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Easter 6

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. . . ."

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• *Lectionary Readings (Year A)*

Revised Common Lectionary

First Reading	Acts 17:22-31
Second Reading	1 Peter 3:13-22
Gospel	John 14:15-21
Psalm	66:8-20

John 14:15-21

“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.”

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

It is not necessary to think that “John’s Gospel fills in a major gap in the Synoptic accounts” (Critical Background) to recognize that John’s description of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples differs greatly from that of the synoptic gospel writers. Where the synoptics offer brief accounts of Jesus’ anticipation of his upcoming betrayal and his sharing bread and wine with the disciples before going out to the Garden of Gethsemane, John’s gospel includes no fewer than five chapters devoted to this gathering (13:1-18:1). The writer of John includes a confrontation with his betrayer, but does not mention bread and wine. Instead, he depicts Jesus as washing the disciples’ feet (13:2b-17), encouraging the disciples at length (13:18-16:33), and concluding by praying for them (17:1-26).

1. This section of the gospel is sometimes referred to as “Jesus’ Farewell Discourse,” as John depicts Jesus preparing his disciples for the time when he will no longer be with them.

As Jesus looks to the future, what might he desire for these men with whom he has shared his travels and his teaching? What might he fear for them? What hopes might he have? How might he be feeling as he sits with them on his last night?

What might the disciples be feeling? Might they sense something about Jesus’ mood or behavior that would affect their own? What hopes or expectations might they hold about the coming days? What anxieties might rise up within them as Jesus announces his coming betrayal?

As Jesus begins to speak to them, one turns to someone beside him and asks,

“ _____ ?”

His fellow replies,

“ _____ ”

At the Workbench: Easter 6

"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."

What might be the connection between *love* and keeping (observing, paying attention to, guarding, keeping watch over) a *commandment*?

What difference might it make to the disciples to anticipate an *Advocate* that will be *with you forever*? What might they expect from such an *Advocate*?

"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."

What is an orphan? What is it to be *orphaned*? What is lost in being *orphaned*?

What does Jesus promise the disciples so that he *will not leave [them] orphaned*?

What is implied to say someone is *in* another person?

In what way might Jesus be *in my Father*?

The disciples *in* Jesus?

Jesus *in* the disciples?

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

John 14:15-21 • May 29, 2011

What questions might be going through the disciples' minds as Jesus speaks?

How might they be feeling as they hear his words?

2. What do you know of a time when someone has bid farewell to those with whom they have shared significant experiences? It might have been at the office, in your family, among friends on a sports team, a work group, or at church. You might search the web for "farewell speech," and consider examples like Lou Gehrig, Dwight Eisenhower, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Bill Gates, or Richard Nixon.

What did the person want to emphasize or recall? What emotions did they sum-
mon up? What hopes or promises did they hold out for the future?

What role did the person expect those left behind to play? What responsibilities,
tasks, perspectives, or goals did they hold up for those left behind?

What resources, supports, or encouragement for the future did they offer or
point out?

3. When have you found yourself in your inner life at a time of bidding farewell to some aspect
of yourself, some time or era, or some significant person or situation?

What did you want to say to what was about to be left behind?

What assurances did you want to make or receive about the future?

How has what was left behind remained with you?

Reading Between the Lines

I will not leave you orphaned. . .

The image Jesus used here may have lost some of its power in a world where maternal mortality rates are low and life expectancies are high. There are fewer *orphans* in our world than there were in the first century. Nevertheless, we know this story.

What do you know of being orphaned? What does your inner orphan need?

How might an *orphan* need an *advocate*?

How might an *advocate* come to an orphan? What might this inner advocate say to or do for your inner orphan?

Take a few moments and write out a dialogue between your orphan and your advocate? What do they have to say to each other?

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"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Paul Knittner in *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian* (Oxford: One World, 2009) writes: "What we are called to be faithful to is not the words themselves, but the way those words are supposed to form or reform our lives. Christians believe certain things in order to act in a certain way. The purpose of doctrine is not primarily to fill our heads but to shape our lives." Consider what John's Jesus does not say at this critical point. There is nothing about himself. No exhortation to worship him or anyone. Nothing about what those left behind are supposed to think or feel or believe. He leaves them with no creed or catechism. Rather than being told what he hopes will fill their heads, Jesus speaks of keeping his commandments. Which, of course, is all about loving. What do you know about ways in which being faithful to words can avoid, short circuit, and even compete with love abiding? What is your personal scheme for loving Jesus? What evidence do you have that the holy words you say are in the process of forming or reforming your life?

