

Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • August 22, 2021



The Scripture
John 14:15-27

"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." Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

The Message

“11 Indispensable Relationships: You Need the Paraclete”

Mark Briley

To give a child a balloon is to give them the world. There is something about this mysterious ball that magically floats in the air. Red Robin has figured this out. You know, the burger joint? Every kid that comes into that place gets a balloon making it a favorite place of our kids to eat when they were growing up in Tulsa.

Balloons can also betray you in an instant. You're a kid; holding a magical balloon and then... that balloon gets away from your grasp. Earth shattering. Watching it float away... watching terror fill their faces, alligator tears flooding down their cheeks. And you think, "We'll, there'll always be another one" but... sometimes, Red Robin runs out. It's a dark day when Red Robin runs out of balloons. I know from experience. The joy of connection. The agony of loss. The life of a balloon.

It is perhaps the life of our relationships as well. New ones come. Old ones pop and let us down. Some cheer us up like a balloon artist, who turns a boring tube of air into a barking poodle or an all but functional ten-speed bicycle like Vince Vaughn's character in *Wedding Crashers*. Other relationships let us down like a balloon that slowly deflates until all life is gone. Some keep us afloat during the hardest seasons of our lives.

We've spent our summer talking about these relationships. Today, we finish the sermon series that guided us week to week through the many *witnesses* in our lives – eleven to be exact.¹ We've considered how they shape us and how our *witness* shapes others as well.

Today is a bonus to the series. We are actually sharing our twelfth *witness*... an extremely important relationship you need in your life. You need the *Paraclete*. Are you familiar with this term? It's not a bird, per say, though my autocorrect desperately wants me to preach that you need a parakeet *witness* in your life. And perhaps you do. *Paraclete* is the Greek word most typically used synonymously with the Holy Spirit. Jesus occasionally uses the word to refer to himself, but mostly we translate it as “*Comforter*” or “*Advocate*,” certainly an important *witness* to close out this series. Why? Because life is messy.

We know our human *witnesses* will fail us at times, deflate slowly perhaps, or pop like a pin to balloon. We've named 11 other *witnesses*. We know each is a flawed human just like you and me. Even with best intentions, sometimes, Jethros fail. Sometimes,

¹ 11: Indispensable relationships you can't be without. Leonard Sweet. David C. Cook publishing. Colorado Springs. 2008. This series is grounded in and inspired by Sweet's work in this book. Any quotes or references to Len Sweet are linked to this work.

Yodas are no-shows. Sometimes, Jonathans turn into Judases. Sometimes, Jerusalem gets paved, and they put in a parking garage.

Jesus knows this about humanity. In his farewell discourse in John's Gospel, he addresses this with his disciples. "*I don't give you as the world gives,*" he says. "*I give you something more.*" I won't flake out on you. I am constant, steady, always there even when the world dumps you. We don't have to do more than turn on the news, open our social media feeds, or simply turn around to know the world is a real mess right now and it's hard to keep our chins up sometimes.

When I was doing youth ministry in Indianapolis, we had a Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper fundraiser every year to support youth mission trips and retreats. The youth loved it... the congregation was wildly supportive... but it was a hot mess and a half for sure... mainly on our power grid. We would plug in pancake griddles wherever we could find an outlet in the church as we were feeding hundreds of people in a short amount of time. Our electrical system was not designed to handle this level of pancake madness. So we were constantly tripping breakers and having to run back and forth to power-up again before the bubbled pancake batter deflated too early. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. The building wasn't built to handle the pull on so much power.

As pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote this week, "*the system shut down when modernity asked too much of it.*"² Nadia is known for telling it like it is and not pulling any punches. I've met her a couple of times and the truth holds. The piece she wrote this week speaks to this breakdown. She said, "*I don't think our psyches were developed to hold, feel, and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow, and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day.*" We were developed to hold all of those things in our village – not in the universe. She admitted that her emotional circuit breaker keeps overloading because the hardware was built for an older time. She said what I've heard others saying too. "*When I check social media and watch the news, I never feel like I'm enough; that I can do enough.*"

She quotes Enneagram teacher, Suzanne Stabile, who has taught many of us to ask the question in moments like this and much lesser, mundane moments as well. "*What is mine to do? What is NOT mine to do?*" It's not a matter of values but an issue of math. I can't do all the things... be all the things... superhero all the things. I just can't. She offers some helpful reminders:

² <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/if-you-cant-take-in-anymore-theres>

1. We are still living through a global pandemic which means the baseline of anxiety and grief is higher than ever and shared by everyone (*even when some can't name it for themselves*).
2. The world is on fire literally and metaphorically. But...
3. I only have so much water in my bucket to help with the fires.

