

“Companionship”

Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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If life during and after COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is the importance of companionship. In the midst of that terrible health crisis, a church member said, *“I can’t wait to hug my grandchildren.”*

We all need companionship in some form. Living alone may be necessary but is not always desirable. Christian faith in general, and Jesus Christ in particular, promises that we need never be alone.

This is a Mother’s Day message so I would be remiss if I did not mention my own mother, Yvonne Clarice Atkinson Bodt, now nearly 14 years gone to live with her Savior. Mom was my companion. Her profound influence on me included encouragement to consider a call to ordained ministry. As mothers often are, she was a comforter. I still have a strong memory, as though it were yesterday, from when I was four years old. I had nightmares that would wake me in which a monster came to eat me. After this, I could not sleep. Mom said, *“When that happens, you can come to me, but you can also pray that God will take away the nightmares.”* I prayed, the nightmares vanished, and though my prayers have not always been answered as quickly or directly as that one, I have forever been convinced of the power of prayer. Mom led the weekly in-person Prayer Circle at my home church for years, meeting every Wednesday at 10 a.m. lifting intercessory prayer and writing notes to those for whom they prayed.

Mom’s compassionate skills were sharpened by a career in nursing, working full-time while raising four sons during a time when many women did not work outside the home. We never had to wonder if the right medication was in the house, and the Merck Manual was second only to the Bible among the books consulted in our home library. She was a fixture in my home church, serving on every committee and board except Trustees, as well as being the Chair of the Baltimore-Washington Conference Commission on Missions. A month after successful heart by-pass surgery in 2009, she had a spinal stroke and was paralyzed from the waist down the last three years of her life. She was determined to walk independently and, although she was not able to achieve that, her fighting spirit and zest for life never waned.

In fact, though she was a woman of deep faith in Jesus and life beyond life, Mom also loved THIS life. Carol recalls the day Mom died when my mother said, "I think I'm dying." Carol answered "The Lord won't take you until He's ready" and Mom quickly replied "But I'm not ready!" This is a testimony to my mom on Mother's Day and I give thanks to Anna Jarvis and her campaign to create a national Mother's Day observance as noted in your bulletin.

Yet despite these wonderful memories, it was my dad's experience in his later years that taught me the most about companionship. Dad was always an independent sort, living by example if not in words by the mantra "*Neither a borrower nor a lender be.*" After he and Mom became empty nesters in the mid-1980's, they continued to live in the home they built in 1958 and in which they raised my brothers and I. Dad loved "*Five Acres,*" his descriptive name for the property, and was determined not to leave. When Mom died in 2012, he was determined to live there alone. By the grace of God, he did, for nearly five more years. Kinda.

Five acres is a lot of property when it is in grass and sage and has to be mowed. Ask his sons! So Dad was alone, but not without increasing support. That support blossomed into full time home care after his fall on Easter Monday, 2017.

Dad was fortunate. He lived a good and full 94 years. He had resources to pay for care; and he did not outlive those resources when he died less than four months later. My two younger brothers lived close by and my older brother and I came when we could and generally stayed for extended time: all to help with the tasks of living that Dad could no longer perform.

The reality, for my independent-minded dad; for you who care for aging parents (which now again includes Carol and me) or minor children; for you who find social isolation a bit too easy: the reality is that we all need companionship. John Donne expressed it well:

No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main....any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind.

*And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls,
it tolls for thee. (1)*

(1) Donne, John (1572-1631, Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and severall steps in my sickness, Meditation XVII, 1624

In today's Gospel, Jesus says that he is going to leave those he loves. Death is less than 24 hours away. What can he say to those he loves, and to those who love him?

He can, and does, promise them that although he will not be here in body, the Advocate will be with them forever.

The Advocate. The Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Truth. The Greek word is "*paraclete*," translated as "Comforter," "Counselor," "Helper." Somebody's who's in our corner. A confidant. An aide. Someone who, as the scripture also says, "has borne our grief and carried our sorrows." The Advocate is one who comes along side of us to travel with us. Right: a travel companion. Companionship: with God!

Jesus links this promise of eternal comforting companionship to his command to love. This love is not romantic love, not friendship, not familial love, but *agapo*, the self-giving sacrificial love that puts the well-being of another first. To put the well-being of another first is to mirror, or reflect, the love of God.