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Parallel Readings

From *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

[Ed. Note: While researching the history of HeLa cells—the first human cells cultured outside the human body—the author became enmeshed in the lives of the family of Henrietta Lacks, a poor, black woman from whom the cells had been taken in the 1950’s. Deborah, Henrietta’s daughter, did not learn about her mother’s cells for years, and was frightened by imagining what might have happened.]

“You don’t have to be fearful,” Gary said. “The word of God said if we honor our father and mother, we can live long upon the earth, and you doing that, you honoring your mother.” He smiled and closed his eyes. “I love this scripture that’s in Psalms,” he told her. “It says even if our father and our mother fall sick, the Lord take care of you. Even if you lose everybody like your mother and your sister, God’s love will never turn His back on you.”

But Deborah didn’t hear any of it.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” she said. “You know they mixed her with mice to make a human-mouse? They say she’s not even human anymore!” She laughed a loud, manic laugh and ran to the window. “Holy cuss!” she yelled, “is it raining out there?”

“Much needed rain,” Gary whispered, rocking back and forth.

Deborah grabbed the blue ribbon keychain that always hung around her neck. It said WWJD. “What is this,” she said, “a radio station? I never heard of WWJD.” She started yanking it off her neck.

“Come on, Cuz, it means ‘What Would Jesus Do,’” Gary said. “You know that.”

Deborah stopped fussing with the keys and collapsed back into the chair. “Can you believe they even gave her that AID virus and injected her into monkeys?” She stared at the floor, rocking violently, her chest rising and falling fast with each breath.

Gary sat, calmly rocking in his chair, watching Deborah’s every move, like a doctor studying a patient. “Don’t make yourself sick over something you can’t do nothin about,” Gary whispered to Deborah as she rubbed the welts on her eyes. “It’s not worth it . . . you got to let the Lord handle it.” His eyes drooped closed as he mumbled, “What is Deborah doing for Deborah?”

From *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, copyright © 2010 by Rebecca Skloot. Used by permission of Crown Publishers, a division of Random House, Inc.

When she didn't answer he looked at me and said, "I was talking to God just now—he's trying to make me say stuff, trying to make me move." Deborah called Gary The Disciple because he had a habit of channeling the Lord in the middle of a conversation. It started about twenty years earlier, when he was thirty— one minute he was busy with booze and women, the next he'd had several heart attacks and bypasses, and he woke up preaching.

"I been tryin to keep Him out of this because we've got company," he said, flashing me a bashful grin. "But sometimes He just won't let me keep Him out."

Deborah called Gary The Disciple because he had a habit of channeling the Lord in the middle of a conversation.

Gary's brown eyes went vacant, unfocused, as he stood slowly from his chair, spread his arms wide, and reached toward Deborah, who struggled to her feet, hobbled toward him, and wrapped her arms around his waist. The moment she touched him, his upper body seized like he'd been electrocuted. His arms thrust closed, hands clasping each side of Deborah's head, palms to her jaw, fingers spread from the back of her skull to the bridge of her nose. Then he started shaking. He squeezed Deborah's face to his chest as her shoulders heaved in silent sobs, and tears rolled from Gary's eyes.

As they rocked back and forth, Gary tipped his head to the sky, and began singing in a hauntingly beautiful baritone.

"Welcome, into this place . . . Welcome, into this broken vessel." His singing, quiet at first, grew louder with each word until it filled the house and poured into the tobacco fields. "You desire to abide in the praises of your people, so I lift my hand, and I lift my heart, and I offer up this praise unto ya, Lord."

"You're welcome into this broken vessel, Lord," he whispered, squeezing Deborah's head in his palms. His eyes shot open and closed, and he began to preach, sweat pouring from his face.

"That you said in your word Lord, that the BELIEVER would lay hands on the sick, and that they shall RECOVER!" His voice rose and fell, from a whisper to a yell and back. "I REALIZE God that TONIGHT there's just some things doctors CANNOT DO!"

"Amen Lord," Deborah mumbled, face pressed to his chest, voice muffled.

"We thank ya tonight," Gary whispered. "Because we need your help with them CELLS, Lord . . . we need your help liftin the BURDEN of them cells from this woman! Lift this burden, Lord, take it away, we don't NEED it!"

