

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 1:1-3
SECOND LESSON: John 14:15-21
May 14, 2023
MOTHER'S DAY

“Love on the Inside”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A teacher gave her class of third graders a lesson on the magnet and what it does. The next day in a written test, she included this question: “My name has six letters. The first one is M. I pick up things. What am I?” When the test papers were turned in, the teacher was astonished to find that almost 50 percent of the class answered the question with the word “mother.”

Mothers are not perfect. I know, because I am one. But we do pick up a lot of things. In my household no matter who else is home, I am the one assigned to certain chores. I get to clean up all the throw-up, and pick up all of the dead animals. Their excuse? *You're a mom, you can do it.* Mothers apparently have superpowers when it comes to handling gross things.

On Mother's Day we celebrate mothers, mostly for their love. The handling of gross things is a secondary benefit. But not one of the mothers we celebrate today is perfect. Even the most loving of mothers have made mistakes. But there is one mother who is perfect, and that mother is God. While we are more familiar with the image of God as a father, the mothering is in there too. Jesus once even referred to himself as a mother hen in Luke's gospel, saying, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” (Luke 13: 34)

In our reading today Jesus said, “If you love me you will keep my commands.” This sounds like something a mom would say. But what commands? What did Jesus ever command in the gospel of John? The Jesus of the other gospels tells us to go the second mile, turn the other cheek, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give generously to those in need and judge not lest we be judged, but John's gospel isn't exactly overflowing with commands. Basically, it boils down to one thing—love. The word “commands” here is in the plural but we're hard pressed to find them. We could conceivably include two other instructions as commands, believe in God, believe also in me. Jesus also said in John's gospel, “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (13:14-15) But is a “should” a command? In the gospel of John everything, even service, comes

back to love. It's almost overwhelmingly repetitive. I hate to complain about love, but the gospel of John is very circular. If we fail in love, we fail in everything.

The source of this love is the Holy Spirit. While we as human beings created in the image of God are able to love, to love to the degree Jesus asks of us is divine. But we are not asked to do it alone. Jesus said, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." God's love is poured in us and through us through the Holy Spirit, and we experience God's presence with us because of the Spirit.

Jesus gives the Holy Spirit a new title—that of *parakletos*. We have translated it here as advocate. It is used only five times in the New Testament, four of them in the gospel of John to refer to the Spirit, and once in the letter of I John to refer to Jesus. I John says, "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (1 John 2:1). Jesus says he will ask the Father to send another advocate to help us because Jesus himself is our advocate. The Holy Spirit is our advocate, or *parakletos*, here to help us on earth, and Jesus is our *parakletos* in heaven, our advocate with the Father. Basically, we have been given one advocate to help us not to screw up, and another to advocate on our behalf when we do. God is a realist.

Like some English words that are rich in meaning and associations, *parakletos* has a lot of overlaps. It means far more than an advocate. It can mean a lawyer who pleads our case, or a witness testifying on our behalf. It can be someone who give comfort, counseling or strength. The Holy Spirit is our therapist. The Holy Spirit mothers us when we are feeling down. The Holy Spirit rescues us when we are in danger. *Parakletos* literally means "someone called in to help" and that help can take many forms. The world does not recognize this helping part of God, because the world wants no help. But the disciples were afraid and bereft. Jesus had been a constant presence with them. And now he had told them he was going away. But the Holy Spirit is not another Jesus. The Spirit continues Jesus' work and reminds us of everything he said. Jesus, the Word made flesh, shows us the nature of God in incarnate form. The Spirit reveals these truths to us, but does not take Jesus' place. It is through the work of the Spirit that we are able to discern who Jesus is. Most of us would not want to trade a here and now concrete person for an amorphous presence, but when Jesus was incarnate he could only be in one place at a time, and he could not remain on earth in the flesh. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, can be with all of us throughout time.

While I say all of this, truly understanding the nature of the Holy Spirit and the trinity in general is impossible. When I was a little girl this part of the godhead was called the Holy Ghost, and I thought it was the ghost of Jesus! Theologically inaccurate, but logical. Genesis says, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" in creation. We can't touch the Spirit but we can see evidence of the Spirit. We can't see the Spirit but we can feel the Spirit. We can also grieve the Spirit if we harden our hearts. It is the Spirit who draws us to God, and who gives us a hunger for God. It is the Spirit who enables us to love

the unlovely and to persevere in doing good. People can pretend to be Christians. They can claim to be spiritual. But the proof is always found in action. In order to know what someone *really* believes we have to look at how they live. We have to consider the fruit of their lives.

When the Spirit is at work in us, we change. Some people look for signs and miracles and speaking in tongues. They expect the Holy Spirit to bring excitement. But far more miraculous are the changed lives we see in those who have come to faith. The person who was self-centered becomes involved in helping others. The one fixated on money quits a job with a large income and changes vocation to one involving service. The person who struggles with anger develops patience and tolerance. The gossip becomes aware of the fact that words can become weapons and it's just not fun anymore. Those fighting God slowly lay down their arms and come home.

Christianity would not exist were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit. No one could keep it up for long on self-discipline. A religion of rules might exist, but only love brings life. Coming to believe is like falling in love. We can't do it in the abstract. It's about a real encounter. It is about relationship, and it is the Spirit who makes the presence of Jesus and the Father known to us. When we walk in the love of God through the Spirit we genuinely love one another, even when we are frustrated. We love as Christ has loved us. And people are drawn to God in a community of love. Persuading people that God loves them in words does not work very well. But loving them with God's love does. Amen.

Genesis 1:1-3

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

John 14:15-21

15 "If you love me, keep my commands. **16** And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— **17** the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. **18** I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. **19** Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. **20** On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. **21** Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."