

**Another Advocate**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: John 14:15-21**

President Bush recounts a time when he was called upon to introduce his parents at a civic event in a small Texas town. "First I said, 'Mr. President, welcome to Fredericksburg,' and there was a nice round of applause. And then I said, 'Mother...'" and the place went wild. "Mother," I said, "It's clear the people of Texas still love you and so do I, but you're still telling me what to do after all these years." And a guy in a big cowboy hat cups his hands and screams, "And you'd better be listening to her too, sonny boy." [Bonnie Angelo, *First Mothers: The Women Who Shaped the Presidents*, p. 358]

Happy Mother's Day. It used to be a joke among preachers that you had it made on Mother's Day. Easiest sermon in the world. What can you say about motherhood that isn't going to be met with approving smiles and even a sentimental tear or two? In some ways I'm sorry I didn't get to ride that wave, because I never come to this day without remembering one as a newly-ordained minister, serving a church in rural Iowa. The children had come forward for the children's message, which began with my asking them what nice things they were doing for their mothers. Came the usual answers: breakfast in bed, flowers, a hand-made card. Then one seven-year-old boy answered, "Nothing. My mom went to California to get a new family."

From presidents to pre-schoolers, everyone has a mother. Not every mother loves wisely and well, and even the best among us have moments when they wonder if they have it right. It's not easy being a mother—or a father, or a mentor to a young person--as evidenced by the title of the book currently being studied by our parents-of-adolescents group: *Yes, Your Teenager Really Is Crazy* (although one of the mothers in the group told me there is a companion volume by the same author, *Yes Your Parents Really Are Crazy*). Best-selling author Anne Lamott's rocky relationship with her mother is described in all her books, including her latest tellingly entitled "Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith." Here the struggle takes on spiritual proportions:

*I prayed for my heart to soften, to forgive her and to love her for what she did give me—life, great values, a lot of tennis lessons, and the best she could do. Unfortunately, the best she could do was terrible....and my heart remained hardened toward her."*

[Lamott, p. 46]

Now the parent of a teenager herself, Lamott acknowledges that family life includes “mess and misunderstanding, hurt feelings, and sighs.” Today there’s an unmistakable sense that it is more difficult than ever to navigate the rocky shoals of parenthood and bring our children safely into adulthood. What kind of world will greet them? How can we be sure they’ll have what they need to be capable and loving, responsible and caring? Will our children have faith? Whether or not you are a biological parent, these concerns belong to us all. What can we do? Where can we find help?

The gospel reading for today may not seem to address these questions specifically. And yet it provides a window on another community filled with uncertainty for its future. The scene is an upper room; Jesus and his disciples gathered for what would be their last supper together. It was a family meal: the Passover Seder, a tradition shared in the intimacy of home and loved ones. But this night is different; the familiar seems strange and all kinds of boundaries are blurred and confused. Jesus has already predicted he will die, and what’s more, that one of them will betray, and another one will deny even knowing him. There’s an uneasy feeling, heavy with the unspoken question on everyone’s mind: How are we going to get along without you? Listen, then, for God’s Word to the faith family, in the reading from the gospel according to John in the fourteenth chapter at the fifteenth verse [found on page \_\_\_\_\_ of the chapel/pew Bibles if you wish to read along].

JOHN 14:15-21

Since January, our church building has been utilized as the second site for Open Doors, an educational enhancement and developmental program for Roxboro middle school students. What used to be quiet hours from 3 until 6 pm, have now become filled with the sounds of some 30 young people engaged in learning activities. Though they are well-supervised, the decibel level is higher than previously, and visitors to my office during this time have sometimes commented on this. Recently I was privileged to read some essays written by the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade participants, about what the program meant to them. *Open Doors is a place where you can talk about your problems and there are people here who take you seriously*, wrote one boy. Another one added, *Open Doors is like summer camp. When you first come you don’t know anyone and you’re scared, but by the end everyone is best friends. We have so much fun, I think I’m at home.* And this one: *The people at Open Doors are like my family, because I always know I can count on them.*

I’m proud that this congregation has literally opened our doors for such a program that provides critical care and nurture for young people during time they might otherwise be alone or left to their own devices. And it

provides a picture-perfect illustration of the gospel text in which Jesus assures the anxious disciples of his presence forever.

