

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
May 14, 2023
John 14: 15-21

What wisdom have you learned from your mother? What advice or example did she bestow that has stayed with you, guided you? What habits or assumptions do you have that came from your mother? What quirks or clumsiness have you inherited that serves as an immediate reminder? Holly has a story of Susan throwing the keys to someone and the keys landing on the roof, thus remembering her mom every time she awkwardly tosses something.

My mother both inherited and passed on a certain work ethic, always doing what needed to be done, wearing a thousand different hats whether it be various ways of serving the church, or cleaning or cooking or doing the books for the cabinet shop. She could make a mean casserole. She was rightly proud of her pies. I often remember my mother, though, when we have pork chops, which is what I am cooking for Mother's Day dinner tonight. But, my brothers and I would joke, for the love of God keep her away from the pork chops. She tended to cut them open to see if they were done, all the juices poured out. Growing up, we thought pork chops were supposed to chew like leather.

What are the things that evoke the memory or presence of a friend or a parent or a loved one?

Well, our scripture is a continuation of the scripture and sermon last week. We talked about how Jesus is beginning to speak to the disciples about his leaving, that he will go away at some point and how he comforts them with the language and promises of a betrothal ceremony, that if he goes away for a time, it is only so that he can make preparations, do the necessary work, and would someday gather them to himself again. He is not abandoning them. Rather, he assures them that the Spirit will be with them and that through the Spirit they will carry on the work they saw him do. We talked also about how, like a graduation, they are anticipating certain things coming to an end, and others beginning.

And if you remember, it was Thomas was the one who said, we don't know where you are going and we don't know how to get there, and he implied, we sure don't know how to carry all this on without you.

Therefore, as Jesus continues to speak of his eventual leaving, he continues to offer words of comfort. And one of the ways he seems to be offering comfort is by

instructing them how to maintain their connection with him. For even though he will go away, he will not abandon them, and that he desires and fully intends for them to stay connected to him. And one of the ways for them to do this, like carrying on a mother's pearl of wisdom or secret recipe, and thereby remembering and feeling her presence with you, Jesus says to follow the things he taught them. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Now it is not clear to me what Jesus is referring to here as "my commandments." The word commandment causes us to think of the ten commandments, or the Torah as the law. Is Jesus taking on divine-self language and calling the Old Testament law his commandments? Is he referring to his teachings and interpretations, his guidance and his wisdom? It is likely appropriate to hear a bit of all of this in Jesus' words.

But what strikes me is that the language of commandments are invoked in different ways in scripture. In the book of Exodus with the giving of the law, it is in a sense of, fulfill this way of living and things will go well with you as you enter the land. Not unlike the sense that comes from Jesus in John 10:10: the thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, but I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly. Sometimes it has a sense of showing ourselves reverent and obedient to our sovereign. It always seems to carry a sense of covenant, that following the commandments is our way of honoring the relationship, the agreement. *But, this morning the sense is that the commandments is a way for the disciples to stay connected to the Christ who has shaped their world*, like doing what you mother taught you even when you are away from her.

The poem this morning struck me for its practical wisdom, the kinds of things we might learn from important figures, or have seen modeled by important figures in our lives, and that by trying to implement, we might remember or recall that person's place or influence. Like learning to prioritize, to know what the most important things are and to invest one's time and energy and resources accordingly. This was among the main teachings in my parents' house. That along with, if you see something needs to be done, then do it. Indecision is decision. Other aphorisms and peculiar vocabulary. My mom didn't have too many aphorisms, but her main concern was that we would not embarrass her, but she was the one who had four boys. Don't blame that on me.

Jesus is going away, but he seems to be comforting Thomas and the other disciples by saying I will be close to you, and one way that I will be close to you is when you enact and live out the things I taught you. If you love me, then keep my commandments. By following his teachings, by keeping these things, by living

them out and holding them close, they will feel Jesus with them, the way you feel your mother over your shoulder when you are cooking her recipe. You will keep Jesus alive with you, Jesus will be at work through you. This is one of the ways in which they will maintain connection and stay attuned to his guidance.

I have some colleagues who tend to use the language of spiritual formation. Holly has been a part of a Young Life program called the “Good Way,” which too is a program seeking to instill a value of or to provide resources for one’s “spiritual formation.” But what is spiritual formation? It is not just the accumulating of knowledge, it is not just the purging of sinful habits or thoughts or choices, it is not the earning of God’s favor, or the effort to get more gold stickers than others, or coming to act like a hermit spending all of one’s day in prayer.

Rather, to my understanding, spiritual formation is the developing of practices that keep us in touch with the Lord, that foster our connection, that improve our ability to listen, that keeps us connected to the Christ who redeems us and who calls us to follow in his example, to follow in his teachings, to follow in his love and grace. Because the connotation of commandment here is not so much about do the good things and make sure you don’t do the bad things – it is more, that this is how you will stay connected to me, my love, and my purposes, by keeping these things in your heart and your mind and your actions.

Now Jesus offers another comfort as well, that he will be with them not just as memory or as attached to habits or quirks or words of wisdom, but as the Holy Spirit indwelling. So not only will you hear Jesus’ voice in your head as you continue to live out the things he taught you, you will literally have the presence of Jesus with you through the Holy Spirit. “This is the Spirit of truth,” Jesus says, “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.”

“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.”

The Holy Spirit indwelling, the commandments and teachings tethering us to his presence and his memory, and us trying to carry on the work, empowered by that Spirit, empowered by Christ’s presence and Christ’s example.

Now there are likely many voices ingrained in our heads, many people whose memory is triggered by a certain saying or activity. But part of the challenge of spiritual formation, part of the challenge carrying on Jesus' work is finding ways to get in touch with Jesus' teachings, with God's voice, with the Spirit's healing power. Part of the task is also unlearning certain things, like knowing how to sear in the juices of a pork chop, unlearning certain things like always listening to the critical voice that we have internalized, so that we can learn new things, like grace.

Parents instill much good, but they often instill a nagging voice and an exacting standard as well, because, speaking as a parent now, we've been constantly trying to keep them alive and to teach them what we think they need to know and to get them to stop leaving their junk everywhere. Parenting is not easy, and the voices left in one's head in the aftermath may be like the result of the telephone game, not exactly what was intended, but the twisted residue that finally got through.

And so, spiritual formation is trying to get back to the message before the telephone game, to get back to practices that connect us, that put us in touch with the Christ who leads and loves, with the God who created you, with the Spirit who is with you and in you. Therefore, it is time to get back to some intentional practices, because in a world of lots of voices and stresses and influences, don't you want to hear God's voice coming through most clearly? Don't you want to be in touch with that ongoing work that Jesus left in our hands? Don't you want to know the comfort and presence of the Spirit who is with you and who is already in you?

John 14: The Promise of the Holy Spirit

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.”