

EASTER 6 – May 1, 2016
John 14:23-29
The Rev. Carenda Baker

In 1971, singer/songwriter Carole King released her album “Tapestry”, which included a song with the following lyrics:

“When you’re down and troubled
And you need a helping hand
And nothing, nothing is going right
Close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night
You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am
I’ll come running to see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you have to do is call
And I’ll be there – you’ve got a friend.

Now ain’t it good to know that you’ve got a friend
When people can be so cold
They’ll hurt you and desert you
And take your soul if you let them,
Oh, but don’t you let them. . .

Ain’t it good to know you’ve got a friend”.

The song was titled, “You’ve Got a Friend”.

Companionship. Human beings were created for companionship, to experience that good feeling which comes from being with someone else, being in their company. We were not designed to be alone. But true companionship is very hard to come by. Often where we hope to find it, it fails us. Where we trusted in it, it deserts us. Where we count on it, it leaves us. But the truth of the Resurrection? We are given companionship that is secure and lasts for life – for this life and into the life to come!

Today’s gospel reading from John is part of the account of Jesus saying goodbye to the disciples, and giving final instructions to them before his death. Can’t you imagine the mingling of great love, and intense sorrow, their hearts breaking at the thought of parting from their teacher and friend. The fear of being left alone once he is gone.

Sooner or later, we all come to face this place of dying and parting, don’t we? Some of us have already faced it numerous times in life. Whether from the perspective of the person who is physically dying, or the one being left behind, there is such important

emotional and spiritual work to be done in the final days of our physical life. It is important because it can truly help us experience a holy dying, dying with faith and hope, in trust and in peace. A big part of what needs to happen at the end of life, if at all possible, is that our relationships need to be affirmed and set right by saying things like, "I'm sorry, please forgive me. And, "I do forgive you." We need to speak gratitude for the relationship with our dear one: "Thank you for all you have meant to me. Thank you for all the life and love and memories we have made and shared together". And to acknowledge the reality of the parting, the preparation for going our separate ways by saying: "I love you." "I will miss you". And even, "It's okay for you to go." This is very tender and difficult heart and soul work, and it is SO important. I don't know anyone who wants to die angry, fearful, or regretful, or be the one left behind, and experiencing those feelings, either.

That part of saying "It's okay for you to go" – that's incredibly hard to do. I have seen some members of families who are able to do it, and others cannot. And sometimes circumstances are such that we don't get the opportunity to say it. And that's okay. But it is such a gift to our loved ones if we are able to tell them this.

Well, I can certainly imagine there is no way the disciples could say to Jesus, "It's okay for you to go". It was not okay that he was leaving them. He had just said to them a few moments earlier, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." It must have sounded to them like Jesus was talking in riddles - again. "You're leaving but we won't be alone. You're leaving but you're coming?" Can you imagine the disciples' confusion and bewilderment?

We, from the Easter side of things, recognize that Jesus was promising his permanent presence would be there for them, not permanent in the same physical & bodily form, but present in his essence, present to them in a different way. Jesus gives the disciples (and us) two very important things in his leave-taking. He gives us the promise of real and permanent companionship through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the gift of his peace, the assurance that all will be well.

Depending on which translation of the Bible you read, the Holy Spirit, this holy Companion is referred to in several different ways. In Greek the word is "Paraclete", which means "to come alongside", a Helper, in other words. The King James Version reads "Comforter", the New International Version says "Counselor", the New Revised Standard Version we heard read says "Advocate", and Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, The Message says, "Friend".

Comfort, help, and healing are part of what the Holy Spirit brings, offering soothing for hurting, and peace for troubled hearts. The Holy Spirit comes to remind us that God's love is always pointed in our direction. This is a blessed gift. It is a solid and sure foundation to lean on when we are left reeling in times of loss. Yet – yet there is even more that we are provided in the companionship of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit will do two things, said Jesus – teach us what we don't yet know and need to learn to continue as his disciples, and remind us of everything Jesus said. Implied here is that we are called to be active students and listeners. In addition to comfort, the Holy Spirit will also be a Companion who brings strength, renewal, and transformation, one who instills hope, encourages, teaches, and gives power and direction for our living.

Part of Resurrection living then, is to embrace this Divine Companionship by opening our hearts to it. The good news is that Jesus' promise has been kept. The Companionship of the Holy Spirit is ours. It is available to us 24/7. The challenge for us is to offer our ***intention, attention, and sacred space***, so that we come to know intimately, and depend upon this Holy Companion. ***Intention*** is simply making the decision each day to listen to the desire for holy Companionship that is deep within each of us, planted there by God. It's a simple decision to make, but it is not easy to live into. That's because it requires ***attention*** - making time daily to be present to God, free of the distractions of electronic devices and the tasks and interruptions of work and other responsibilities. I love the way Cheryl Stearn, our senior warden describes what it feels like when she is unable to start her day with Morning Prayer and attention is not given to God early in the day – “it's like starting the day with your shoe laces tied together”. The last part of embracing Holy Companionship is to ***create a sacred space*** to be present to God. It does not have to be elaborate. It does not have to be a whole room, or necessarily even indoors. It just has to be a dedicated space for you and God to be with each other. Candles, incense, an icon, a small altar or prayer desk, a flower or green plant, prayer beads, a Bible or Book of Common Prayer can all help to create and mark our set aside sacred space.

One of the beautiful things about opening our hearts to Divine Companionship is that we don't just do this individually. We also experience it when we gather together as a community of faith for worship, meetings, and social gatherings. You may have noticed that we observe a bit of silent time immediately following the sermon. This is intentional. This is time for us to reflect on what has been spoken and heard. We try not to rush into and through our corporate prayers, especially the Lord's Prayer. It is my hope that we could learn to practice keeping a bit more silence before the service begins, even before the prelude starts. I'm not suggesting “no talking at all”. I am suggesting that quiet preparation for worship is important, so if we do need to engage in conversation with someone as we come in, it is most respectful to do so quietly, being sensitive to the needs of others gathered. And on Sundays like today, when we offer healing prayers, we are all invited to be in prayer for those who ask for prayer, and by doing so, together in love we lift our sisters and brothers and their needs to God.

Our worship together is precious time. It is important for us to be in God's presence together – praising, listening, praying, communing. And it is important for this Trinity parish, every time we gather, to be a safe place to bring whatever it is we are carrying – sadness, tears, anger, anxiety, questions, doubts, confusion, good news, joy, gladness. No church is a community of perfect people who have it all together – none of us is free of challenges. None of us is free of the personal and social wounding that leads us to sin – those “things done and left undone”. But we are a redeemed, forgiven,

empowered, resurrection people, learning to live with each other and grow in love as God continues shaping us into the people God intends us to be.

Listen for these words in the Eucharistic prayer this morning: “Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.” To which the congregation responds, “Risen Lord, be known to us in the breaking of the Bread.”

Nourished and strengthened here in community by our risen Lord himself through the power of the Holy Spirit, let us embrace the deep peace that is offered, peace that comes from knowing: “winter, spring, summer or fall, all we have to do is call” and God will be there. Jesus’ death and resurrection have sealed this promise. We’ve got a living, and forever friend – working in us and for us, now and always.