

Not Falling Apart
A Sermon on John 14:15-21 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Do you ever get the feeling the world is falling apart? I do. You don't need me to provide specific examples of the many ways the world seems to be falling apart, because I'm pretty sure you have your own, personal list of ways the world seems to be falling apart.

You and I might have different events on our lists, but the lists would be similar in being lists of bad decisions made by people. This is even true when it comes to bad events that are happening in terms of the weather and the climate, because people are making bad decisions that are making the summers hotter, and the droughts longer and deeper, and the storms more severe. People are doing some bad, selfish, foolish things.

We call these bad, selfish, foolish things, *sins*. A sin is a mistake. Babies, and little children, and people who don't have much power can make mistakes, but they can't make truly terrible mistakes because they don't have much power. People with lots of power have the ability to make the very worst, very terrible mistakes. The reason it feels like the world is falling apart is that people with lots of power are making very bad mistakes.

There is one part of our world that is not falling apart; it's the part that has to do with God's activity in the world. The part of the world that has to do with God's activity is not falling apart. God made the person who is sitting next to you, and the person sitting behind you, and the person sitting in front of you. God made these people in God's image. God gave these people the greatest gift, which is the ability to love another person. God also created you in God's image, and gave you the ability to love another person. And each one of us brings to worship the desire to know God, and the desire to love and be forgiving, the way Jesus loved and forgave people.

This is why the hour we spend together in worship is the most important, joyful part of the week for me. Perhaps this is true for you also. You and I have the desire to know more about God and follow God's way. We are strengthened in our quest to follow the Lord of love by spending this hour with others who have this same desire.

We strive to know more about God's way of doing things. We strive to respond to the bad situations we encounter with love and compassion, but it's not always easy to know the right thing to do. It's not easy to know the right thing to do partly because we don't fully understand God. There are times when we cannot see or understand the way God is active in the world.

In three weeks we will be celebrating a day we call Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is one of my favorites because it is concerned with the idea that God is multi-dimensional. The idea of the Trinity is that God is a lot more complicated than you or me. God's activity in the world is larger and more complicated than a person's activity in the world.

In the Trinity we identify three distinct ways God engages with the world. Firstly, God is the God who creates. When Jesus refers to God as 'the Father' in the Gospels, Jesus is telling the disciples about the work of the God who creates the world. The second dimension of God is that God is the one who redeems us, the one who reconnects us with each other and with God. We see this second part of God expressed in the person of Christ Jesus. The third dimension of God is that God is the one who sustains and guides us. We see this third part of God expressed in the Holy Spirit.

We know the second dimension of God, the dimension of God that redeems and reconciles us with God and with one another, in the words and example of Christ Jesus. We have many words of Jesus, and many stories about the way he served people. So this is the dimension of God we know best. When we respond to others with love instead of hatred we can be confident we are following Jesus' example. When we act with humility, and don't assume that we should be judging

other people, we can be confident we are following God's way, because Jesus addresses these issues directly in the Gospels.

Our knowledge of God the creator is not as direct. We have some passages of scripture that help us understand something about God the creator. For instance, in the first chapter of Genesis we see God the creator at work. We learn that rest is a sacred part of our lives. But we have study a lot of Holy Scripture and we have to learn a lot about God's creation in order to know much about the ways of God the creator. The God who creates the universe is beyond our understanding, as described in a verse from Isaiah: *For your thoughts are not my thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways, says the Lord.* God the creator is transcendent.

In the Trinity we describe a third dimension of God. God is the Spirit that sustains and guides us. God as the Holy Spirit might be even more difficult for us to know and understand than God the creator. In the church where I grew up, they didn't talk much about the Holy Spirit. My guess is this aversion to saying much about the Holy Spirit rests in the fact that there are not many passages of scripture that describe the work of the Holy Spirit. But today's Gospel passage gives us a good place to begin.

The context for this passage is that Jesus was sitting at the Last Supper with his disciples. After supper he had washed their feet. Then, knowing what was about to happen, he delivered his longest message to them, a sermon we call 'The Farewell Discourse'. In today's passage, Jesus begins by saying, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."* We show our love of Jesus and our love of God, by our care for one another and by our humility.

Then Jesus says, *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.* Different translations of the Bible have different words to describe 'the Advocate'. Some use 'comforter', others use 'counselor', others use 'helper'.

The original word, in the Greek language, is *paracletos*, or 'paraclete'. This is a compound word that combines two ideas. *Para* means 'alongside' or 'beside'. *Cletos* means 'to call'. So paraclete means *to call alongside*. The paraclete is the one who is beside us, calling to us.

Jesus is in the middle of an extended passage telling the disciples about his departure from them. Let's notice that he tells the disciples *the Father will give you another paraclete, one who will be beside you, calling to you*. So the paraclete, the one we call the Holy Spirit, is like Jesus in a certain way. Jesus was the first paraclete, the first one to be beside the disciples, calling to them. The Holy Spirit is another paraclete, another counselor beside us, the same way Jesus was beside the first disciples. *And this one will be with you forever.*

Jesus tells the disciples, *This paraclete is the Spirit of truth*. Just as Jesus was mostly concerned with revealing the truth, the Holy Spirit, the paraclete is primarily concerned with honesty and truth telling. But people have a difficult time telling the truth. Most human rulers are too weak and stupid to tell the truth and advocate for the truth. So we are not surprised when Jesus tells the disciples *This paraclete, sent by the Father, is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him*. The people of the world have an aversion to the truth. They cannot admit that their ways of violence and domination of their opponents are the result of their deep insecurity and weakness.

A few hours after telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, Jesus was arrested, put on trial, and crucified. Jesus, the first paraclete, the one sent from God who was alongside them, calling to them, was dead. To the disciples, it seemed like the entire world was falling apart.

But there was one part of the world that was not falling apart. God was not falling apart. Out of the despair and death and confusion God brought new life.

The disciples did not understand, the same way we do not understand what is happening in our world. The disciples thought that life was ending, but God was working a new beginning. They

did not see it. They did not understand how it could happen. In their time of despair, God was giving birth to something new and vital and joyful.

It feels like the world is falling apart, but God is not falling apart. It feels as if all of the strength we once knew is disintegrating, but God's love is not disintegrating.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. God is working a new beginning. We do not see it. We do not understand how it will happen. In our time of despair, God is giving birth to something new and vital and joyful.