such a song the disciples could go on, sustained by the memory of this one great life, waiting and hoping Jesus would soon return.

The whole Gospel of John could be a Camelot song, for John wrote these words long after Jesus was gone. This gospel is written backwards, in the midst of a community for whom Jesus was only a memory. Most of those in John's community had never met Jesus. Most, if not all, the disciples were dead. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed—a sign for many that the end-time would soon come. But the end-time didn't come. Life went on and that was, in many ways, the hardest part of all. Jesus hadn't returned even when all the signs seemed right. This community of believers felt pushed to the very edge of despair, and despair could defeat them. The gospel writer knew the dangers of such despair. Here at the table, Jesus says the same things over and over in different ways. The central word is love.

"If you love me you will keep my commandments.

"A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.

"Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.

"I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

"But how can we do that?" the disciples must have wondered. Knowing they had a hard time loving each other even while Jesus was with them, how could believers love like that in John's community where memory was fading? Let's just keep singing about that time when Jesus was here.

"Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot for one brief shining moment."

But Jesus did not sing that song. Jesus didn't call the disciples to hold up his life as memory but as presence. "I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus said, "I am coming to you." What a strange thing to say on the night of betrayal and arrest. He should have said, "I am leaving you." Jesus didn't deny what was going to happen. "In a little while the world will no longer see me," Jesus said, "but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."

The reason the disciples are not orphans is because the spirit of Jesus came to them when Jesus ascended into heaven. The spirit that existed in the very beginning, that blew like a wind over the face of the deep in creation, that became flesh and was born in a manger in Bethlehem, that washed their feet, cured diseases, broke down barriers, fed the hungry, forgave sins, and brought hope to those in despair, that Spirit would now be residing in them. Jesus said the Spirit that dwells in me

will abide in you. That is why his followers became so courageous when faced with diversity: They weren't alone! Christ was in them.

Shortly before this, Jesus had said something audacious. "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father." If anyone other than Jesus had made such a claim, we would call it blasphemy. Yet, that's what Jesus said that night at the table, even as God breathed into lifeless clay to create a living person, the Spirit will breathe the presence of Jesus into you. In the power of the Spirit, Jesus will continue to be present with you. "I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you."

Love and the Spirit-these two are at the center of Jesus' farewell message. "Love one another as I have loved you" and "The Spirit of Truth will abide with you when I am gone." A little later in this same chapter, Jesus says, "The Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of all that I have said to you." That is, Jesus was saying: You don't know everything yet. You have more to learn. In every generation you will be faced with new questions and perplexities. Does the sun revolve around the earth or is it the other way around? Did man evolve over eons or was he created in a brief few days? Should nuclear weapons ever be used against an enemy? Is welfare the best way to bear one another's burdens? Should women who feel called by God be ordained to preach? Should gays and lesbians be allowed to marry? Jesus knew there were some questions the sacred writings didn't address. Jesus also acknowledged that there were some things he had never talked about. "The Spirit will be your tutor," he said, "guiding you into all the truth."

Rosemary Radford Reuther says there are two things the church must do. One is to pass on the tradition from one generation to another. We might say this is like King Arthur's song: "Ask ev'ry person if they've heard the story, and tell it loud and clear if they have not." Tell the story of Jesus to your children and your children's children.

But that's not all, she says. There is a second thing the church must do. Be open to the winds of the Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation. That is different than Camelot, deeper than memory. Here in the United Church of

Christ we have a motto that says God is Still Speaking, and don't place a period where God has placed a comma. We are still learning how to love, and if we keep our hearts and minds open to the Holy Spirit, we have much to learn.

The world is changing rapidly, maybe faster than it ever has, and we need to remember that Jesus is more than just a memory, more than just a man whose teachings were told in a book written 2000 years ago. He is present among us, and he becomes even more present among us when we are loving one another. He becomes real in us when the Spirit lives in us and among us.