So, she tries to tell herself, "*It's okay to focus on **one** fire.*" It's okay to do what is *yours* to do. Say what is *yours* to say. Care about what is *yours* to care about. That's enough. If immigration reform is yours to do – and we have folks in our congregation who are rock stars in this critically important field of work – thank you! Inevitably, however, someone will say to you, "*But what about climate change? Don't you care that the planet is dying?*" And you could turn to them and ask, "*Do you have no heart for immigrants?*" but then we're all just fueling fires, not putting them out. Instead, Nadia writes, "*be grateful for the people who are called to work on and respond to worthy issues that are not fires we ourselves are equipped to put out.*" And maybe what someone really needs to hear this morning is this next word: "*If your circuits are overwhelmed there's a reason, and the reason isn't because you are heartless, it's because there is not a human heart on this planet that can bear all of what is happening right now. So, thank you for being a person who cares about and responds to animals, or the environment, or immigration, or domestic violence, or any of the other worthy-to-be-cared-about-messes we are in the midst of right now. Just, thank you.*"

Do you feel overwhelmed like this right now? It's stressful and painful and heartbreaking. Is there any *witness* that can come alongside of us in such a time? A church friend asked me last week – combing back through this series of *witnesses* – "*Where is the Advocate witness?*" And this week gives us the Paraclete – the comforter – the Advocate. The Spirit promises a constant presence... a balloon to hold onto that never leaves you. And we sure could use an image of humanity all hanging on to a Spirit balloon right now. Could you see it? Not people holding all the balloons... but each one holding one.

We struggle with this concept of the Paraclete. In our humanity, we struggle to believe in a relationship that has no ulterior motives, no selfish intentions, no possibility of loss or abandonment. But the Paraclete is always there even as our understanding of the Spirit of God runs the spectrum across Christian communities and followers. Who is this *witness* really?

Translating Paraclete as comforter can be misleading. We start thinking warm fuzzies. We think of the comforter that we pull up to our chins at bed in night. In John's account, "*Comforter*" describes a bracing friend... one who sees us through it all... who walks with us and never abandons us... but doesn't alleviate the obstacles necessarily either.

While no one had deeper compassion for humanity than Jesus, there is also no one who has loftier dreams for humanity than Jesus. Discovering and living into these dreams will not come without sacrifice and heartache but rather call for courage in the midst of it all. As Jesus says in our discourse in John's gospel, "*Do not be afraid,*" it may be more accurately translated as "*Do not be without courage.*" We launch a four-week series next week called, *Courageous*. If you've been thinking about inviting someone to come join you for worship – this may be a great time, as I think we all could use a dose of courage about now.

We know crises and trials come – we're living this reality now. When crises come into our lives, they either break us *down* or break us *open*. Whether it causes a *breakdown* or a *break open* may hinge on our relationship with the *witness* of the Paraclete. This *witness* is one of inner fortitude. It's God in us. Only twice do we find in the Bible that it says, "*God is*" something. In John 4:24 it says, "*God is Spirit.*" and in First John it says, "*God is love.*" How do we really get ahold of "*God is Spirit,*" "*God is Love*"? There's a grounding in a person that has such a relationship – and it can become quite palpable. It's hard to describe. When the Apostle Paul tries to describe heaven in First Corinthians, he can only say, heaven is like "*unwordable words*". How do you capture the Spirit?

It's why I love the question in our text today asked by Judas (*not Iscariot as is interestingly noted in the passage*). Jesus is saying all of this, "*I'm leaving but I'm not leaving. You won't see me, but I'll be with you.*" and some of the disciples are doing that side-eye peek at each other like, "*Do you know what he's talking about?*" or "*Are we going to eat soon?*" But Judas is bold enough to ask: "*Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?*"

And this is big, right? How will I know what is the Spirit of God moving in my life and what is indigestion? How will I know what is mine to do and what is for someone else to do?

And I could get all scriptural on you and say, "*Philippians 4:8 tells that story.*" What does it say? Paul says, "*Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.*" – That's the Spirit's move. That's how you'll know. Maybe. But you want to *know*. You want to say in the middle of the angst of your life and the tug and pull of the world: "*Give me a balloon, God, so that I know you're here; that you've got me and you're leading me somewhere.*"

Give me a man running toward me shirtless in the church parking lot, a sweaty mess, asking, "*Do you have a shirt I can have – I'm late for a job interview!*" True story –

happened to Terry a week ago, and we're all praying that guy got the job sporting a Broadway Christian Church t-shirt. *Where Love Leads*, friends. We want it that clear.

Here's the deal – you *know* how this clarity comes. You don't have to go to seminary or have a Master's in Philosophy or sleep at a Holiday Inn Express. It's all about relationship. Clarity comes in *witness*. You want a truth teller in your life? You've got to be doing life with that person on a regular basis. You want someone who's got your back? You've got to be invested in that relationship. Same is true of the Spirit of God. You study and pray, listen and make yourself available and see what starts to become clear about what is yours to do. Jesus says, "*When you love, you'll know.*" The invitation to this relationship is the center of Jesus' message. It is an invitation to trust that his companionship is real... to trust that God is actually going to make all things new as is promised time and time again throughout Scripture. You will continue to be tempted in a thousand different ways *not* to believe this. There will be seasons of your life that you fight this reality.