Deborah started convulsing in Gary's arms, weeping and whispering, "Thank ya, Lord . . . Thank ya, Lord." Gary squeezed his eyes tight, and yelled along with her, "THANK YOU, LORD! THANK YOU FOR TONIGHT!" Their voices grew louder together, until Gary stopped, tears and sweat pouring from his face onto Deborah as she screamed, "Thank you Jesus!" and let loose with a chorus of hallelujahs and praise

Gods. Gary swayed back and forth, breaking into song again, his voice deep and old, as if coming from the generations who worked his tobacco fields before him: *"I know the Lord been good, yoooooooooooooh . . . I know the Lord been good."*

"Real good," Deborah whispered.

"*He's put food on my table . . .*" Gary dropped his voice, humming as Deborah spoke: "Show me which way to go, Lord," she said. "Show me where you want me to go with these cells, Lord, please. I'll do anything you want me to do, Lord, just help me with this BURDEN. I can't do it alone I thought I could. But I can't TAKE it, Lord."

Mmmmmmm mmmmmmm mmmmmmm, Gary hummed.

"Thank you Lord for giving me this information about my mother and my sister, but please HELP ME, cause I know I can't handle this burden by myself. Take them CELLS from me, Lord, take that BURDEN. Get it off and LEAVE it there! I can't carry it no more, Lord. You wanted me to give it to you and I just didn't want to, but you can have it now, Lord. You can HAVE IT! Hallelujah, amen."

For the first time since Gary stood from his chair, he looked straight at me.

I'd been watching all this from a recliner a few feet away, dumbfounded, terrified to move or make noise, frantically scribbling notes. In any other circumstance I might have thought the whole thing was crazy. But what was happening between Gary and Deborah at that moment was the furthest thing from crazy I'd seen all day. As I watched, all I could think was, *Oh my god . . . I did this to her.*

Gary stared into my eyes as he hugged Deborah's sobbing body and whispered to her, "You're not alone."

Looking at me, Gary said, "She can't handle the burden of these cells no more, Lord! She can't do it!" Then he raised his arms above Deborah's head and yelled, "LORD, I KNOW you sent Miss Rebecca to help LIFT THE BURDEN of them CELLS!" He thrust his arms toward me, hands pointed at either side of my head. "GIVE THEM TO HER!" he yelled. "LET HER CARRY THEM."

I sat frozen, staring at Gary, thinking, *Wait a minute, that wasn't supposed to happen!*

Deborah stepped away from Gary's embrace, shaking her head, wiping her eyes, and yelling, "Phew!" They both laughed. "Thanks, Cuz," she said, "I feel so light!"

"Some things you got to release," Gary said. "The more you hold them in, the worse you get. When you release them, they got to go somewhere else. The Bible says He can carry all that burden."

She reached up and touched his face. "You always know what I need. You know how to take care of me."

"It's not so much that I see it, but He sees it," Gary said, smiling. "I didn't know all that was coming out my mouth. That was the Lord talking to you."

But what was happening between Gary and Deborah at that moment was the furthest thing from crazy I'd seen all day.

“Well, hallelujah,” Deborah said, giggling. “I’m comin back tomorrow for some more of this! Amen!”

It had been drizzling outside for hours, but suddenly rain pounded the tin roof and turned to hail so loud that it sounded like applause. The three of us walked to the front door to look.

“It’s the Lord saying he heard us,” Gary said, smiling. “He got the faucet turned on high to clean you out, Cuz!”

“Praise the Lord!” Deborah yelled.

Gary hugged Deborah good-bye, then hugged me. Deborah grabbed her long black raincoat, opened it wide, and raised it above her like an umbrella, nodding for me to come under with her. She let the coat fall onto both of our heads, then put her arm tight around my shoulders.

“You ready for some soul cleansing?” she yelled, opening the door.

Rebecca Skloot

From *Lovers of the Lost*

Waving Goodbye

Why, when we say goodbye
at the end of an evening, do we deny
we are saying it at all, as in We’ll
be seeing you, or I’ll call, or Stop in,
somebody’s always at home? Meanwhile, our friends,
telling us the same things, go on disappearing
beyond the porch light into the space
which except for a moment here or there
is always between us, no matter what we do.
Waving goodbye, of course, is what happens
when the space gets too large
for words—a gesture so innocent
and lonely, it could make a person weep
for days. Think of the hundreds of unknown
voyagers in the old, fluttering newsreel
patting and stroking the growing distance
between their nameless ship and the port
they are leaving, as if to promise I’ll always
remember, and just as urgently, Always
remember me. It is loneliness, too,
that makes the neighbor down the road lift
two fingers up from his steering wheel as he passes
day after day on his way to work in the hello
that turns into goodbye? What can our own raised
fingers do for him, locked in his masculine
purposes and speeding away inside the glass?
How can our waving wipe away the reflex
so deep in the woman next door to smile

Wesley McNair, “Waving Goodbye,” from *Lovers of the Lost: New & Selected Poems*, (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 2010), p. 29.

and wave on her way into her house with the mail,
 we'll never know if she is happy
 or sad or lost? It can't. Yet in that moment
 before she and all the others and we ourselves
 turn back to our disparate lives, how
 extraordinary it is that we make this small flag
 with our hands to show the closeness we wish for
 in spite of what pulls us apart again
 and again: the porch light snapping off,
 the car picking its way down the road through the dark.

