### Acts 17:22-31

**22**Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. **23**For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

**24**“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. **25**And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. **26**From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. **27**God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. **28**‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

**29**“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. **30**In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. **31**For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

### John 14:15-21

**15**“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 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.”

“Spawn”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

**Sing:** “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home . . . a long way from home.” Out of all the pages that a favorite sermon resource of mine, Kate Huey, wrote in reflecting on today’s scripture lessons, the repeated line of this old spiritual has stuck in my head throughout the week. It helps me to know how we might approach the passage from John today in order to understand just what the disciples might have been feeling. Maybe it feels strange to thinking of this song on Mother’s Day, but I want to remind you all: the news is good.

In the past several weeks, we have been reading through what is Jesus’ final discourse to his disciples. Comforting and challenging them at every turn, we might indeed wonder what Jesus could possibly say to them to put their fears to rest. Thomas has wondered aloud at how they might know how to get where Jesus is going, when they don’t even know where it is. In beautiful but sometimes inscrutable language, Jesus tries one more time to reveal to the disciples what is his relationship to God—in him and from him, eternally. “All well and good, Jesus,” they might have said, “but if we can’t see you, how do we know you’re there? Really, Jesus, how *will* you be *here* at times we need you the most?” This may well be our question of Jesus, too. Jesus has an answer. He tells the disciples that the world does not know the Holy Spirit, and therefore cannot see this advocate of ours. This reminds me of a lyric I used to sing regularly from the band U2 as I and my band shared with churches around Massachusetts in what is called a U2charist: “I’m packing a suitcase for a place . . . that has to be believed to be seen.” Do you hear the play on words? In this world, we know too well that things have to be seen to be believed, but this is not so with Jesus, and the truth confounds us. Jesus’ gifts to us have to be believed to be seen, and with his departure, the disciples are not sure they are up to the task. Are we?

**Sing:** “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child . . .” I have a friend, the Rev. Toni DiPina, whom I met when we were in the same Field Education practicum at Andover Newton. In unboxing binders that Linda Elder carefully packed up for me for the move, I spent probably too much time reading through some of the material as I determined what could be thrown away. So, I had the chance to reread some of our assigned “theological reflections” on different experiences. There were five students in the course, which met with a supervisor once a week while we worked in a church as student ministers. We talked about a lot that reached far beyond and before our studies during that year. Toni shared then about her rather unusual early life. You see, Toni was what we sometimes call a foundling. At ten months old, a young police officer found her abandoned. Toni was raised in various foster homes, with one offering her the most significant stability. There, she was introduced to Jesus through the Lutheran Church that she called her first church home. Toni has shared her story quite widely, even through a publication of the UCC when she served as Associate Pastor of the Hadwen Park United Church of Christ in Worcester, MA. So, I don’t tell her tale out of turn here, in case you’re wondering. Toni went on to graduate from college and work in the insurance industry before eventually going to seminary and serving the church.

Toni’s most consistent home throughout her life has been the church, which we know as the Body of Christ. This may mean more or less to each one of us, depending on our experience of home and of church. For Toni, church offered her comfort and stability that she sometimes lacked from home. For Toni, church offered her the love that she sometimes lacked where she lived. Although she might have felt very often that she was a “motherless child,” she knew that Jesus loved her, deeply and well. I am often moved to share from this pulpit an understanding I have of our loving God that is not necessarily what each of us *believe*, and I would echo Rob McCall, whom we remembered together yesterday afternoon. What we *believe* is not as important as how and whom we love. Still, for me there is one simple facet of Christian faith that is as comforting as it is mysterious: Jesus is not someone who lived and died millennia ago. God did not come to us once and leave us bereft of comfort and solace ever since. God did not create us, did not birth us to be without the love of a caring parent lifelong. God became one of us in Jesus, and God has sent the Holy Spirit to live with us forever.

Let’s remember what Paul told the people of the Areopagus, who were ignorant of our one God’s power and glory: “**24**“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. **25**And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. **26**From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. **27**God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. **28**‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”

God has made us to “seek him” or her. There is in each one of us the desire to know our roots and to feel the sense of belonging to family. Where our earthly families sometimes fail us, God never does. Where in this earthly life we may sometimes be fooled into thinking we are motherless, fatherless children, Jesus lets us know that we are never forgotten, never unloved. What the disciples need to hear from Jesus as he is preparing them for his departure from this world is what all of us need to hear: We are not left alone.

I have shared with you the story of Toni’s abandonment, but only briefly mentioned the young officer who found her. Toni’s story of family doesn’t end with her being fostered as a child. Toni was married and adopted two children of her own and is now a grandparent—to two wonderful little boys. Maybe it was because of her first grandson’s growing to the age at which she herself was found that originally stirred Toni to seek the man who found her. In any case, Toni searched for and found the then78-year-old man who found her as a baby and delivered her to safety. She wonders why she didn’t do it sooner, and eventually met him face-to-face in St. Louis. Since then, with the help of one of the online DNA services, she has met cousins, aunties and uncles, and also learned more about her birth parents. There was in Toni a kind of persistent longing for this reconnection, though she didn’t know the strength of it until she turned 50 years old.

St. Augustine famously writes in his *Confessions –* “*You stir us to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”* We can remember with the Psalmist, also, “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Psalm 42:1-2). We have in us a deep thirst for belonging, for connection and relationship. We have in us a deep longing for acceptance and love. In today’s and in the past week’s lessons from the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks to reassure his disciples. Jesus knows that with his departure, even though *he* knows there will be a resurrection, his disciples will feel a bit lost. They will need to be reminded of their connection to him in some way beyond an ephemeral description of an ever present God. They will need to know that Jesus is really *with them*, and Jesus gives them what they need. Jesus gives us what we need.

Jesus gives the disciples and all of us the assurance that he will remain with us, not leaving us bereft of care, but loving us even from beyond death in ways that are sustaining. That is the comfort he offers, with the challenge tied even to the words he offers to comfort. Do we love Jesus enough not only to mourn his absence in death, but also to want to please him, as he lives eternally with us? Maybe we are content to let Jesus remain somehow like the gods that Paul sees worshipped in gold and silver—firmly in place without the ability to stir us, either to love or action.

We know the Spirit, because we know that Jesus loves us. And if we love Jesus, do we keep his commands? My saxophone playing friend from the U2charist band an, Willie Sordillo, has written a song whose one bluesy lyric might stay with you, too: “If you really love me, you’ve gotta listen to me, and feed my sheep.” Do we really love Jesus, as we know Jesus loves us? So much to become one of us, and to die and send us the Holy Spirit eternally . . . Being in relationship, in loving relationship, involves a kind of reciprocity of giving, doesn’t it? No, God does not *require* that we respond to God’s many loving gifts, but our response in love ought to stir in us gratitude that is somehow apparent. How do we let Jesus know that we *love him back?* We feed his sheep, loving as widely and as well as Jesus did—indiscriminately welcoming all who need an earthly home. We become family to those who would, without the church, not know love, and for those who already do, we make this sense of fellowship apparent in our every deed.

We need never feel like a motherless child. We are never far from home. We are the offspring of God, who made us; who loves us; and who advocates for us eternally. Thanks be to God.