The gospel reading today is a continuation of Jesus’ final teaching to his close companions that we have been hearing and thinking about for the past few weeks. Throughout this time with them he has given them so much to take in – He kneels as a servant and washes their feet, he talks of coming betrayal and abandonment, and if that is not enough, he says there will soon come a time when he will no longer be with them. They are disrupted, distressed and confused.

But now, in the midst of that, Jesus turns to words of reassurance, beginning with, “If you love me…”.

If you love me…. How often have we heard or said or thought that in our lives? If you love me.

Maybe we have said it in jest …….as in, “if you love me you’d bring me a cookie”.

Or, perhaps we recognize it as a statement that speaks to a deep longing within…. If you love me.

What does it does it evoke for us?

Affirmation?

Belonging?

Doubt?

Anticipation?

IF you love me…... IF is such a small word, and yet those two letters hold so much…

so much what…?

Meaning? …..possibility?….. potential?

Love is about being in relationship. It is the kind of love Jesus has been demonstrating for his friends all along in his actions, healing, teaching and in how he talks about the love of the Father dwelling within him and within us. The love of God is love without barriers and boundaries.

So, I would like to add something to the IF.

I would like to insert WHEN to what Jesus is saying. So then we hear not only

*IF you love me, you will keep my commandments*,

and also

*WHEN you love me, you will keep my commandments.*

You see, IF feels to me like a very *internal* kind of word, something I have to think about and make a definitive decision – YES or NO- *an intellectual exercise*.

Now there’s nothing wrong with deliberation in our decision-making, we just can’t remain there, stuck in our heads. So that’s where WHEN comes in. Because IF and WHEN we love Jesus, we WILL follow His commandments to love God and love others. It is about the action we take as a result of our love for and through and because of Christ. This is no small thing Jesus is laying at the feet of his friends, especially since he is making it clear to them that he will not physically be in the vicinity to guide and help them in the near future.

But Jesus reassures them with a promise of “another Advocate”, someone who God will call to their side to support them and be a source of help and comfort. He says, “This is the Spirit of Truth, ... You know this Spirit, because it abides with you, and it will be in you.”

I love that word,….. ABIDE. Perhaps when you hear it you think as I do of the beautiful hymn, *“Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.”*

I wonder if the disciples could have had any sense of what Jesus was talking about. Would they have felt a comfort at the word abide?

The writer of the Gospel of John surely liked the Greek term “meno”, the root word of abide, remain, stay, live, dwell, last, endure and used it *40 times in 33 verses*. It seems to carry for John, the very essence of God’s presence in among and around Creation.

And if we look at other instances where John quotes Jesus, it is clear that Jesus is commanding us that we must abide with each other. Look at John 15:4 which is the basis for our Episcopal Church of NH vision “Tending the Vine”. Jesus says, “Abide with me, as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

IN the reading from Acts today, Paul, by adopting the words of a Greek poet, takes the sense of *living, moving and having our being*, indeed of abiding in Christ, and uses it to create community with his Greek listeners.

Like the newly minted theologian I am, I looked up the verb *to ABIDE* in Webster’s Thesaurus. Here are just a few of the related terms:

Stand for

Remain or continue with

Persevere

Persist

Survive

Keep on

Put up with

Sit tight

Be big about

Suffer with

Submit to

I don’t know about you, but very few of those actions sound particularly comfy and relaxing to me. All of them speak to us of actions borne of patience, persistence and tolerance. None of them look to be taking place in solitary and isolated existence, but in the midst of others. Abiding takes time and willingness and discipline and prayer and seeking others in community. There is little space or time for building walls or making up reasons for holding on to things that divide or segregate.

These are the qualities of the relationship the Spirit of Truth brings to us directly from and in the mutuality that is God. IF and WHEN we dwell in love with God in Christ and the Spirit, we are compelled to live out the commandments and to learn and practice the actions of abiding.

I’d like to tell you about two special organizations here in New Hampshire who represent exemplars for me of what it is to abide with others.

CASA is a primarily volunteer organization that, since 1989, serves to advocate for children who have been removed from their homes because their parents are unable to care for them. CASA volunteers are trained and appointed to look out for the best interests of the children. They are the eyes and ears of the court, making independent, objective recommendations to the judge based on information they gather through meeting with the child and his or her parents, foster parents, social workers, schoolteachers, therapists and more.

These volunteer advocates are not lawyers or social workers. They are dedicated caring adults that help the child to navigate a complex and often confusing and disconcerting process so that they might find stability in a safe, permanent loving home as quickly as possible while enduring the least amount of trauma and upheaval.

Patrice, a CASA volunteer advocate, is quoted on the CASA website, *“ I will never forget the first time that my work as a CASA volunteer was having a direct positive impact on a child’s life. During a court hearing a judge abruptly turned to me and said, ‘what do you think of that’? I had a lot to say. I knew that child well from visiting with her. I knew what she wanted and what she needed. I spoke up in court that day and the judge listened.”*

The Granite State Organizing Group is a grass-roots organization of churches and community members that are united to strengthen community voices in issue-oriented actions. They focus on problems such as poor housing, failing schools, barriers to citizenship, unjust working conditions and lack of access to health care.

One such GSOG action has focused on working with Manchester Housing Authority’s Elmwood Gardens, assisting renters in developing their voice. More than 35 residents have graduated from a sponsored leadership training class and have formed a Tenant Leadership Group. This group now works with other tenants to proactively brainstorm solutions to community issues and promote fellowship within the housing development.

These people, together, abiding, coming to each other’s side as help and support and companions, are evidence of the Spirit of Truth residing in and among us. To quote Dr. Craig Koester, Academic Dean at Luther Seminary, *“A quick reading of John may give us the impression that the Spirit is the Advocate who brings up our case before God in the hope that God will do something merciful for us. But the direction is actually the opposite. God has already given us the gift of love through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and such love is what creates genuine life. The Spirit is the Advocate who brings the truth of that life to us in this time after Easter, which makes faith possible.”*

Jesus’ assurance to his companions that they will not be abandoned, left as orphans with none to comfort and support them, also comforts us today. It is the Spirit who continues to make God’s abiding love known to us, in us, and among us.

In closing, I would like to offer us this poem by the Austrian poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke. May they be words of encouragement for us as we seek to abide in God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.*

*These are the words we dimly hear:*

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.*

*Embody me.*

*Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.*

*Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.*

*Just keep going. No feeling is final.*

*Don’t let yourself lose me.*

*Nearby is the country they call life.*

*You will know it by its seriousness.*

*Give me your hand.*

*Rainer Maria Rilke*

*Book of Hours, I 59*