

# *Permanent Relationship*

John 14:16-29

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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<sup>16</sup> “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,<sup>1</sup> to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup>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<sup>2</sup> you.

<sup>18</sup> “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup>In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup>On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup>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.” <sup>22</sup>Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. <sup>24</sup>Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

<sup>25</sup> “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. <sup>27</sup>Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. <sup>28</sup>You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. <sup>29</sup>And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.” (NRSV)

On many sides these days, the news is troubling. This summer, heavy rains flooded the Midwest while the lack of rain sent parts of the West and the South into drought. As if it's not enough for the country we live in to be fighting hugely expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Israel—backed by the United States—threatens to fight Iran, which could lead to this country's third simultaneous war. As ice melts in the polar regions at an alarming rate, the recent G8 summit refused to do anything substantive about global warming. Prices for health care go up while health care coverage goes down. The housing market may be approaching gridlock after taking a one-two punch from the sub-prime mortgage mess and now from worries about the financial health of lenders like Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

And then there's the price of gas, which is rapidly causing all manner of painful changes for big corporations and individual households alike. With gas hovering around \$4 a gallon or a bit less, the new rule we try to follow at our house is that except for going to work and church, we don't drive anywhere unless we can do at least two things on the same trip. Gone are the days when we might drive to the store just to buy a pair of shoes. Although no one really knows the future of oil prices, a few analysts have said that oil might go to \$200 a barrel, depending on

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<sup>1</sup> Or *Helper*

<sup>2</sup> Or *among*

many different factors, which would translate into gas costing around \$7 a gallon. *That* would really shake things up, causing massive business and behavioral shifts on a bigger scale than we've seen so far.

Because I'm a pastor, I keep wondering about one aspect of these new gas realities that almost no one seems to be talking about: how will gas prices affect the way we do church? So far I've not seen any article about this in the secular or church press; nor have I heard many people talk about it. I have heard some people speculate that the huge, regional mega-churches around the country could be in trouble since a number of their members drive fifty, even one hundred miles to get to church.

If the price of gas remains \$4 a gallon or slightly less, and especially if it rises to \$5, \$6, or \$7 a gallon, I wonder if we can continue to conduct conference and denominational business the way we have. Small and limited-income congregations, perhaps even medium-sized and medium-income congregations, will no longer be able to send delegates to annual conference sessions, or especially to the extremely expensive biennial national conventions.

Changes may also happen in local congregational life. For instance, at what point might we say that instead of driving to the church building several times each week for multiple events, we will instead drive to the building only once a week, probably on Sunday, and then accomplish as much as we possibly can on that one day? In this scenario we might come in the morning for worship and classes, eat lunch together, and in the afternoon schedule commission meetings, youth group meetings, small group meetings, and the like. This, of course, is just one of a number of potential scenarios that the new realities of gas could create in congregational life.

Fuel is only one of the economic, political, and environmental challenges before us. In profound ways our times are troubled. As a result many of us are anxious about the future. One of the dynamics of human nature is that we are probably more afraid of what *could* happen than we are about what has *already* happened. We fret over how bad will things get. Will we have enough money? Enough raw materials? What hardships will we have to go through? How will we get by?

We are hardly the first people in history to live in troubling times. In the gospel of John, people were also living in troubled times with troubled hearts. Their reasons for anxiety were somewhat different than ours. They weren't worried about gas, for the obvious reason that none had been refined yet; and they weren't anxious about the state of the polar ice caps for the simple

reason that no one in Palestine knew the polar ice caps even existed. Nonetheless, John's community of faith was deeply worried.

They were worried because of an announcement they had just heard from the lips of Jesus back in chapter 13: Jesus was leaving them. He would soon be going away to a place where they could not go (13.33). Coming where it does in the gospel of John, this announcement probably means two things. First, Jesus is hinting in a round-about way that he is going to die. And second, he's also hinting that he will leave this world altogether and ascend back to God. Either way, he announces he's leaving them. Permanently.

This is shocking news. It amounts to the collapse of their world. It calls into question most of what they had relied on and believed in. The departure of Jesus is a theological and relational crisis.

To understand the nature of this crisis, you have to know that the most important thing Jesus does in the gospel of John is to reveal the person of God. In the other gospels, this theme is not nearly so pronounced. In those other gospels, Jesus comes to inaugurate the reign of God and help people to understand what that reign is all about. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus tells lots of parables; he gives lots of moral teachings; he lays out a number of commands; and he demonstrates through his own actions what this wonderful reign of God is like.

