



## I Am in My Father...

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, April 27, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Acts 1:22-31; Psalm 6:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; and John 14: 15-21.

Today's gospel builds on last week's reading. Both are from the farewell discourse in John which comes between the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane. You might think of it as after dinner conversation. Jesus has told the disciples of his impending death. The primary concern is not with what will become of *Jesus* but what will become of his *disciples*. They are soon to feel orphaned and abandoned in a hostile world. Jesus says to them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled," and everything that follows seeks to reassure them.

Last week I mentioned there is a pattern of promises that carry a commission and the commissions imply a promise. The One who sends accompanies those sent. The One who commands them to love empowers them to love. The One who loves expects the loved to love others, and the One who abides with the disciples expects them to go just as Jesus himself was sent.

To refresh your memory, the three promises are these. First, we will abide with God and that abode has been made ready for us. Next, there is a sure and certain way there. And thirdly, there is a power that will sustain the community of followers on the journey and allow them to do even greater works than Jesus did.

Last week we reflected on Jesus as the way, the truth and the life. Today we have the third promise, the promise of another Advocate. Jesus during his life time has been that Advocate for us, and now that he is preparing to leave he assures the disciples and us that there will be another Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. The coming Advocate is the One with power that will sustain the community on the journey and allow them to do even greater works.

Two of the words that frame John's thinking here and throughout his gospel are the words obedience and love. In English, the word obedience is a rather stern word meaning to submit to authority, or to conform to the will of another, or to do as we're told. However, in Greek it originally meant to hear and respond. The nuance is much softer. It doesn't mean mindless compliance. In Greek, to be obedient is to hear and respond. The connotation is warmer and more relational.

The other word important to understanding John is the word love. In English, love is an emotion, a feeling. We use it to mean affection, eros, friendship, and sometimes as agape or caritas, the self-sacrificing love of God for humanity.” In John’s gospel however, love is not a feeling. Love is an act. It is something we do, not something we feel. We may feel we love someone, or we may feel we love God, but if it does not express itself in action, it is invalid. For John, these are closely intertwined. If we love God, we will hear and respond. We will act in the best interest of others irrespective of how we feel. We will act as Christ would act.

The example that comes to mind is the parent who responds to a crying infant at 3 o’clock in the morning. I think it is safe to say that parents do not do this because they were suddenly awakened by great waves of affection. They do it because they are committed to the best interest of the infant, even at 3 o’clock in the morning.

These meanings inform the way John writes. By placing love and obedience at verses 15, 21 and 24 it becomes clear that the promises are specifically for those who love obediently.

Under the heading of re-assurance, note the radical assurances Jesus offers in verses 18-21:

1. I am coming to you.
2. The world will no longer see me, but you will see me.
3. Because I live, you also will live.
4. I am in my Father — you are in me — and I am in you.
5. Those who keep my commandments are showing their love for me.
6. The love shown to me flows on to God.
7. In this love I will return the love and show myself to these people.

Today Jesus says, “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.”

The language that “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” involves metaphors not common to our culture. Happily, I came across a story from ESPN.com of all places that I think provides a glimpse. Here’s the tale.

Derek Redmond was a young British runner, one who had sky rocketed to fame by shattering his country’s 400-meter record at age 19. But then an Achilles tendon injury forced him to withdraw from the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, and he endured five separate surgeries. When the Summer Olympics arrived in Barcelona in 1992, Derek Redmond was absolutely aching for a medal.

On the day of the 400-meter race, 65,000 fans streamed into the stadium, anxious to witness one of sports’ most thrilling events. High in the stands is Derek’s father, Jim, a faithful witness to every one of his son’s world competitions.

The race begins and Derek breaks through the pack to seize the lead. “Keep it up, keep it up,” his father Jim says to himself. Heading down the backstretch, only 175 meters from the finish line, Derek is a shoo-in to win this semifinal heat and qualify for the Olympic finals.

But then Derek hears a pop. It’s his right hamstring. He pulls up lame, looking as if he has been shot. His leg quivering, Derek begins to hop on the other leg, and then he slows down and falls to the track. Medical personnel run toward him as he sprawls on the ground, holding his right hamstring.