Our text is a small part of a much longer section—more than three chapters—in which Jesus appears to give a very long sermon, followed by a very long prayer. Biblical scholars believe that this is a summary of Jesus' completed work on earth retrospectively from his death and resurrection—in other words, the early church's understanding of his ministry from the vantage point of the cross and empty grave. If the threat of Jesus' death constituted a crisis for the *disciples*, so the implications of his resurrection constituted a similar crisis for the *early church*; for each provoked a kind of separation anxiety: *how are we going to get along without you?*

Jesus' response seems obvious enough: follow the way I've shown you; keep the commandments. Love God, love one another. Maybe it was the look of panic in their eyes that made Jesus continue. Maybe he understood their feelings of inadequacy, and even their resistance to change and growth.

To the disciples and the first-generation church, anxious about what lay ahead for them, Jesus spoke a word to allay fears and galvanize them for the future. *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.* Jesus makes a promise that neither his death, nor his resurrection life will break the relationship he has with them, a relationship characterized by the trust between a loving parent and a child. In a new and powerful way, they will know divine presence not limited by space or time or circumstance, but as a permanent reality: *to be with you forever.*

In addition, God will be experienced by them as an Advocate—the word refers to an attorney or counselor who goes to the wall (and sometimes to the mat!) on their behalf. Jesus promises God's presence and ALSO GOD'S POWER at work in their lives. That power is the spirit of truth through which they will find life.

And they did! The disciples clung to something of that promises in the dark hours following the crucifixion, and held on until the morning dawned in resurrection light. The early church, buffeted by storms of controversy and insecurity (hmmm, sound anything like the later church??!), took hold of the promise and sailed forth to move mountains and human hearts.

What does this promise of divine presence and power mean today as we and our children face complex choices and sobering realities beyond anything previously imagined?

You know the greeting-card sentiment that goes, "God couldn't be everywhere so God made mothers." Well, our text might express it this way: Mothers can't be everywhere, so God gave another Advocate, a helper. Someone who counsels us in perplexity; who intercedes for us when we don't know how or what to ask; someone who "abides" with us (and abides us!), for better or for worse. Forever.

Murray Bowen, the psychologist and originator of family systems theory, says that there really are only two critical tasks in life: one is to become separate (individual, individuated, independent), and the other is to become connected (interdependent, related, part of a whole). For these developmental tasks we really never complete, God gives us another Advocate. For the inevitable difficulty in letting go; for helping children grow wings to fly AND for those uneasy feelings sparked by change and uncertainty; for the anxiety one feels as a child heads off to kindergarten, or the prom, or college, for the times when life doesn't make sense and the news is bad---we have Jesus' unfailing promise. *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*

I've never forgotten an article I saw in a National Geographic magazine years ago. After the devastating forest fires in Yellowstone National Park, rangers moved in to assess the damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes; a state perched on the ground at the base of a burned tree. He took a stick to level the ashes, but when he struck it, three tiny chicks scurried from under their dead mother's wings. The mother bird had carried her offspring to the base of the tree, gathering them under her wings. She might have been able to fly to safety herself, but had refused to abandon her chicks. When the scorching heat reached her, she would abide with them, and because she did, those under the cover of her wings lived....

I like to think I would be that mother bird for my son to protect him from life-threatening fires. Every mother and father I know would say the same. But we also know that, finally, we cannot shield our children and all the beloved children from every fire, from every act of violence, from every foolish choice. Playpens work well—for awhile. Rules about boundaries and curfews have their place—though they keep expanding almost from the moment you set them. And so we need another Advocate. Someone who abides with them, and with us. Someone in whose presence we find exactly what we need to love well; to keep God's commandments, and to know life.

NOW TO THE RULER OF ALL WORLDS, UNDYING, INVISIBLE, THE ONLY GOD, BE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND EVER! AMEN.

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