Not in John. You've probably noticed that in John, Jesus really doesn't do any of these things. In John, Jesus doesn't talk much at all about the kingdom of God. He never gives his followers any commands, except for the command to love each other in 13:34. If you're the kind of person who doesn't like rules very much, then you might like the gospel of John, because it has no rules other than the one to love other Christians. And while Jesus does do some miracles in John, they are not for the purpose of showing us what the reign of God is like. Instead, the miracles in John are signs—we might better call them symbols—of Jesus' own divine authority.<sup>1</sup> The miracles in John aren't there to illustrate the reign of God; instead they're there to prove that Jesus comes from God, that Jesus and God are united as one, and that by knowing Jesus you know divine life and light.

In other words, the main thing Jesus does in the gospel of John is to reveal the person of God to us women and men. Jesus shows God to us. As I've already suggested, this revelation is not really about facts, details, and information. In the Old Testament, and also in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, revelation is often about facts. In those parts of the Bible, God reveals information to

us about what rules to keep, how to worship rightly, what justice and peace are, and what righteous living is all about. We also get some information about God—that God calls, forgives, guides, blesses, admonishes, and so on.

Not in John. In John, Jesus reveals a relationship. What Jesus reveals is God’s own self. In this gospel we don’t get reams of new data; we don’t get an instruction book; and we don’t get a college class on macro-economic analysis. No, in the gospel of John we get a relationship. We get to know the person of God rather than facts about God.

I do not know either Barack Obama or John McCain, one of whom will be our next president. Oh sure, I know some things *about* Senator McCain and Senator Obama; but I do not *know* them as persons. I do not have an intimate relationship with either man, and I am not a personal friend of either one. By contrast, I do know Jennifer Halteman Schrock rather well. Sure, I know lots of information about her. But that’s very different than knowing her as a person—and I’m delighted to know her as a person. For a quarter of a century she’s been my best human friend. I have a deep relationship with her.

That’s what Jesus makes possible in the gospel John: his coming to earth allows people to know God. The incarnation of Jesus permits them to form an intimate relationship with God. Thanks to having Jesus here on earth, men and women could now form deep connections with God that up to that point in time were not possible.

Now you understand why the disciples were thrown into a tizzy when Jesus announced he was leaving: because if he leaves, they lose their intimate connection with God. They will be orphaned (14:18). They will be bereft, friendless, forsaken, and above all, without hope. And of what value is human life without a connection to God?

However, Jesus has some other news to share also. The news comes in two parts. The first part is he’s leaving permanently; but the second part is don’t worry; “do not let your hearts be troubled” (14:27). Be at peace, because God is going to send you the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, to be with you forever. This Paraclete will teach you what you need to know, and help you when you need help. The Paraclete will make a home in you and among you. (The Greek can be translated either way: “in you” or “among you.”) And that’s just what happened: after the resurrection Jesus, while gathered in a home with the disciples, breathed on them—an action that transferred the Paraclete from him to all of them (20:22).

This is where the Paraclete has been ever since. It's nothing short of a miracle, if you pause to ponder it. The Holy Spirit is fully and completely present in every community of faith in everywhere in the world, at any point in history. The historical Jesus never could have done that because he was limited by time, space, culture, and gender. The Paraclete, however, is not limited by anything, and can live everywhere simultaneously, here and now, among us and all of God's people. We are the Paraclete's home. Other parts of the Bible understand this a little differently, but at least as far as the gospel of John is concerned, the Paraclete is a gift only for the church. The world at large neither sees nor knows the Paraclete (14:17).

Which means that in troubled times, we the church have a huge advantage over anyone else: we have the Paraclete. We have the capacity to understand that God is bigger than us while at the same time being intimately involved with us. We have the ability to be at peace. We have the wherewithal to live in hope. We have the means to live unafraid, for the simple reason that we see and know God. We enjoy a relationship with God that permits us to live qualitatively different lives.

In the context of troubled times and troubled hearts, I am glad, even joyous, that Jesus has left us and no longer lives anywhere on earth. His departure has allowed the Paraclete to stay with us, to be for us, and to move among us in fresh ways unrestricted by time or circumstance. We are in permanent relationship.

Thanks be to God!

#### **Note**

1. On signs v. symbols, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Crossroad, 1999, 2003), 63-77.