

THE BABYSITTER



John 14:15 "Jesus said, '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. . . I will not leave you orphaned . . .'"

In Jesus movies, the scene usually moves directly from the Last Supper to the Garden of Gethsemane, as though the disciples simply finished the meal and then immediately moved to the place where Jesus prayed, in agony, and where Jesus was soon thereafter arrested. But that's not how it goes in the Gospel of John. This morning's reading is a part of a long-recorded conversation between Jesus and his disciples after the Last Supper, but before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane,

traditionally called by scholars, "The Farewell Discourse."

Parts of the Farewell Discourse have been our Gospel reading for the last three weeks. This long and meandering dialogue covers more than 5 chapters at the end of John's Gospel! Moreover, the language in this conversation is stilted and difficult to follow and understand at times, as is often the case in John's Gospel. Jesus doesn't speak in John's Gospel as he does in the other three. There are no folksy parables in John's Gospel, for instance, or simple miracle stories. There are instead a lot of long theological discourses, like this one. As a result, sometimes the conversation in John's Gospel becomes so lengthy and so convoluted that we miss the simple point of the story being told, as is often the case in the Farewell Discourse. Despite the lofty and confusing theological language, there is a very simple interaction taking place here in the midst of this long dialogue, an interaction that is actually very familiar to almost all of us.

As the parent of four children, the scene in the Farewell Discourse is an easily recognizable one to me, one which I have experienced many, many times, as I suspect many of you have as well. So, imagine, if you will then, a parent standing in the front hallway with your hand on the front doorknob and a coat on your arm, watching your young children playing on the living room floor as you prepare to go out for the evening. One of the

children inevitably looks up suddenly and, noticing that the parent is about to leave, asks: "Where are you going?"

"I am going to prepare a place for you." Jesus says in the Farewell Discourse, in last week's Gospel, *"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also."* (Jn. 14.3)

"Can we go with you?" the children often respond.

"Where I am going you cannot come." (Jn. 13.33)

How long will you be gone?"

"A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me." (Jn. 16.16)

"Who will take care of us?"

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." (Jn. 14.15)

The context and the concerns of the long Farewell Discourse are simply those of a departure, of someone leaving, with all the attending emotions and concerns and questions that go with the departure of someone we love ---- a concern especially appropriate in the hours after the Last Supper, just before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, but one also appropriate on this Sunday, just before the Ascension, when the now the Resurrected Jesus will depart, again, and like little children we want to know "who will take care of us when you're gone?"

Wherever the disciples were gathered, be it in the Upper Room, or on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, or on the Mount of Olives --- the disciples recognizing Jesus' departure inevitably resulted in some confusion and some serious concern. At first the disciples were probably speechless after Jesus left them, and afraid, and then one of them, I imagine, inevitably blurts out the question that often haunted my children when they were young: "Who will take care of us now?" The disciples began to look to Peter for answers, I suspect. He was, after all, the one Jesus commissioned as shepherd of his sheep earlier in the Gospel, on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius (Jn. 21.17). But it is that other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, who seems to have remembered what Jesus had said.

"Wait," he says, "(Jesus) told us that he was going away, but (that) he would be coming back to us, remember? He said he was going to the Father, and that he wanted to tell us beforehand so that when it happened, we would believe. Well, now it has happened, and we don't need to be fearful; we (just) need to trust Jesus and his words.

The others probably started nodding their heads. Yes, he had said something like that. They remember now, they clearly remember words like those recorded in John's Gospel.

"In fact," says this disciple, "he said that we would remember because the . . . what was it? The Advocate! *The Holy*

Spirit would teach us everything, and (would) remind us of all the things the Lord told us while he was still with us.” (Jn. 14.26)

And then suddenly it dawns upon them: that they were actually already remembering the things he told them, as if he were standing right there with them, whispering the words in their ears! And in that same moment, they realize that they were not alone, that they were not orphans, that the promises of Jesus to them were promises that have already been kept.

The Greek word for “advocate” is *paraclete*, formed from a verb that means “to call alongside.” A *paraclete* is the one who comes to your defense, to your rescue, to your comfort, and who stands with you, stands beside you in time of need. That is what Jesus promised his disciples, a holy comforter. The Holy Spirit will do for the Church, what Jesus did for his disciples. And with that in mind, perhaps we should “rejoice” as Jesus suggests. We are in good hands.

Whenever as a young parent I put my hand on the doorknob to go out, my children would inevitably look up from what they are doing, to ask “Who will take care of us?” Then I would usually name one of our regular babysitters --- and remind them that they also have each other. Usually there was a favorite among the babysitters, one who read to them, or played games with them, or baked cookies for them. And they were always reassured

whenever I named that babysitter, and so they would go back to playing, knowing that everything was alright.

I don't know whether the Holy Spirit has ever been compared to a babysitter before, but if we can imagine Jesus as a parent, then it may not be so hard to imagine the Holy Spirit in this other role, as one who cares for the Church in the interim, between Jesus' departure and his return, as one who comforts us, teaches us, reminds us of what Jesus taught, and yes, sometimes perhaps even romps about on the couch with the sons and daughters of God.

In the words of Jesus, then, let us "Rejoice!" *"If you loved me, you would rejoice,"* Jesus said, *"because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I."* (Jn. 14.28) *"And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever. And now I have told you this before it takes place, so that when it does take place, you may believe."* (Jn. 14.29) And now it has taken place, so let us rejoice and believe, especially now as this parish moves towards the future, towards a time of my eventual retirement, my departure, and another transition. Let us always trust in the presence of the Holy Spirit; that all will be well, and we can get on with our playing! AMEN