

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 20-21, 2017
John 14:15-21

“The Promise”

This is the season when college students transition from the academic year of learning to summer jobs or summer classes. That’s what’s been going on in my family as three of my four daughters recently finished up their year of learning. Our oldest daughter graduated from the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg last Saturday in a very damp and chilly outdoor commencement ceremony. So that means I have only two children in college, right? Not for long! Our youngest daughter will graduate from high school next month and so will be starting college in the fall. She’ll be joining her sisters at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond. As I often say: “My children, and my money, go south on I-95.” If you are familiar with the area in Richmond where the Monroe Park campus of VCU is located, smack dab in the middle of this is the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. This beautiful Italian Renaissance structure, on the National and State Registries of Historic Landmarks, was dedicated on Thanksgiving Day over 100 years ago in 1906. Engraved in stone over the central portico above the main doors are these words of Jesus taken from the opening verse of today’s Gospel lesson: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Following Jesus’ call to his disciples of every age to keep his commandments is his promise: **“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you”** (John 14:16-17). It is that promise of Jesus to send “another Helper... even the Spirit of truth,” that we focus on today. The message for today is entitled, “The Promise.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The risen Savior points us ahead to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which is two weeks from today, the culmination of the 50 days of this Easter Season. Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the redeeming work of Jesus continues even to this day as the Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one truth faith” (Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed). That is Jesus’ promise to his followers. The truth is that all of God’s promises find their fulfillment, their “yea and Amen,” in the Son of God, our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. We see all Three Persons of the Holy Trinity mentioned here in today’s Gospel lesson: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All Three Persons work together in this seamless relationship of harmony and love. This is the Triune God whom we worship and serve.

My mother and father-in-law were with us for our oldest daughter’s college graduation, and they returned home this past week. I was the one who took them to the airport on Tuesday morning, luggage in hand and boarding passes printed out. They started preparing for their departure at least a day before they actually left. That’s how it works when we are traveling: we have to get things together, pack suitcases, and make sure everything is ready. Jesus is preparing for his departure, which is imminent. We will celebrate this in the week ahead on Thursday, Ascension Day, which commemorates when Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after he rose from the dead (see Luke 24:50-52). I invite and encourage you to come to the evening service of Holy Communion on Ascension Day (May 25). Jesus is really preparing his disciples for his departure. That’s why he says what he does here: to help them be ready for that day when Jesus withdraws his physical presence, and they will no longer see him. But he promises that he will not leave them as orphans. Under Roman law, in extreme circumstances a parent could legally disown a child, but under that same Roman law, a child who had been legally adopted could never be disowned by parents. The adoption was final and forever. What a blessing for us to know that our adoption as God’s sons and daughters, accomplished through the atoning blood of Jesus shed for us on the tree of the cross, and conveyed to us through the cleansing waters of holy Baptism, is final and

forever! That primal fear deep within us of being abandoned, of being left as orphans, is addressed by Jesus here: **“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you”** (John 14:18). And Jesus does come to us in his Word of forgiveness, peace, and new life. He comes to us in the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism and in the true Body and Blood of Jesus himself in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus comes to reassure us that he truly is with us always, even to the end of the world (Matthew 28:20), and that he will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). That is Jesus’ promise.

Having this promise of Jesus, we now *want* to keep his commandments. It’s not a “got to,” but a “get to.” It’s not some kind of heavy, onerous burden that sucks the joy out of life. Not at all! It is a great blessing to keep Jesus’ commandments because we know that this is the way of life and salvation. As he tells us: **“Whoever has my commandments and keep them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him”** (John 14:21). Jesus sums up all of the commandments in this way: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets”** (Matthew 22:37-40). Love God and love your neighbor. That is our calling in Christ. We do as Christ commands, knowing that our keeping of his commandments will be imperfect at best. This side of heaven, we will always struggle with sin and temptation. But our hope is in Jesus who has overcome and defeated all sin and temptation. Our hope is in Jesus who has kept all of God’s commands perfectly in our behalf. Our hope is in Jesus who loves us and has laid down his life for us.

Even after his ascension, Jesus promises to be with his children in a new and profound way through “another Helper.” Jesus’ physical presence on this earth was limited; only so many people could get close to him. Not so with the One who is to come! That word, “Helper,” is translated from the original παράκλητος, where we get our English word, “paraclete,” which means “helper,” or “advocate.” The original word here is a legal term and denotes one who represents you and speaks in your behalf in a court of law; your defense attorney! This is that holy Helper, the Spirit of truth, who stands beside the child of God and speaks in our behalf before the Father’s throne. This is our Advocate who **“helps us in our weakness... [who] intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words”** (Romans 8:26). This is the promise Jesus makes to his dearly loved children, and that includes you. This is what Jesus means when he says: **“Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live”** (John 14:19). Through this holy Helper, through the Spirit of truth, we do see Jesus. We see him now through the eyes of faith as we walk by faith until that great and final day when we no longer walk by faith, but shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, hold on to this blessed promise! Amen.