

“Just When You Needed It Most”

John 14:15-31

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In John's understanding of Christianity, there was only one test of love and that was obedience. So in the telling about Jesus' life, he said that Jesus showed His love for God through His obedience. He then suggested that it is by our obedience that we show our love as well. As John is recalling the final conversation Jesus had with His disciples, John summarizes Jesus' teachings about how love is seen in consistency of our actions.

Inconsistency in love and obedience sometimes shows up in children or young people who say that they love their parents but end up causing them grief and anxiety because they haven't followed their instruction. Adults can be inconsistent when they claim they love the one they married but have behavior that actually shows insensitivity and unkindness that brings pain to the other.



As Jesus was teaching, here, He was talking about the bond of love between Him and the Creator and between believers and God and He knew consistency was difficult for all of us because life is so uneven. He knew that there would be struggles in the Christian life and that there would be many moments when we need help. So Jesus noted that after He would leave them, He would send another Helper. The Greek word that was used here for

“Helper” is *parakletos* which is not easy to convert into English.

The King James rendered it as “Comforter” which is good but not good enough. Moffatt translated it as “Helper,” which has more of a sense of action to it. The word actually was used in that culture to refer to “someone who is called in.” The reason *why* someone would be called in to help is what gives the word such power in our Christian faith.

The Greeks used the word in a variety of ways. A *paraklete* might be a person called in to give witness in a law court in someone's favor. A *paraklete* might be an advocate called in to plead in defense of someone under a serious charge. This might be an expert who is asked to give advice in some difficult situation. But a *paraklete* was always someone called in to help in time of trouble or pressing need.

The word “comforter” used to be a perfectly good translation for this description of the Holy Spirit. The Bible translator Wicliffe was the first person to use it to explain the role of the Spirit that Jesus was trying to convey. The word “comforter” comes from the Latin word *fortis* which means “brave.” The comforter was someone who enabled a person in despair to be brave.



In our culture, however, the word “comfort” is almost always associated with sorrow. A comforter is thought of as someone who sympathizes with us when we are sad. God's Spirit gives the believer a sense of comfort but this is only part of the dynamic of God's Spirit in our lives.

We often talk of being able to cope with things and that is precisely the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit somehow bypasses our inadequacies and fears and enables us – empowers us – to not only cope with life but to persevere and even overcome our challenges. So this is basically what Jesus was saying on the eve of His departure from His visible earthly life. ‘I am sending you out on a very difficult task but

I am going to send Someone along with you Who will guide you as to what to do. This Helper is going to empower you to do what you've got to do.'

Jesus went on to say that most people in the world will not be able to recognize this Spirit Who accompanies us in our journeys. This is apparently because the majority of people on this planet try to live as if there is no God.

Paul was reinforcing this teaching about how people deny the presence of God when he wrote: "Although they knew God, they did not honor God or give thanks but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools."¹

Our outlook on life is largely shaped by our parents, teachers or others (whom we allow to influence us) colors all of our interpretations of life. An astronomer will see far more in the sky than an ordinary person. A botanist will see more in a garden than someone who knows no botany. A musician will appreciate the beauty and intricacies of a symphony far more than one with no musical training. An artist will have a deeper appreciation for a painting than someone without the benefit of training in the field of art.

What we see and experience, then, depends on what we bring to the situation and the extent to which we are open to receive new and fuller expressions of the truth. A person who has eliminated God from their thoughts would not be open to receive new truth about or from God's Spirit to illuminate their lives. This suggests that you and I ought to be more than a little nervous if we haven't learned or thought anything new about God or God's people for a couple of years. *This could mean we haven't grown in our understanding of faith or life.*



If we believe that true wisdom begins with a reverence for God,² people who have refused to be open to God may never be truly wise. I don't think we should judge that lack of openness on the part of others but we would be wiser to consider it as sad for

¹ Romans 1:22

² as the book of Proverbs repeatedly suggests

all they are missing in their life. God's Spirit might not come without a person being open to receive God into their heart or their core of their being. God's Spirit waits to be received, "knocks on the door" perhaps (as Jesus once pictured) but must be invited in.



As the disciples were hearing about Jesus' soon-to-come departure, they must have had a sense of foreboding. They probably sensed that a tragedy was ahead. But when Jesus said He was coming back, He was talking about His resurrection and His risen presence. Because He would be alive, they would be spiritually alive. They would have help from God's Spirit.

When John was writing this, it was late in the first century (or even on into the early years of the second century). The Jewish people, who had converted to Christianity and who were reading this gospel, had seen Jerusalem and its magnificent temple demolished. The Pharisees had been right: the Jews had better make their religion portable and independent from the temple cult or they would have nothing when the temple would be destroyed again.³

By this time, the Christians had seen their small and struggling churches suffer persecution. The kinds of hardships and the levels of suffering they had experienced, make our church's financial needs look small.

The disciples, who were listening to Jesus in that upper room, knew that they would be needing help to make it through life without Him being there as He had been. It has been the same with all of us since that night.



³ The Pharisees had survived the Roman destruction in Palestine because they had created a religion that was progressive enough to not only embrace their Scriptural tradition but also their practice of providing new insight on emerging morals dealt with in the coming generations. Because of their understanding that there is new light to be shed from God on emerging ethics, they enabled Judaism to continue to this day.

The other day I answered the phone and it was a recorded voice trying to sell me something. There are companies out there that want us to make a commitment of our money but they don't value us or value our time enough to assign a real person the task of making the phone call. If we want to purchase something, they'll take our money but because of the percentage chances of us not being willing to do it, they don't want to bother paying a person to actually talk with us. Every day, our society seems to become more and more impersonal and it is becoming more difficult for people to find a sense of our own value and worth.