Sweet describes the difficulty of maintaining this relationship with God this way: "*I have the image of a loving parent, holding on in a big bear hug as a rebellious child flails away, struggling with all the child's might to break free... yet all the while hoping that those strong, protective arms never let go.*"

We desire the connection... the comfort, the possibility that something beyond the pain and heartbreak of this life is legit... but we also fight it. We fight it with the mentality that we can make it on our own. Salvation can come through our own hard work or business savvy or street smarts. That's the world's peace. Jesus says, "*I don't give peace like the world gives.*" The world can provide wealth and guilty pleasures... but it cannot give peace of soul. The world's idea of peace is *lack of conflict*, but it is never given. The world's peace comes only when someone wins... a peace treaty will be signed but only when one party surrenders... when one loses.

Jesus says we don't have to win this peace... "*I will **give** it to you.*" No matter how much you rebel. No matter how many times you fight it. "*I will give you peace when you seek it.*" "*Keep my commandments,*" he says. And we're not talking a huge complicated list here. In this discourse in John's gospel, Jesus says, "*Here's the deal. Love me. Love each other.*" That is how you'll know peace. Do not be without courage. Be strong enough to error on the side of love.

When we get into a series like this one... one about relationships... it can get tricky. For some, it has been therapeutic to consider these *witnesses*, identify them, strengthen them, or even seek them out if any particular *witness* was missing. For some it has been difficult... troubling memories of relationships gone sour, broken-

hearts, feelings of isolation or loneliness, or the realization that you have missed out along the way on the opportunity to be a better *witness* to others in your life. I know it's a mess out there right now, friends.

Rob Bell reminds us that the struggle is real. He tells about a wedding ceremony he officiated several years ago. *"The bride wore a white summer dress, the groom a white linen shirt. They insisted on the simplest ceremony possible. It was held in a park in a grove of trees. Their family and friends stood in a circle, with the three of us in the middle. I began with a welcome, they exchanged vows and rings. I pronounced them husband and wife, they kissed, everybody clapped. The ceremony took seven minutes.*

The couple was then handed a cluster of helium balloons on strings. The balloons, I told everybody, were symbols of their past struggles [unhealthy decisions made; heartbreak initiated or received; even sins committed – and they were quite specific about each]. As a picture of starting over, together, they wanted their first act as a married couple to be letting the balloons go.

*They walked out of the grove of trees into an adjoining field. Just the two of them, holding hands, standing in knee-high grass, exchanging words that only they could hear. Then they raised the balloons above their heads and let them go. We all stood there, watching those balloons float away until they drifted from sight. There are moments you wonder if you'll ever forget. Events that sear themselves on your conscience. That moment was one of those for me."*³

Bell wrote how it wasn't easy for them moving forward. We hope we've turned a page, turned over a new leaf, got a fresh start... and we have... and we do. But they were still imperfect humans... trying to conquer the trials of each new day. As Bell tells the story – the road they walked after that wasn't any easier than the one that led them to that balloon-release-wedding.

I wish that was it. *"And they lived happily ever after."* But life seldom resolves big realities in 30 minutes like our favorite sitcoms. Things don't always turn out well. Sometimes they don't turn out at all. Sometimes everything falls apart, and we wonder if there's any point to any of it.



I turn around this past week to dumpster fire after dumpster fire. I even saw this news story saying that a tissue used by famed soccer star, Lionel Messi, during a press conference where he announced he was leaving his Barcelona team. The used tissue

³ I cannot find the original source of Bell's story here. Here is his website, however, which reveals a good deal of his work: www.robbybell.com.

he used to wipe a tear is on the market to be sold for one million US dollars. *What are we doing here?*

We're tempted to shut ourselves off, fortify the walls around our hearts, and forge ahead, promising ourselves that we will never open ourselves again to be a *witness* to anyone, let alone the Spirit of God. But... as one of my Broadway friends recently shared, "*You're either hopeful, I or you're part of the problem.*"

I have to believe that we can recover from anything. I have to believe that God can put anything—and anyone – back together. I have to believe that the God Jesus invites us to trust... this Paraclete that comes to us... walks through life with us. I have to believe that this God is as good as Jesus says God is. *Loving. Forgiving. Merciful. Full of Grace.* I have to believe that this Paraclete not only gives me peace but also brings peace to my other relationships... the other *witnesses* that have come to help me make sense of my life. And no matter the trial... no matter the failure... no matter how empty-handed I may believe myself to be, I have to believe that God does not run out of balloons.

May it be so.

Song of Focus

"You've Got a Friend"

WORDS AND MUSIC BY CAROL KING, © 1971, COLGEMS EMI MUSIC

Added Bridge by Ed Varnum

"You've Got a Friend" - verse one and refrain

Added Bridge:

Oh God, it's good to know,
you're always here,
that you are forever by my side.
Thank you for the Holy Spirit,
speaking words of truth,
to remind me that you always abide.
Yes, thank you for the Paraclete,
the Advocate and Comforter,
Spirit of Truth, with me along life's way,
who lives in me and reminds
me of your love and of your grace,
that I might listen, that I might hear you say:

"You've Got a Friend" - refrain