

I'll Be There
May 16, 2023
John 14:15-21

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 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.

18 "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 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."

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

Lloyd was a dear man in my previous congregation who had a tender heart. Toward the end of his life, his health declined and his wife of over seventy years died. It was hard for him to be joyful about much. And yet, there is one story that brought him great joy to tell. It is the story of how he and his wife came to adopt Kim. It is a story of happy coincidences, being in the right place at the right time, and listening to that voice within that is telling you to do something big and bold. He smiled until he got to the part about Kim. She was three years old and found abandoned under a busy bridge in a crowded Korean city. She was all alone – left to fend for herself. Despite the life and home, he and his wife were able to share with Kim, he couldn't bear to think for a second about the minutes, the days, maybe weeks this child was all alone in the world. Tears welled up in his eyes as he tried to fathom how someone could abandon her.

Abandonment is deeply wounding and one of our deepest fears. When Jesus tells his disciples that he is leaving them, they are filled with anxiety. Imagine all they have invested in following Jesus, and now he is leaving?

I imagine their eyes as big as saucers as they ask Jesus, "Where are you going? Why can't we go with you? What's going to happen to us?" Jesus promises his disciples, "I will not leave you orphaned." And the next thing he says is, "I am coming to you." Friend and scholar, Mark Davis, who knows Greek, says that the word translated as "coming" means the opposite of "leave" and it is present tense. That might sound like a nerdy little detail, but it means that Jesus is saying something closer to "I'll be there," rather than "I am coming to you."

"I will not leave you orphaned," says Jesus, "I'll be there."

What we want to know is how? Where? How is Jesus there? Where is Jesus when a child is abandoned in a city? Where is Jesus when all you have is your car to call home? Where is Jesus in injustice and suffering? Where is Jesus when you are all alone and don't know what to do or where to turn?

My husband is a Bruce Springsteen nut, and he has helped me to appreciate Bruce's ability to tell a story. Many of the stories he tells are the stories of those on the bottom, pressed upon hard by life. One such song is "The Ghost of Tom Joad" and Tom Joad is the main character of John Steinbeck's classic, "The Grapes of Wrath." This story is about a poor family of tenant farmers trying to survive the Great Depression. The Dust Bowl forces the Joad family to leave Oklahoma and head for California in search of jobs, land, dignity, and respect. Tom Joad, fresh out of prison, joins his family as they are preparing to leave.

On the journey, Tom is influenced by Jim Casy, a flawed former minister who is done with religion. Yet Casy, the Christ figure in the novel, holds to the belief that people are holy and deserving of love because they all belong to one greater soul.

They arrive in California, only to experience more misery and oppression in the migrant labor camps where wealthy farmers exploit them and trap them in poverty. Casy is eventually killed after leading a strike.

Tom decides to leave his family with the hopes that it will be better for him and his family to leave than to stay. The final scene with Tom sees him saying goodbye to his mother.

She asks:

Ma: How am I gonna know about ya, Tommy? Why they could kill ya and I'd never know. They could hurt ya. How am I gonna know?

Tom: Well, maybe it's like Casy says. A fellow ain't got a soul of his own, just little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody, then...

Ma: Then what, Tom?

Tom: Then it don't matter. I'll be all around in the dark – I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look – wherever there's a fight, so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they build – I'll be there, too.

Bruce Springsteen takes this dialogue and tells the story from the vantage point of someone sleeping under a bridge – "waitin' for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last."

Bruce sings:

Now Tom said, "Mom, wherever there's a cop beatin' a guy

Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries
Where there's a fight 'gainst the blood and hatred in the air
Look for me Mom, I'll be there.
Wherever there's somebody fightin' for a place to stand
Or a decent job or a helpin' hand
Wherever somebody's strugglin' to be free
Look in their eyes Mom, you'll see me.

Both Steinbeck and Bruce capture what Jesus is saying to his disciples as he prepares for his departure.

Jesus says, "I will not abandon you. I'll be there."

In every act of compassion – I'll be there.
In the fight for justice – I'll be there.
In the healing of the broken and in the finding of the lost – I'll be there.
In the forgiving of a sinner, in the welcoming of a stranger; in tending to the "least of these" – I'll be there.
In the tending of creation – I'll be there.
In a mother's love – I'll be there
In the outstretched hand, the tender touch, the listening ear – I'll be there.
In the breaking of bread, in sharing and service – I'll be there.
In the work of peacemaking, in nearness of comforters - I'll be there.
When love finds its way to prisons, under bridges, war zones, and refugee camps – I'll be there.
Wherever someone responds to a cry for help – I'll be there.
Whenever someone gives sacrificially – I'll be there.
Wherever and whenever you live out my commandments to serve and to love – I'll be there.

Every evening, as I drive the 22 home and I pass a giant billboard that says, "Trust in Jesus." I try to receive it as a gift rather than speculating about the motives of whoever paid for it. To trust Jesus, is to trust the way he taught us to live. When I pass the sign, I figure it is an opportunity for a little ethical self-reflection. Where and how am I living what Jesus taught? Where do I fall short? When the headlines are screaming about debt ceilings, the crisis at the border, staggering homelessness, gun violence, climate change, and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation...do I still trust that Jesus is the way? Do I trust that Jesus has not given up on us and the kingdom work he began. Do I trust Jesus enough to live the way he taught us to live?

In his book, "A Conspiracy of Love," Kurt Struckmeyer writes these words:

At the heart of Christianity is a powerful ethic.

It is what the first followers of Jesus called the way – a way of living based on love and compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness, inclusion and acceptance, peace and nonviolence, generosity and justice.

This ethic is what makes Christianity good.

Without it, Christians can become rigid and intolerant, self-righteous and condemning, hate-filled and violent, selfish and unjust.

In other words, he concludes, without the ethic of Jesus, Christians can represent the worst humanity has to offer.

Do we trust in Jesus? Do we trust he has not abandoned us?

When we choose love over hate – Jesus is present.

When we choose compassion over indifference – Jesus is present.

When we choose reconciliation and forgiveness over bitterness and brooding – Jesus is present.

When we choose inclusion and acceptance over intolerance and condemnation – Jesus is present.

When we choose peace and nonviolence over violence and retribution – Jesus is present.

When we choose generosity and service over greed and selfishness – Jesus is present.

When we choose justice over oppression and exploitation – Jesus is present.

These are choices we make each day. To choose the way of Jesus is to trust in Jesus. It is on the way that we encounter him again, and again, and again.

“I’ll be there,” Jesus says.

And he is.

Amen.