That's what we're supposed to do, we who follow Christ and comprise the Church that is his body. The things that we do for others – "*Helping Hands*," the Woodbury Food Bank, our "Crossroads" forums on justice and advocacy issues, the "Miracle Sunday" offering next week and scholarships for our own young people, our partnership with Transition Academy and Open Doors Prayer that is not insular but outreaching – these things are done not because we're good people (sometimes we are and sometimes we aren't) but because we desire to reflect God's love in the world. Jesus reminded us today, "*Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.*" We love Jesus by doing for others in his name. These are acts of companionship of the highest order.

Let's turn now to Paul's experience in Athens as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. I almost called this message "A Tale of Two Sermons." Jesus' discourse to his disciples is the most intimate of messages. Paul, on the other hand, for all his effectiveness in so many other places in sharing the love of Christ, couldn't get through to the Athenians.

You may know that our scriptures generally follow the lectionary, a three-year cycle of readings chosen by scholars to reflect major Biblical themes and to allow us to read a large portion of the Bible over that time. Yet every now

and again I have a lover's quarrel with the lectionary authors. I wondered, "Why did they stop the Acts reading at verse 31?" If they'd included one more verse, we'd have heard the lukewarm response of the Athenians: "When [the Athenians] heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, 'We will hear you again about this.'" And although some of his listeners joined him and became believers, no church was started there.

Why? Because in attempting to meet the Athenians where they were, Paul's approach was primarily intellectual, not relational. This is not to disparage intellectual people or intellectual curiosity. Far from it! It is intellectual curiosity and scientific insights that developed a vaccine for the coronavirus. The current anti-vaccine, anti-science, anti-intellectual rhetoric and practice from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is the cause of, among other maladies, the worst measles outbreak in over three decades, nearly all of the infected children who have no agency to protect themselves. Jesus came to take away our sins, not our minds.

Paul himself was a learned man. In Athens, he hoped to reach the Epicureans AND the Stoics. Simply put, the Epicureans believed that just to exist is pleasurable and that we should curb our desires so that we experience peace by avoiding vain striving. The Stoics believed there are many things outside our control, and curbing our desires is not enough. We also need courage, moral strength and wisdom, especially when bad things happen to us. To me, both of these philosophies have something to teach us and, indeed, the household of God is big enough for all.

But one can intellectualize without a commitment of the heart. This is where Paul's proclamation seems to have been ineffective. One can get caught up in theories and "what ifs" without living Jesus' command to love others. And then there's arguing just for the sake of arguing. The writer of Acts says of the Athenians, "Now all the Athenians....would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new." Sure sounds like high-brow gossip to me!

What God promises is not a philosophy but a way to live. While it is important to think and be thoughtful, what draws people to God in Christ is the love that we show. What draws us to God in Christ is the love that we are shown. Many have said, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day." The challenge is to **be the sermon** we want to see, isn't it? When we experience the love of the Advocate, the Companion, the one who comes alongside of us, we want to share it. And when we recognize our need for a Companion, we not

only draw close to God through the Holy Spirit but find our hearts warmed: open to what others offer to us.

For over 30 years Carol and I have had friends who are the epitome of intellectual inquiry. He is a now-retired college professor who taught, among other things, a fascinating cross-disciplinary course on slavery, Afro-centric and Cajun cuisine, and New Orleans jazz. She is a now-retired high school chemistry teacher: a scientist teaching budding scientists. They have hosted us many times in their lovely Pennsylvania home. Their life includes challenges: his sobriety of 40 years (one day at a time), an adult child in prison, and a sibling who was a victim of clergy sexual abuse. What keeps them going?

You might expect me to say “their faith.” In fact, although they are people of faith, their faith has taken some major hits. What keeps them going, according to their own witness, are people who have come alongside them through these nearly unspeakable trials. What has kept them going are people, in and outside the Church, who listen without judgment. What keeps them going is an extended family system born not of blood but of love.

I thought about them this week as I remembered another family whose mother died suddenly and unexpectedly on Mother’s Day, 2020. I married the mother and her husband 35 years ago; Carol supervised their son on his way to credentialing as a physical therapist. It is a small world. As I like to say, *“You always have to be good.”*

We talked about these things; we expressed our faith; and we prayed. But I honestly think that what most conveyed the love of God was pizza. We told them we would bring pizza at dinner time, and we did. And the Spirit was as alive in those moments as I have ever known it at any Lord’s table.

For you see, it need not be dramatic acts of love that express our desire to come alongside another. Those acts within our grasp will do nicely, thank you. And when we are those who need companionship, we find that the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Companion keeps us going. Even when we are not aware. For as Jesus says, *“he abides with you and will be in you.”* In you. In me. Amen.