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Holy Faith, Santa Fe
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Easter 6 – Year A
Acts 17.22-31
Psalm 66.7-18
1 Peter 3.13-22
John 14.15-21

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Whenever you get ready to go on a long trip, do you take the time to prepare clear and elaborate instructions for whoever is going to mind your house while you're gone – how to take care of the plants, correct the temperature, take in the mail, set the alarm? It's human nature to want to take care of things and have everything in order before we depart.

Great leaders do the same sort of thing when they step down from their post. Perhaps one of George Washington's greatest addresses is his farewell speech as he stepped down as general of the Continental Army. Dwight Eisenhower is remembered for his warning against the power of the military-industrial complex that he delivered during the last week of his presidency. Ronald Reagan is remembered for his touching letter acknowledging his struggle with the onset of Alzheimer's, recognizing that he would make no more public appearances, and wanting to say farewell before he rode off into the twilight of his life.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is doing the same sort of thing. The setting for Jesus' discourse is the Last Supper. He knows he's going to die the following day, and he's preparing his disciples for his departure and giving them instructions and encouragement about how to carry on in his absence – how to keep their faith, keep their love, keep the movement going. Jesus' words are just as applicable to us today as they were to his disciples 2000 years ago – this week as we celebrate Jesus' ascension

on Thursday when he bodily left this earth to sit on the right hand of his Father, and as we wait for the return of Jesus, yet try to keep our faith, keep our love, keep the movement going.

Jesus says, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." The original word in Greek is "paraclete," which certainly means "advocate," in the sense of someone who advocates for you or pleads your case before a judge – but it means so much more. "Paraclete" can also be translated as "counselor," in the sense of someone who gives you advice, or "helper," "comforter," "encourager." Jesus calls this Advocate "the Spirit of truth...You know [the Spirit], because [the Spirit] abides with you, and [the Spirit] will be in you." We know this Spirit to be the Holy Spirit who lives in us, moves among us, and works through us.

Notice that Jesus says that he will ask and God will send us another Advocate. That's because Jesus is our first Advocate. Jesus is the one who pleads our case and intercedes on our behalf before God. Jesus is our counselor in how to lead our life. Jesus is our helper to make it through the day. Jesus is our comforter to take the sting of pain away. Jesus is our encourager to persevere.

But Jesus knows that he will not always be walking this earth to be with us as an Advocate. He tells his disciples, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." Jesus is talking about the last day when he will come again and, just as Jesus lives forever, we receive his gift of everlasting life. But he says, in the meantime, "I will not leave you orphaned." He will ask God to give us the Holy Spirit, the gift of which we celebrate at the Feast of Pentecost in two weeks, to be another Advocate who intercedes on our behalf, who

counsels us how to follow Jesus' commands, who helps us do God's will, who comforts us in times of sadness, and who encourages us on the way. It's the Holy Spirit who imparts Christ's life to us and unites us to God the Father through Jesus the Son.

This gift is not automatic, however. Jesus begins today's Gospel passage with, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate." There is some reciprocity involved. Jesus has just finished saying, "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." Just as Jesus will do whatever is asked in his name, so he places a reciprocal responsibility on those who do the asking: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And Jesus' commandment is clear: to love one another as he loves us.

Throughout this discourse, Jesus is talking to the collective – to his disciples and to us – and not to the individual. Jesus says, "If you [all] love me, you [all] will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you [all] another Advocate, to be with you [all] forever...You [all] know him, because he abides with you [all], and he will be in you [all]. I will not leave you [all] orphaned."

But at the end of today's Gospel, Jesus focuses on the individual and individual responsibility. Despite our translation that pluralizes the object to whom Jesus is referring, Jesus actually says, "The one who has my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me; and the one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love that one and reveal myself to that one." As Wes Howard-Brook, in his book *Becoming Children of God*, states: "[M]any Christians may at first glance find [this] disturbing: the Father's and Jesus' love comes to those who love Jesus. It is *not*

necessarily universal *or* unconditional but is an aspect of *mutuality* in relationship...Although we heard that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son’ (3:16), that act is completed and past. Whether God *still* loves the world is a [question]. [emphasis original]”¹ My answer to that question is, yes, God still loves the world – God’s love was universally and unconditionally given on the cross so that all who believe in Jesus may have eternal life, but now God’s love is reflected in the love we give God and one another.

Howard-Brook suggests: “God *did* love the world, and gave his Son. *Now*, God and the Son await the love of those who have been empowered to become God’s children [through the gift of the Holy Spirit, perhaps?], and *will* love them. *To these*, Jesus will be revealed. The event of the incarnation has changed forever the relationship between humanity and divinity. From now on, God’s love is a response, not an initiative. [emphasis original]”²

Just like those who house sit for the owner who is away, as the ones, individually and collectively, to whom Jesus has given the instructions and has entrusted with the care of this world, we will need to give an account when he returns. So let us love Jesus and keep his commandment to love one another as he loves us. Amen.

¹ Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books (1994), 322.

² *Ibid.*