At the very same moment, there is a stir at the top of the stands. Jim Redmond, seeing his son in trouble, begins to race down from the top row. He is pushing toward the track, sidestepping some people and bumping into others. He has no right or credential or permission to be on the track, but all he can think about is getting to his son. He is absolutely single-minded about this, and isn’t going to be stopped by anyone.

On the track, Derek realizes that his dream of an Olympic medal is gone. He is alone. The other runners streak across the finish line, with Steve Lewis of the United States winning the race. Redmond is orphaned, as it were, a lonely figure on the track, friendless, parentless and alone.

Tears pour down Derek’s face, and all he can think is, “I don’t want to take a DNF.” A Did-Not-Finish was not even part of his vocabulary. When the medical crew arrives with a stretcher, Derek tells them, “No, there’s no way I’m getting on that stretcher. I’m going to finish my race.” And so he lifts himself to his feet, ever so slowly and carefully, and he starts hobbling down the track.

Suddenly, the crowd realizes that Derek isn’t dropping out of the race. He isn’t limping off the track in defeat, but is actually continuing on one leg, in a fiercely determined effort to make it to the finish line. One painful step at a time, each one a little slower and more agonizing than the one before, Derek limps onward, and the crowd begins to cheer for him. The fans rise to their feet and their cries grow louder and louder, building into a thundering roar.

At that moment, Jim Redmond reaches the bottom of the stands, vaults over the railing, dodges a security guard, and runs out to his son. He reaches him at the final curve, about 120 meters from the finish line, slips his arm through that of his son and grips him around his waist. “I’m here,” said Jim, “We’ll finish together.”

Derek puts his arms around his father’s shoulders and together, father and son struggle toward the finish line with 65,000 people cheering. Just a few steps from the end, with the crowd in a frenzy, Jim releases the grip he has on his son so that Derek can cross the finish

line by himself.

“I’m the proudest father alive,” Jim Redmond tells the press afterward, with tears in his eyes. “I’m prouder of him than I would have been if he had won the gold medal.

I think this gives us a glimpse of what Jesus means when he says, “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” And in much the same way that this father rushed to help his injured son finish his race, the Holy Spirit comes to us to help us finish ours. (Weinburg, Rick. “Derek and dad finish Olympic 400 together.” *ESPN Web Site*. ESPN.com, sports.espn.go.com. Retrieved November 9, 2004. Photo at [astropix.com/SPORTSPIX/92\\_OLYMP/REDMOND.HTM](http://astropix.com/SPORTSPIX/92_OLYMP/REDMOND.HTM).)

In a more humorous vein, there is a tale told about spiritual power that comes from the mission field. Herbert Jackson told how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that would not start without a push.

After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years. When the Jackson family was reassigned a new missionary came to the station. When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, the new man interrupted, “Why, Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable.” He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson’s astonishment, the engine roared to life.

For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting that power to work.

Today’s gospel is the first of five passages in the farewell discourses concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, and all of which make clear that Easter is completed with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The promises are these. (1) The Spirit will come from God at the request of Jesus. (2) The Spirit will replace Jesus as another Advocate and guide to be the helper, companion and comforter that Jesus had been. (3) The Spirit will never go away. (4) The Spirit will remain with and in the church forever. (5) The Spirit will be with and in the church in ways distinct from any functioning of the Spirit in the world. (6) The Spirit will be for the church a source and confirmation of truth. The promise for the first disciples and for the church is the promise of power, guidance and comfort, without which the church cannot live faithfully.

Finally, in the Orthodox world today is Easter. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, the day after Easter was devoted to telling jokes. . . . They felt they were imitating the cosmic joke that God pulled on Satan in the Resurrection. Satan thought he had won, and was smug in his victory, smiling to himself, having the last word. So he thought. Then God raised Jesus from the dead, and life and salvation became the last words. (William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and*

*Faith.*) So, if you have any friends in that tradition tomorrow would be the day for sharing jokes.