Wesley McNair

From *Believer Beware*

My Holy Ghost People

I don't understand Holy Ghost people, but I better believe them—every strange word. I'm a quarter Holy Ghost person myself: Pauline begat Judy and Barbara, and Barbara begat me.

I can't remember witnessing anybody speaking in tongues, but I must have heard the Word like that when my grandmother would take me to her Church of God when I was little. And I've heard from my mother what it's like: When people get worked up in church, somebody may break into what sounds like gibberish. And sometimes somebody will run whooping around the sanctuary, and some loudmouthed Sister so-and-so may interpret—it'll be something generic, like *Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!* They don't always interpret, though, and they don't speak in tongues at every service. It's supposed to be when the Spirit comes up on you, as they say, and when it does, they say something like *Ashundado ashundado kundai! Ashundado ashundado kundai!*

I wonder why Grandmother says "the Lord" more than "Jesus" or "Christ," and "Holy Ghost" more than "Holy Spirit." Our Lord Jesus Christ is supposed to be one and the same with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, so maybe it doesn't matter what you call any of them. But God seems more cosmic to me, out there reigning over the whirling universe, and the Spirit more down to earth—blowing through everything in the world, sometimes hard and fast, stirring up even Jesus in the pillow of your heart. Jesus is the one who loves you no matter what, and He died for your sins, and He'll come again, so He's Christ too. But the Lord and His Ghost sound different and elsewhere to me. The Lord seems stern and strange, every time I hear his name, like far-off thunder; the Holy Ghost startles like the rumble, quaking louder and closer.

Ashley Makar

Ashley Makar, "My Holy Ghost People" in Jeff Sharlett and Peter Manseau, Eds., *Believer Beware: First-Person Dispatches from the Margins of Faith*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), pp. 27, 29-30.

Critical Background

From *Encountering John*

Another Divine Helping Presence (14:15-31; 15:26-16:16)

Continuing to encourage his disciples, Jesus proceeds to elaborate on another major advantage of his “going to the Father”—the giving of the Spirit. As John has made clear earlier in his Gospel, this giving of the Spirit was possible only subsequent to Jesus’ glorification (7:39). With this glorification now imminent (cf. 12:23; 13:1), Jesus spends much of his time in the Upper Room preparing his followers for life in the age of the Spirit.

Here John’s Gospel fills in a major gap in the Synoptic accounts. For as a survey of these writings shows, references to the Spirit are limited almost exclusively to his role in Jesus’ earthly ministry: he conceives Jesus in Mary’s womb resulting in the virgin birth (Mt 1:18, 20; Lk 1:35); descends on Jesus at his baptism (Mk 1:10) and leads him into the wilderness at the temptation (Mk 1:12); rests on Jesus throughout his ministry, designating him as Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord (Lk 4:18 citing Is 61:1; Lk 10:21; cf. Mt 12:18 citing Is 42:1); and the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (that is, attributing God’s work through Jesus to Satan) cannot be forgiven (Mk 3:29 par.). The only instances transcending the role of the Spirit in Jesus’ own ministry are the Baptist’s designation of Jesus as the one who will “baptize with the Holy Spirit” (Mk 1:8 par.); Luke’s reference to God’s giving of the Holy Spirit to those who ask (Lk 11:13); and Jesus’ promise to his followers that the Holy Spirit will speak for them in times of persecution (Mk 13:11 = Lk 12:12).