Some time ago, back in the early eighties, I attended a conference in California on the use of computers for aiding the ministry of the church. One of the primary presenters in the conference was Jack Taub – the founder of the Source telecommunications network. He originally made his money in stamp collecting because he was able to convince the Federal government that they could actually sell stamps to individual collectors – knowing that they would not use them to mail letters.

Jack Taub talked mainly about his dream for our nation's educational system. His idea was to have a computer system used in every classroom across the nation. He suggested a computer terminal for every child's desk. This would enable the teacher to monitor the work of every pupil.

Each student would have the benefit of being able to work at their own speed and on the subject on which he or she needs to work most. It supposedly would also put the wealth of the nation's educational materials at the fingertips of every teacher. The teacher controlling the student computers would be able to connect them to a much larger computer storage facility with all of the latest teaching materials in it.

Even AT&T thought this idea had merit and had already backed his plans with millions of dollars. But during the question and answer time, after his lecture, I stood up and had a few things to say.

I said his idea was obviously brilliant and that many of the present limitations will eventually be worked out. It is one thing for a teacher to teach geometry or literature on a computer screen but to demonstrate something with three dimensions (like the solid object called a dodecahedron) would require something other than a two dimensional computer screen or television. My guess, I said, is that within a few years after all these computers are installed, the system will add holograph imagery. This was a new and experimental light projection system that has a three dimensional appearance.

But then I got to my real concern. I said that in our experiences, in using computers for communication with people around the world, there is a central need that can not be forgotten. We all have a basic and driving need to know and be known by other people. I pointed out that the only reason all of these people had gathered at this conference was because a sense of community had been established on these national computer networks.

I noted that once we got ourselves connected with someone in Portland Oregon or Dallas Texas, Beijing China or Buffalo New York, none of it mattered unless we got to know one another's names and heard responses to what we shared. Unless his educational system on children's desks, (or any other electronic communication medium), will enhance our relationships and build community between us – bridging the sense of isolation we have in this impersonal society – it will be ineffective.

And as you might imagine, it released a wave of expression of agreement and that concept of community-building has been in most of the discussions on the conference since. Most of the people there were ministers so everyone there knew that churches are in existence to build community.



The Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to us is One Who helps us by enabling us to build community. The Holy Spirit is One Who teaches us so learning must be central to our way of life. God's Spirit is the One Who leads us into a greater depth of understanding of God and there is never an excuse in the Christian faith for a closed mind. The Christian

who feels that he or she has nothing more to learn is one who does not even begin to understand the purpose of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would remind us of what He taught and this suggests at least two things. That in matters of belief, the Holy Spirit is at work to bring to our minds the things Jesus taught. It suggests that we have an obligation to think and remember but all our conclusions ought to be evaluated by their consistency with Jesus' teachings. It also means that God's Spirit would be involved in guiding our conduct.

Perhaps the most profound gift of the Spirit Jesus sends to us is the gift of peace. Throughout the Bible, the word for peace, "shalom," never means simply an absence of trouble. "Peace" means everything which makes for our highest good.

The peace that our culture offers us is the peace of escape, the peace which comes from the avoidance of trouble and the refusal to face things. But the peace that Jesus offers us is the peace of our inner and outer balance.

Whether it was the disciples listening to Jesus or you and me here this morning, we know that no experience in life can ever remove the possibility of sorrow, danger or suffering. We can never insure ourselves against loss, even though this seems to be the premise of much of our economy. No matter how prosperous we may be, no matter how skilled we might be in our careers, no matter what level of sophistication we may achieve in anything we do, we will still need help to make it through life.

I frequently hear stories of how elderly friends have come to the place where their bodies are so feeble, that one day, they collapse on the floor of their homes. And I hear how they lay there and struggle to inch their way toward the phone without success. They lay there in pain, calling out for hours, with hope that a neighbor will hear. And they end up laying there for a day or two until a rescue squad breaks into their home. [There is a relatively solution to this problem and you may find it helpful to consult with the people of the Life Line Company.]

Hearing and seeing several of these occurrences through my work in churches has

profoundly affected me. These real stories are etched on my mind and represent, to me, the utter frailty of human life. "God, how despairing" I pray within myself as these kind and gentle souls I know tell me of their plight. Yet in a way, we are all struggling through life in need of a Comforter – in need of an Advocate of some sort. We need a lifeline.

We are all so interdependent upon one another. All of us are interdependent and no one can even pretend, for long, that they are totally self-sufficient. "Life is hard," Jesus was clearly saying but God's Spirit comes in and makes a home in our lives – giving us comfort, guidance and a sense of inner peace.



This church is called to be a family, a gathering of people who have the peace from the presence of God's Spirit. This church is in existence to nurture God's Spirit of peace within you and certainly those we meet who live without peace. This church family is here on this street only to enable you to build community. It is here to help you make it through the tough times and to see that you find the strength within you (and around you) to conquer those things that you need to overcome.

We are here so we can keep learning about God's presence in our lives. We are here to be highly successful in bringing the truth of Christ's love to others in specific and practical ways.

The peace that Jesus leaves you, the peace that Jesus gives to you, is nothing like what the world is offering. Therefore, don't let your hearts be troubled and don't be afraid. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our Maker and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is yours, because God's Spirit is with you, in you and around you, right when you need it the most. This is why you have worshipped God in this hour and why you will worship God in your heart all this week. 🙏

