



May 17, 2020 Easter 6C

John 14:14-21

Famous Last Words: Love and Spirit

A couple of years ago, we went with friends to see *Camelot* at Chanhassen Dinner Theater. *Camelot* takes place in the days of King Arthur. Camelot was pictured as this wonderful, idyllic, almost utopian place where only good things ever happened. By the end of the story, Camelot has gone the way of all flesh and has become a place of greed and unfaithfulness and deceit. At the end, King Arthur sings (and no, I'm not going to sing. And all God's people say, "Amen!"):

*Ask ev'ry person if they've heard the story,
And tell it strong and clear if they have not,
That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory
Called Camelot!*

*Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot
For one brief, shining moment
That was known as Camelot.*

Keep the story going begs King Arthur. Pass it on to your children and your children's children; and in the very remembering, you will keep the dream alive. In the midst of the despair around you, recall this time, this special place. Keep it alive by keeping the memory alive.

We don't live in Camelot. That is certain. Maybe Coronalot, but definitely not Camelot. We live in a place where bad stuff is the norm. And Jesus knows that, and He addressed it in His parting words to His disciples.

Oh, it can be tempting to hear Jesus singing Arthur's song as He gathers with His disciples for the last time. Jesus knew He would soon be betrayed by one of His closest followers-betrayed, arrested, and finally killed. Here on Passover night, perhaps still at the Passover table, Jesus gives His last words to His closest friends. We can well imagine Jesus calling them to remember the wondrous days of glory they had shared (think of all the miracles they saw or the lessons he taught them). With such a song the disciples could go on, sustained by the memory of this one great life, waiting and hoping Jesus would soon return.

John wrote His Gospel late in life, probably during the time he was leader at the church at Ephesus (around 90-100 AD). He was writing to people for whom Jesus was a memory. Most of those in John's community had never met Jesus. Most, if not all, the disciples were dead. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed-a sign for many that the end-time would

soon come. But the end-time didn't come. Life went on and that was, in many ways, the hardest part of all. Jesus hadn't returned even when all the signs seemed right. This community of believers felt pushed to the very edge of despair, and despair could defeat them.

This seems like a great place for a Camelot song: *"Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot for one brief shining moment."*

But Jesus didn't sing that song. Listen to Jesus' words again:

"If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be^[a] in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."

These words are part of a much longer discourse Jesus gave on the last night of His life. Listen to some other things He said as part of that same discourse.

" If you love me you will keep my commandments.

" A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.

" Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.

" I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

"But how can we do that?" the disciples must have wondered. Knowing they had a hard time loving each other even while Jesus was with them, how could believers love like that in John's community where memory was fading? Let's just keep singing about that time when Jesus was here.

But Jesus did not sing that song. Jesus didn't call the disciples to hold up His life as memory but as presence. "I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus said, "I am coming to you." What a strange thing to say on the night of betrayal and arrest. He should have said, "I am leaving you." Jesus didn't deny what was going to happen. "In a little while the world will no longer see me," Jesus said, "but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live."

Jesus was calling His disciples to be something and do something as a result of His leaving. Jesus was calling his disciples to live and love in ways

that seemed impossible. They couldn't do it, not without the Spirit. The Spirit is the other theme repeated over and over around the table. Sometimes Jesus says the Advocate, like someone who stands beside you in a court of law. Sometimes he says Helper, sometimes Spirit of Truth. When Jesus said, "I am coming to you," He didn't mean He would return like an old friend from a long journey. Jesus would be with believers in a different way—a very real way. The eternal, cosmic Word of God became flesh in Jesus. That's what John wrote at the very beginning of this Gospel. The Spirit, which blew like a wind over the face of the deep in creation, took on flesh in the one who now sat with them at the table. This Living Word had just bent down to wash the disciples' dirty feet. You can't get much more down-to-earth than that. Jesus was very clear. The Spirit that dwells in me will abide also in you.

Love and the Spirit—these two are at the center of Jesus' parting words to His disciples. "Love one another as I have loved you" and "The Spirit of Truth will abide with you when I am gone." A little later in this same chapter, Jesus says, "The Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of all that I have said to you." That is, Jesus was saying: You don't know everything yet. You have more to learn. In every generation you will be faced with new questions and perplexities. Does the sun revolve around the earth or is it the other way around? Should nuclear weapons ever be used against an enemy? Is welfare the best way to bear one another's burdens? Should humans own other humans? Jesus knew there were some questions the sacred writings didn't address. Jesus also acknowledged that there were some things He had never talked about. "The Spirit will be your tutor," he said, "guiding you into all the truth."

Rosemary Radford Reuther is a church historian. She says there are two things the church must do. One is to pass on the faith from one generation to another. We might say this is like King Arthur's song: "Ask ev'ry person if they've heard the story, and tell it loud and clear if they have not." Tell the story of Jesus to your children and your children's children. But that's not all, says Reuther. There is a second thing the church must do. Be open to the winds of the Spirit by which the faith comes alive in each generation. That is different than Camelot, deeper than memory, more than tradition.

Something strange is going to happen at the end of this story. Jesus seems to be ready to leave. He says, "Rise, let us be on our way." You can almost see him getting up from the table, then realizing that He forgot to say something. "I am the vine," he says, sitting down again, "and my Father is the vine grower. Abide in me as I abide in you." But how can we abide in

Jesus? He has told the disciples over and over, repeating himself at the table: You will abide in me through the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit will teach you how to love one another. The Spirit will keep us connected, said Jesus. You to me, all of us to God. And you to one another.

Years ago I read something rather odd: "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home." It's a joke, of course, for we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there's another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home." The life of faith can be like that-doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them we're tied together like branches on the vine-or like climbers tied to the rope-tied together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems absurd. "I will not leave you orphaned," said Jesus. "I am coming to you."

This promise is far deeper than Camelot, and it wasn't only for Jesus' disciples, but also for you and for me. The Spirit ties us to Jesus. We feel a tug on the rope whenever we are tempted to settle for answers that make more sense, but cannot give life.

We don't live in Camelot. We live in a place where the struggles are real and hard. But we have Jesus. And that's enough.

Known by **LOVE**

Live by **FAITH**

Voice of **HOPE**