In the first half of his Gospel, John’s treatment of the Spirit largely resembles that of the Synoptics. Thus he also includes the Baptist’s designation of Jesus as the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:32-33; cf. Mk 1:8 par.) and emphasizes that the Spirit in all his fullness rested on Jesus during his earthly ministry (1:32; 3:34; cf. Lk 4:18). Moreover, John stresses the Spirit’s role in regeneration (3:5, 6, 8; cf. 1:12-13), worship (4:23-24), and the giving of life (6:63). But as in John’s presentation of Jesus’ followers (see ch. 11 above), his adoption of a post-exaltation vantage point regarding Jesus leads to a vastly different portrayal in the second half of his Gospel, most notably in the farewell discourse. In this unique body of teaching, the Spirit is featured primarily by the use of two characteristic designations: “the *paraklētōs*” (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; elsewhere in the New Testament only in 1 John 2:1, there

Andreas J. Köstenberger,
*Encountering John: The Gospel
in Historical, Literary, and
Theological Perspective*, (Grand
Rapids: Baker Book House,
1999), pp. 156-158. Reprinted
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with reference to Jesus “our Advocate” with God the Father), and “the Spirit of truth” (4:17; 15:26; 16:13). The fact that both expressions are used side by side in 15:26 makes it clear that they are closely related.

We will first deal with the designation “Spirit of truth,” since it is the more straightforward and noncontroversial of these terms. In the context of the present chapter, Jesus has just been characterized as “the truth” (14:6), in keeping with statements already made in the Prologue (1:14, 17). The concept of truth in John’s Gospel encompasses several aspects:

1. truthfulness as opposed to falsehood: “to speak the truth” means to make a true rather than false statement, that is, to represent the facts as they actually are (cf. 8:40,45,46; 16:7; “to witness to the truth”: 5:33; 18:37);
2. truth in its finality as compared to previous, preliminary expressions: this is its *eschatological* dimension (cf. esp. 1:17: “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”);
3. truth is an identifiable body of knowledge with actual propositional content (e.g., 8:32: “you will know the truth”; 16:13: “he will guide you into all truth”);
4. truth is a sphere of operation, be it for worship (4:23-24) or sanctification (17:17, 19).

Perhaps “helping Presence” captures the import of the term better than any other. . .

The Spirit is involved in all four aspects: he accurately represents the truth regarding Jesus; he is the eschatological gift of God; he imparts true knowledge of God; and he is operative in both worship and sanctification.

We turn to a discussion of the second major designation of the Spirit in John, that of *paraklētōs*. The translation of this term has proved particularly difficult, since there does not seem to be an exact equivalent in the English language. None of the expressions chosen in various English translations seems fully adequate: “the Counselor” (NIV) smacks too much of contemporary notions of counseling, focusing primarily on emotional or psychological aspects (though the legal term Counselor is more appropriate); “the Helper” (NASB, ISV) is more neutral but lacks the legal connotation possibly present; the fact that some translations give several alternative renderings in footnotes also suggests that any one English rendering may be inadequate (cf., e.g., NLT: “the Counselor; or Comforter, or Encourager, or Advocate”). Some make reference to the root meaning of the word, “one called alongside to help,” but it is unclear whether first-century users of this expression consciously drew on this background. There is evidence that the phrase was used in a legal setting, but it is less clear that the meaning should be restricted to “Advocate” or the like. Perhaps “helping Presence” captures the import of the term better than any other, for the following reasons: (1) this is what

Jesus was while with the disciples; (2) this encompasses the various functions laid out for the Spirit in John 14-16; (3) this transcends (but may include) the legal context of the term (see esp. 16:7-11).

Significantly, the first reference to the Spirit in John 14 refers to him as “another” *paraklētos*. This indicates that the Spirit’s presence with the disciples will replace Jesus’ presence with them while on earth. According to John, then, the primary role of the Spirit is that of substitute presence for Jesus: “he lives with you and will be in you” (14:17). When the Spirit comes to dwell in believers, it is as if Jesus himself takes up residence in them. “The Spirit is the divine presence when Jesus’ physical presence is taken away from his followers.” Thus Jesus is able to refer to the coming of the Spirit by saying, “I will come to you” (14:18). This relieves a primary concern for Jesus’ first followers in the original setting of the Farewell Discourse: Jesus’ departure will not leave them as orphans (cf. v. 18); just as God was present with them through Jesus, he will continue to be present with them through his Spirit.

The Spirit’s role thus ensures the continuity between Jesus’ pre-and post-glorification ministry. What is more, the coming of the Spirit will actually constitute an advance in God’s operations with and through the disciples: “But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (16:7; cf. 14:12).

As Jesus’ substitute presence, the Spirit will have a variety of functions in believers’ lives:
he will bring to remembrance all that Jesus taught his disciples (14:26);
he will testify regarding Jesus together with his followers (15:26);
he will convict the world of sin, (un)righteousness, and judgment (16:8-11); and
he will guide Jesus’ disciples into all truth and disclose what is to come (16:13).

Andreas J. Köstenberger

Andy Kille invites your comments and responses to this Sunday’s Workbench. You can reach him at editor@bibleworkbench.org