

The Howl of the Advocate

John 14: 15-21

15 “If you love me, you will fulfill my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 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 you.

18 “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

21 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.”

“If you love me, then you will love one another as I love you.” It’s Jesus’ ultimate commandment to his disciples. Here are a couple of thoughts I would like to share with you this morning about this commandment and the promise of the Advocate Jesus is talking about:

The first thought is that our love for one another *is what loving Jesus looks like*. The two aren’t separate, which basically means I am often in trouble. If I’m honest, I can think of at least a half-dozen people who I have a difficult time loving. I can think of a bunch of others who I point my finger at saying, ‘How can that person claim to love Jesus if they are supporting that way of thinking, or that policy, or refusing to wear a mask in public?’ But then the *agape* love Jesus is talking about slips through my fingers as the voices of judgement slip into my mind. I mean, loving people—honoring the image of God in someone who refuses to honor the image of God in me or others—is a lot more difficult than it sounds. But Jesus doesn’t separate our love for him from our love for one another.

Which brings me to my second thought: we are not left to figure out how to do this by ourselves. Jesus promises an Advocate—literally a defender for the accused—who will be Jesus’ presence with us, especially during the times when we aren’t sure we have what it takes. Which means that the majority of the heavy lifting that is required to shoulder up the strength to love this way isn’t mostly up to us. It’s mostly up to God. God supplies the strength, God supplies the Spirit, God supplies the love.

So this week when I read the good news that Jesus is sending us an Advocate to be with us to help us love one another, my first thought was, “Nice, I have a sermon about receiving God’s love and how Jesus is offering us some words of encouragement to keep us going while we all have cabin fever!” But then came the news of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, the 74 days it took for the truth to come out before there was an arrest, and photos of him wandering around a construction site of a house being built—something I have done several times myself. What was most disturbing was how these photos were used to justify what happened to him and it was after this narrative of white supremacy surfaced which made me hear Jesus’ words differently. It made

we wonder: how can we love one another if it takes 74 days to see the truth and then when we do witness it, there is a counter-narrative produced to justify the injustice?

You see, it's not the offender who often needs an advocate, it's the victim. It's not the oppressor who needs a comforter, it's the oppressed whose perspectives and voices get swept under the carpet of skepticism time and time again just so the system can preserve its false sense of identity and security.

Remember *Advocate* means, “defender of the accused.”

It became clearer for me after reading an article from an African American man, named Julian Newman, who tells about when his father heard the verdict of “Not Guilty” during the Rodney King trials. He recalls how his father laced up his running shoes, ran to the end of the street and howled into the sky like a wolf. And how after watching the video tape of Ahmaud Arbery's murder, he laced up his own running shoes and went on a run of fury as well. Except when he got to the end of his road, he says he wanted to howl, he wanted to lament his pain into the darkness, but he couldn't because there aren't safe places for someone like him to howl. He writes, “My heart howled, but I didn't make a sound. You [grow up to] understand that to navigate a white world, you must live with the knowledge that your skin, your history, your culture can be deadly. Not for them, *but for you*... You want to howl, but you can't.”

Then I remembered something I heard on the radio about a Facebook group who, during these sequestering days, coordinate a nightly howl every night at 8 p.m. (So if you ever hear howling around 8 p.m. in your neighborhood you know why.) The group said the reason they chose to howl is the same reason that wolves howl. Did you know: wolves howl to let other journeying wolves in the area know that there is a pack nearby and they are not alone.

There are some whose voices are muted, who cannot howl, who can only cry out silently in their hearts. Those who need holy advocates who keep howling until everyone feels safe to do so and the lies our system tells itself are exposed.

Which brings us to a final thought: Jesus says this Advocate is already with us and within us. Calling out to us as the Spirit of truth. Validating God's love in our lives. Helping us to shoulder up the strength to stand up for and with the vulnerable.

And she is already here moving among us in beautiful ways.

She is working through those whose hearts were inspired to run or walk 2.23 miles—to represent February 23, the day Ahmaud Arbery was killed and to raise awareness for the sake of advocacy.

The Defender of the Accused is moving through our teachers who are working for equity in our school systems.

The Spirit is moving through coalitions that are organizing ways to get food to vulnerable communities, and organizations who are helping people to keep their insurance after losing jobs.

The Advocate is already here working with us and within us, helping us to do what we can until all of us are free enough to howl into the night sky and feel safe to do so.

Deep down, I believe that our kindness and resiliency, our humor and creativity will allow the love and justice Jesus is talking about to prevail. I also believe that God is the source of the kindness and resiliency, the humor and creativity which will get us through these times together.

The *Advocate* is already here. And maybe, just maybe, you can hear her howling into the night sky, reminding us that we are not alone. Amen.