I sometimes feel a bit pretentious when I talk about the people in my life who help me take care of me. I went to my hairdresser last week to get my hair cut. My doctor told me to take these vitamins. My accountant says I owe the IRS more than I thought I did.

I went to my dentist and she put in a crown. (All of the above are true, by the way.) *My* hairdresser. *My* doctor. *My* accountant. *My* dentist. It can sound like I have a team of professionals on retainer, just waiting for my call so they can spring into action. In reality, I'm just one of many customers, clients or patients of people with whom I can make an appointment and wait for until they have time to see me, not exactly when I need them but when they can fit me into their schedules.

That kind of arrangement for services is so very different from what Jesus tells us he has set up for those who follow him. “I will talk to the Father and he'll give you another Advocate,” Jesus tells his disciples. At first glance, this doesn't seem so different from the kinds of people I just talked about us having in our lives. The dictionary definition of *advocate* is a person who speaks or writes in support of a person or cause. In the legal realm, an *advocate* is a person who pleads the cause of another in a court of law.

Those first disciples knew that Jesus had their backs, that he would go to bat on their behalf when they had wronged God or failed to live up to God's expectations of them.

So, on that last night that Jesus spent with his disciples, it could have sounded like Jesus was going to leave them with someone to take his place in that formal, legal kind of way, a kind of defense attorney who would represent them when they found themselves in trouble with God. After all, Jesus' early followers did have quite an extensive list of Jewish laws that they needed both to know and to obey. They needed someone on their side, to defend them from God's wrath when they got on God's bad side.

But Jesus was telling the men something quite different. Jesus was promising never to leave the disciples alone. He was taking care of his followers the way a parent with a terminal illness makes sure his or her children have someone to take of them after the parent's death. Though there might have been a component of the more traditional role in the advocate Jesus was sending his disciples, Jesus was mostly talking about going to God and making sure the disciples got a friend, someone to comfort them in their loss, to love them when no one else would and to lead them the way Jesus did. In fact, this advocate was taking over where Jesus left off, ensuring that the disciples were not left alone, that they did not lose the unique love Jesus had shared with them over the past three years.

“I will not leave you orphaned.” Jesus knew how bereft his friends would feel when he was gone. The daily reassurance of Jesus' love, of his goodness, of his tender and fierce care for him would never be the same. Yet, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, the one we know as the Holy Spirit, would always be with them. If Jesus was the First Advocate, the Spirit would be the second; The Spirit would, in fact ***be*** Jesus since the Father, the Son and the Spirit are all one. I don't think Jesus expected his disciples to understand the concept of the Holy Trinity; that came along in theological circles after the disciples were gone themselves. What Jesus did want his followers to grasp was that he would be with them always in spirit, that the Truth he had taught them would never change or be taken from them. For the rest of their earthly lives, the disciples would carry on Jesus' ministry. They would embody Jesus' love, compassion and forgiveness in Jesus' name, because love that comes from Jesus is not complete until it is passed on to another.

“If you love me, show it by doing what I've told you. The person who knows my commandments and keeps them, that's who loves me. And the person who loves me will be loved by my Father and I will love him and make myself plain to him, to her.” In English, our translation ends up turning Jesus' words into a conditional clause. “*If* you love me, *then* you will do this.” That puts the decision to follow Jesus entirely in our hands. In Greek, this sentence would be translated more accurately as “*Because* you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Jesus knows that love and obedience do not originate in our hearts and minds, but in Jesus. He loves us, then gives us the ability to love, then shows us what to do with that love.

In this life, none of us is complete until we carry out the mission our Lord has given us. Unlike Jesus' original disciples, we do not have hundreds of rules to keep in order to stay in God's good graces. Jesus consolidated all the former laws into two: “Love me with all your heart and soul and strength and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Truthfully, it might be easier to memorize all those Hebrew rules. But Jesus was quite clear about what he wanted his followers to do. Know that he loves us fiercely. Love him with every fiber of our being. Serve him by loving those around us, not just those who are easy to love, but those who challenge us, who push us to achieve all the Lord wishes us to achieve.

As we do that, we widen our understanding of neighbor. It's not just someone who looks like us or thinks like us or lives near us. Our neighbor is anyone we are capable of loving, anyone who needs our love. We only need look at Jesus to see what that means. What angered those who knew him, who didn't trust him, was that Jesus loved *everyone.* He loved the socially acceptable and the marginalized – those who existed on the fringes of society because they were disliked or feared. Jesus dared to eat with sinners and touch lepers. He spoke tenderly to women and he befriended tax collectors.

Perhaps the hardest thing for us to believe is that Jesus could love those we can hardly abide and that he expects us to love them, too. In this tense political climate, Jesus expects Republicans to love Democrats and vice versa and to rise above the finger-pointing and blame-placing that is the example set in Washington. Jesus expects we who are relatively well-off in the world's scheme will care about those who have little or nothing, not just to give them money or food but to respect them as people with dreams and hopes for themselves and their families. Jesus expects us to treat all our neighbors with dignity, no matter what language they speak or religion they follow, because, ultimately we all are God's children and Jesus' beloved. Jesus expects us to operate out of an abundance of love and compassion, because that is what he has put in our hearts and that tank will never go dry.

So, this week, think about the Spirit who enables you to do what you think you cannot do. Allow that Spirit to thaw your heart and warm it so that you think about loving those you don't even want to love, to respect those you think aren't worthy of respect. Ponder forgiving someone who has hurt you, not because you want to, not because that person has asked for forgiveness, but because that is what Jesus wants you to do and because it will open up a place in your heart for more love.

This week, think about how much God loves you, about all God has done for you, about the Spirit God has given you to know the love of the Father and the Son. Thank God for it all. Know with all your heart that all God has given you is not to be kept deep within in but is to flow out in thoughts and words and acts of deep love for all around you. Because we love Jesus, let us show it by doing what he has told us to do.

Amen.

*Easter 6A*

*May 21, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 14:15-21*