

Sixth Sunday of Easter

17/05/20

by Colleen Clayton

Text: John 14:15-21

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

¹⁵ ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 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.’

.....

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

An old fairy story goes something like this...

Once upon a time there was a bad-tempered widow with two daughters. The eldest was as bad tempered as her mother, but the youngest was sweet-natured and friendly.

The widow doted on the eldest daughter who was allowed to please herself all day while the youngest was forced to do all the work of the house, including fetching water from a well, a great distance from their house.

One day, when she had just filled her buckets at the well, an old woman appeared and asked for a drink. “With all my heart,” replied the girl, glad to show a kindness to one old and infirm.

Now, the old woman was not really the trembling old peasant she appeared to be, but a powerful fairy who had disguised herself in order to see the truth of people’s hearts. “Your heart is gentle,” she said to

the girl. "For your kindness to a poor old woman, I will make you a gift. Every time you speak, from your mouth shall come a gold coin."

When the girl reached home her mother scolded her for having been gone so long. "Pardon me mother," she sweetly replied and as she spoke, gold coins fell from her lips.

"What is this I see?" asked the astonished widow. So the girl told her of her encounter at the well.

The widow immediately wanted the same gift for the eldest daughter so she called to her and said, "Go to the well and fetch water, and if an old woman asks you for a drink, mind you treat her politely."

The girl refused to perform the menial task, until the widow lost patience and drove her to it. Finally, she grudgingly obeyed. No sooner was she at the well than from the wood came a lady most beautifully dressed, who asked her for a drink of water.

"I have not come here to serve you," the eldest daughter rudely replied. "Take the bucket and help yourself, for all I care. I would have you know that I am as good as you."

Now this beautiful lady was in fact, the same powerful fairy in a different disguise. "Your heart is proud," she said to the girl. "For your arrogance, I will make you a gift. Every time you speak, from your mouth shall come a toad."

The girl ran home to her mother, who met her at the door. "Well, daughter," she said, impatient to hear her speak. But when she opened her mouth, to her mother's horror, toads sprang from it. "This is the fault of your wretched sister," the unhappy mother cried, and chased the poor youngest sister out of the house.

You might be wondering what this story has to do with our Gospel reading for today. Fairy stories are not true, in the sense of being factual, but they often contain deep truths about human nature and life. As I sat reflecting on the words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading, this story kept coming to mind. It is the verses at the very beginning of our reading that resonate for me with the story of the two daughters.

Jesus says,

If you love me, you will keep my commandments (14:15).

When Jesus was asked, *Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?* he replied, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* (Matthew 23:36-40)

We can only speak from our hearts. In the fairy story, the two daughters produce from their mouths the physical proof of what is in their hearts. It is much the same with us. What is at our heart directs our words and our actions, the ways in which we shape our lives as individuals and as a parish community, and the product of our hearts falls from our lips into the world, a mixture of gold coins and toads.

If the love of Jesus is in our hearts, directing us to the fulfilment of the two great commandments, then, when we open our mouths, gold coins will fall out to bless the world. But if love is not at the centre of our lives, our cold, reptilian hearts will produce toads.

And this is not a matter of simply saying the right things. I think that one of the great tragedies of Christendom has been to take the revolutionary, all encompassing, world challenging love of Jesus and turn it into a formula for morality; a list of *shoulds* and *should nots* for good Christians to follow. This is not to say that our behaviour doesn't matter – it does! But it must go deeper than simple rule following; it must flow from God's Holy Spirit abiding in us.

In the story of the two daughters, the mother tried to obtain the gift of gold coins for her eldest daughter by telling her what to say and how to behave. I suspect that, even if she had said the right things to the fairy, because her words would not have flowed from her heart, she would not have been able to trick her. Fairies know when we are not speaking the truth.

I think that some of what ails our churches today is our failure to live out the truth of the Gospel, our failure to be a people who abide in God's love and whose hearts reveal that God abides in us. This failure is

visible to the world and it turns away from people who promise gold coins but who actually produce toads.

And this is understandable. The abundant love shown by Jesus, the love that is to rule our hearts, is not easy to live. It is love for those who will betray & deny us. It is love given as a gift to those who can never earn it. It is love that doesn't single out those who we like or who we think are good. But it is only when we have this kind of love in our hearts that we keep Jesus' commandments.

How do we bless the world that we are called to love? How do we keep the two great commandments? These are important questions for the church at this time. Covid19 has changed our world. It has also changed the reality for our churches. We need to find new ways to share God's love with the world, beyond the walls of our church buildings, speaking forth blessing and abundance to those around us.

We do this through relationship with the Spirit of truth.
Jesus says,

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 for ever. 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 (14:15-17).

Jesus' ministry was lived alongside his disciples. He was truly, God with us. In the Holy Spirit he gives us another advocate; another one to be alongside us; in Greek a *paraclete*.

We are called to love Jesus so that we keep his commandments. As we do, we too live alongside others, speaking the gold coins of comfort, strength and love to an impoverished world that can neither see, nor know, God's Holy Spirit.

May the Holy Spirit dwell in our hearts and be our constant companion, comforting and strengthening us, revealing to us the God who loves us.

Amen.