

Witness of Love
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I will not leave you orphaned.

As some of you know, while I was in seminary, I spent a summer serving as the chaplain assigned to the spinal cord injury unit of Jefferson Barracks VA in St. Louis Missouri. Yes, I spent three months as an army chaplain, and it was a life-changing experience.

Each morning, I would check for specific pastoral care requests. If there were any, I would visit those rooms first, otherwise, I would just make my way around the unit, visiting my guys, checking in on them, and listening to stories, fielding complaints, discussing God, and praying, praying, praying.

I played lots of chess, got called more than a few insulting names, and learned a whole lot about the military, the hospital system, and life from the para and quadriplegic veterans who were my congregation.

One of my favorite places to catch up with folks was the art therapy room, where I would paint pottery while chatting with the men who were learning to regain use of their arms and hands. There was one gentleman, who was fully quadripiliegic, who would even pain while holding the brush in his mouth.

I attended staff meetings, made home visits, and wrote case study after case study, all the while taking in the unique experience of working with this particular population.

I will not leave you orphaned, Jesus tells his disciples in today's gospel reading. He assures them that though he will soon be gone, they will not be left alone.

Working through my unit at Jefferson Barracks, I dealt daily with folks who were certain they had been forgotten. That no one cared for them, or about them.

That belief took on different faces for different men. One, for example, did everything he could to get staff to come in and talk with him. He'd make jokes and play games all day long, hiding from the pain he felt inside.

Another veteran took the opposite approach, building up a wall so high and thick around himself, that it was painful to walk into his room. He always had a cutting remark or insult to share, causing people to leave quickly, thus proving his own point. No one wanted to be around him.

Many of the patients were homeless, outside of the VA. It was common knowledge that a large part of the population was there for very preventable problems. They would allow themselves to get pressure sores or let a cut get deeply infected to the point of hospitalization so they could return to a place that cared for them, where they could avoid the questioning stares of passersby on the street, and be with others who had similar stories.

Whether their injuries were sustained in battle, or after returning home and facing difficulty reassimiliating, each man there had the shared experience of loss.

While I served that community, I faced some of the toughest challenges of my ministry so far. I also served as a witness to a deep and abiding love that couldn't be denied.

Dr Brene Brown is a researcher in the area of shame and vulnerability. When asked to speak on matters of faith, she shares her belief that God is love. But she is quick to add, and I quote, "this is why Jesus would have to be the son of God, because people want love to be like unicorns and rainbows and so then you just send Jesus and people go, oh my God, love is hard. Love is sacrifice, love is eating with the sick, love is breaking bread with people, love is trouble, love is rebellious." She quotes the Leonard Cohen song, "Love is not a victory march, it's a cold and broken hallelujah." She continues, "Love is not easy. Love is not like hearts and bows, love is very controversial, really."

During my time at the Jefferson Barracks, that love could be seen in the doctors and staff, working tirelessly to cure broken skin and tender flesh. In physical and occupational therapists, coaxing and encouraging tired men to try just one more time to move that limb, or tie that knot. In the social workers, attempting to make homes safer, or get folks off the streets, and off the illegal drugs they used to self-medicate on their own. And yes, even in a

tired, dedicated chaplain, willing to enter room after room after room, and listen, and question, and pray.

But that love, I am convinced, not come from any of us individually. I believe the love that called us to care again and again and again for this unique, tight-knit, and challenging population of veterans came directly from God.

From the holy spirit, moving within, among, and through us each day.

If you love me, you will keep my commandments, Jesus says, and I will send you an advocate to be with you forever. It is well accepted that Jesus is talking about the third person of the trinity, the holy spirit.

I believe the holy spirit was there in Jefferson Barracks, and I believe the holy spirit is with us here at St. Peter's United Church of Christ as we are inspired to care for one another, and to reach out to our brothers and sisters in our church, in our community, and in the world.

Now, each year, when our confirmands write their creeds, we always hit a bit of a wall when it comes to the spirit. Jesus? Easy. We know all about Jesus. God? A little more difficult. More abstract. But we muddle through. Holy Spirit. Blank stare.

Perhaps we remember the Pentecost story, and the fire and flame and weird speaking in other languages stuff that was supposed to have happened. But how do we see that ancient story working in our lives today?

If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to be with you forever". If you love Christ, you won't be able to help yourself, you will do the two things that he came to teach, Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. These are the commandments of Christ. And we are promised here that as we attempt to do those two things, we will not be alone. The word in Greek is *paraclete*, which means "someone called alongside to help or assist. The original meaning is comforter.

Diane Bergant writes, "It is the Spirit who strengthens us, comforts us, guides us and inspires us. It is the Spirit who enables us to interpret the

signs of the times in ways very different from the ways of the world. It is the spirit who works through us for the transformation of the world.”

We talk of the Spirit as breath, as wind, as fire, and flame. When we are inspired, when we are challenged to make a difference, or are creative in our approach to a problem, the winds of the spirit are flowing through us.

The spirit isn't easy to define, but then, neither are many of the terms we have for the things that are most important. How do you define love? How do you define hope? How do you define grace?

It's not our dictionary definition, but the results of our actions that point as witnesses to these things. God is love. But love is not easy. “It's not like hearts and bows.”

So as you move out into the world this week, I invite you keep your eyes open to the movement of the spirit in your midst.

Ask yourself When are you inspired? When are you given a spark? When are you called to live out your life's purpose and connect with those around you? When are you called to love in ways that are not easy?

And then give thanks, for these are the times your life is touched by the Holy. This sixth Sunday of Easter, we give thanks for the Holy Spirit in our midst. This Memorial Day weekend, we remember those who have served in the military. Let us hold all these things in our hearts, and let us give thanks above all to God. Amen.