

John 14:15-21

How Will I Know?

How will I know if he really loves me?
I say a prayer with every heartbeat
I fall in love whenever we meet
I'm asking you what you know about these things
How will I know if he's thinking of me?¹

For some this may have been a Whitney Houston Flashback as it was released on her solo debut album back in November of 1985. Though the song is definitely a pop song that has nothing to do with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, this part of the chorus echoes a number of questions in conversations that I have had, particularly of late.

This seems an especially appropriate conversation given that Pentecost is next Sunday in which we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to believers and for the church world wide. In the statement of faith of the Presbyterian Church in Canada called *Living Faith* the following affirmations are written, "The Holy Spirit is God with Us...Enables People to Believe... [and] Forms and Equips the Church."²

In the scripture reading Jesus says that he will not leave us orphaned. Now it may be helpful to give a little background to this reading. The setting is the last supper that Jesus knows he will have with his disciples. Though they know something is up, they have no idea that what comes next is Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. They certainly have no idea about the resurrection, even though Jesus has tried before to warn them about what was in store. They were not ready to hear it.

Even now they cannot comprehend why Jesus is talking so. In chapter 14 of the Gospel of John, Jesus' words are confusing to the disciples. We have the benefit of history and the whole story, and in fact this gospel is written for a people who likely never encountered Jesus at all as the account was written sometime after Jesus' death. But in that moment, we hear of a group of people who loved Jesus deeply, had given up family and livelihoods to follow him, and Jesus, knowing what they will face in the coming days, and in the future, speaks words of what he hopes and desires will be words of comfort. If not in the present moment, in a time to come when they, and like us now, reflect on the words.

So Jesus says, God will give another Advocate to be with them forever - the Spirit of Truth - that those who love Jesus and keep his commandments to love God and love

¹ Songwriters: Narada Michael Walden, Shannon Rubicam, George Robert Merrill, George Merrill. For non-commercial use only.

² *Living Faith*. The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Published by Wood Lake Books Inc. Winfield, BC. 1984.

others will know because the Spirit abides with them and will be in them. We are included in the “them”. Those same promises given to the disciples in that upper room are long standing and are for us as well, as they were written and passed on to those for whom this gospel was written.

Jesus was the first Advocate sent by God, God in the flesh. The words we use to express this is God incarnate, God with us. Now that Jesus’ earthly life will end, believers will not be left alone, we will not be abandoned, we will not be left orphaned. Another Advocate will be given to us, this is the Spirit of Truth. This Spirit of Truth continues in the world and the way believers can know and trust it is by loving Jesus and keeping the commandments to love God and love others. It is through this trust and way of life that we will see Jesus and live. As Christians we believe that Jesus lives and because he truly lives and promises the Spirit, we can trust that we are not left as orphans.

But what does that mean? If this is about our love for Jesus and Jesus love for us, our love for God and God’s love for us... as the words of the song say, how will we know that *God* really loves us? How will we know that the promised Holy Spirit really is with us?

Well, we don’t have the benefit of seeing Jesus in the flesh, but we have the words and experiences of Christians from the early disciples to those who continue to witness to their faith today, as well as what we may have experienced and what we know for ourselves. Some of the most beautiful conversations I was privy to this past week were people sharing experiences of how they knew that the Holy Spirit was at work in their lives, from traveling and feeling that they were never alone, that someone had their back through any challenges, to others experiencing welcome in a congregation that when they reflected on it, they knew it was God who had led them there. For some it was like audible words that they heard in their heads about God’s presence in a moment, in a place, or to be seen everywhere and for others, in everyone.

Moments where fear was removed and replaced by calm, moments of chaos and confusion that still had the presence of peace within. Always that sense that there was a guide, a hope, a peace, and for some a presence, what Jesus called an Advocate.

So how will we know the Holy Spirit? First it takes practice and paying attention to what is going on around and within you. And love. Love is the identifying characteristic of God, of Jesus, and so also the Holy Spirit. It is why this scripture opens with... “If you love me...” Love is not just a feeling, it is, in the Christian faith, more so an action. If you love then you will act on that love. You will share it with others in ways that are compassionate and just. Loving like Jesus means loving others.

Theologian Nancy Ramsay writes, “John’s Gospel was written in an age of empire, for people surrounded by agents of the emperor, images of imposed dominion, and the weapons to enforce the imperial power. We find in John’s Gospel this strikingly different claim about the power and order that love brings to life and relationships. It is difficult to

imagine a sharper contrast to the imperial understanding of the way the world is or the definition of power.”³

For Jesus, power was love. In a time when power is about control, ownership, prestige, money, and more, Jesus said power is love. That speaks as powerfully today as it did for the disciples in their time, or for the Christians for who this gospel was originally written. Where this love is shown in word and in action, there Jesus is present through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Some people, and I would say most, can experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives when paying attention, being expectant, reflecting on their lived experiences. But I would also say that many experience times when God feels so distant that there is no way to discern the work of the Spirit in one’s life. I have had one such lengthy time myself. Unable, even unwilling to open my Bible to read scripture. Not able to pray except with expletives, hurt, and anger. Upon reflection, I know it was me that had pulled away from God, not the other way around. When I did come around, turns out God used that in a way that I could not have imagined, in which I now stand here as a minister. But at times one can go also go for a long time not knowing or feeling the presence of God and yet trusting that God is at work through the Holy Spirit.

Linda Clader writes the following, “Mother Teresa of Calcutta famously left her record of a lifetime of struggle – struggle with the darkness that plagued her because, for more than half her life, she did not feel the presence of Christ. Nonetheless among Christians she has been generally accepted as a modern saint. Some consider her an even great saint because in spite of the dark she continued to be faithful. Even though she had not been gifted with spiritual certainty, she steadfastly pursued the mission to which she believed she had been called, and the Christian community recognized and affirmed that mission.”⁴

How will we know that God is with us in Jesus and that the Holy Spirit has been given to us? It will be by our love in action. Our love lived out in service to others. It does not mean sacrificially giving until there is nothing left of yourself, even Jesus took time for rest and renewal, time for friends, prayer, and meals. But there will still be giving of time, talent, energy, resources, knowledge, and most of all your loving self.

This is as true for the church as it is for individuals. How will we know that the Holy Spirit is working in and through us? It will be because we choose to love others, provide for needs, create space for care, partner with those who also help others and so many innumerable ways that speak to care, compassion, justice for those who are on the margins and oppressed, and most of all to value the life of every human being. The Holy

³ Ramsay, Nancy J. *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 2 Lent through Eastertide*. Editors David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2010. P490.

⁴ Clader, Linda Lee. *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 2 Lent through Eastertide*. Editors David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2010. P495.

Spirit works in community with believers. The church has a place at the center of the Holy Spirit's work.

One more thought that may be helpful that came out of conversations with others with which I concur. Jesus comes to us in as many and diverse ways as there are people. It is why listening to each other and helping one another discern, understand, and recognize the Holy Spirit at work in us, in our families and friends, and in our church and community locally and broadly is so important. We learn from one another about God at work.

The Holy Spirit is alive, just as Jesus is alive. We are not orphaned; Jesus has come to us. Even though the world does not see Jesus, we can see him and because he lives, we also live. Because of the Spirit given to us we can know and trust that Jesus is in the Father, we are in Jesus and Jesus is in us. We keep the commandments to love God and to love everyone as God's love is for everyone. Through those words and actions of love we know God's love and the love of Jesus as revealed to us and the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God.