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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
6th Sunday of Easter/Year A
May 21, 2017
Text: John 14: 15-21

I had to chuckle this week as I began my sermon prep. One of my “go to” theologians, Karoline Lewis, began her biblical commentary by writing, “Jesus never stopped talking, in case you were wondering.”

No, Jesus never stopped talking and today we pick up where we left off last week.

In case you don't know where we are in John's gospel, we are still at the table in the upper room the evening before Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus has washed the feet of his disciples and Judas has left the building. He has given them a new commandment, “that you love one another” and then he gave his beloved friends a jolt by telling them that he was going away. They became deeply distressed and ask him where he is going and he tells them that he going to prepare a place for them. And then he gives them and us one of the most quoted and greatest “I AM” statements ever spoken when he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” And that brings us to today when Jesus tells his disciples that he will not leave them orphaned or alone. And he promises them a gift.

At the General Theological Seminary in New York where I received my Master of Divinity degree, there is a tradition that each class give a parting gift to the school. My class gave a portrait of the Rev. Florence Li Tim-Oi, the first woman ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican Communion which hangs in the Chapel. Hers is an interesting story.

Li Tim-Oi was born in Hong Kong during the early 1900's. When she was baptized as a student she chose the name Florence in honor of Florence Nightingale. She studied at a theological College and after graduation was a very active layperson. In May of 1941 she was ordained deaconess and during the course of the year Hong Kong fell to Japanese invaders. And while it became such that priests could not travel safely to celebrate the Eucharist, Florence, could as a layperson, continue her work. The bishop of Hong Kong became aware of her ministry and decided that “God's work would reap better results if she had the proper title” of priest. On January 25, 1944, the Feast of the Conversion of St.

Paul, Florence became the first female to be ordained in the Anglican Communion. Sadly, her ordination became a high subject of controversy at the end of World War II and by choice she decided not to exercise her priesthood until it was acknowledged in the wider Communion. Even during the high and low points in her own personal life, in her country's history and in what was happening with the Church-at-large, Florence never stopped ministering to God's people. She eventually moved to Canada and was a licensed priest in the Dioceses of Montreal and Toronto. Florence died in 1992. The Episcopal Church designated January 24 as her feast in the book, *Lesser Feasts and Fast*, based on the eve of the anniversary of her ordination.*

It would be 1971 when the Synod of Hong Kong and Macao became the first Anglican province to officially permit the ordination of women to the priesthood. And here in the United States, the Episcopal Church, which is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, the year was 1974 when 11 women (the Philadelphia Eleven) were ordained to the priesthood. And the rest, as they say, is history as women, lay and ordained, continue to seek to serve God in the Church in ways never thought possible-not only in the Anglican Communion but across denominations. A spirit of willingness, faithful service, tenacity is the legacy that Florence Li Tim-Oi left the Church.

In today's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

"Jesus never stopped talking" and we remember that Jesus really did have a lot to say before his passion and death. All throughout the course of their relationship Jesus modeled the way in which his disciples were to go about the business of the kingdom-feeding, healing, accepting, showing compassion toward others, among many other things. And his words were also part of the legacy he meant to leave behind for others who would come to believe in him. He spoke the words and imparted commandments so that they and we might live into them.

And what were those commandments? They were commandments based on relationship and love. Jesus said, "Love one another." Do this and "everyone will know that you are my disciples."

And what does that really mean? For Jesus' disciples including ourselves in this age, it certainly does not mean to concentrate only on ourselves, looking out for "Numero Uno"! Or to ask "What's in it for me?" No, Jesus was saying to them and to us to love one another, to look out for each other. Be concerned for

one another. Be other focused. Serve one another. Show others the very face of God. Be the fullness of God in your relationships. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Do this and everyone will know that you are mine. These words to his disciples that evening are the very foundation of the church. It is the basis that makes us the Beloved Community of the Way.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry always speaks of the Jesus Movement. In a recent interview concerning theological education Bishop Curry used the words of Albert Nolan, a South African theologian and Dominican priest, who said, “Jesus did not start an organization, he inspired a movement.” Curry then went on to say, “...that is our origin. That’s who we are at our deepest level, and I happen to believe that our real strength, our creative energy, our deep wisdom is going to be found the closer we draw to that Jesus of Nazareth and the way, his way.”**

Doing this work, following the way of Jesus, is never easy. Jesus never said it would be. And that is why Jesus promises his disciples in this pericope, this passage, that he would leave them a gift. He will send another to help them carry out acts of tangible love toward their fellow human beings. He said to them, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” Out of Jesus’ love for his disciples and for God’s love of Jesus and humankind, an Advocate, a Helper and Comforter, would be sent after his resurrection and ascension.

Do note that Jesus said, “...another Advocate...” Jesus himself was an Advocate sent into the world by God, to heal it, to reconcile it, to love it, and to draw humanity closer to God. This Advocate, the Holy Spirit, that Jesus promised would come to lead and guide them and us. It was this Spirit that breathed life upon the earth during its creation and life into a community of believers.

Jesus kept his promise and continues to keep it and it is the Spirit who continues to breathe life into the church and out into the world even now imparting strength, creative energy, and bestowing wisdom into the people of God. It is the Spirit who truly is ‘the wind beneath our wings’ encouraging us to love, to truly love as God loves. And to love like God is not always easy because we are not talking about puppy love or about looking across a crowded room and seeing the person we might want to spend the rest of our lives with here. Because Jesus is talking about the kind of love that is sometimes messy. We’re talking about loving that sister or brother who looks and sounds and dresses nothing like anyone in your family or the classmates, friends, and neighbors you grew up with. We’re talking about loving another human being who might be stinky and dirty. We’re talking

about loving that person who may get on our nerves at times or doesn't live up to our expectations or who we simply don't understand. Jesus is talking about loving without expecting anything, not even love, in return. We are to love others because that is what Jesus asks of us. Love because God/Jesus first loved us.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” This is God's invitation set before us. And I guess, that makes us advocates too, doesn't it-as we give of ourselves as Jesus gave himself for us and as God gave of God's Son and the Holy Spirit? It doesn't matter whether we are lay or ordained. There is no gender barrier or age limit.

What will be your legacy? What will be our legacy, the legacy of St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church as we walk the way of Jesus together? As we strive to reach out in love? How can we be advocates? In this neighborhood? In this community? Think about it.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me (us).

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me (us).

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me (us).

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me (us).

*Information found in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, page 140.

**"Leading the Jesus Movement" an interview and article by Jim Naughton, *Crossings*, Spring 2017, page 13.