***I Will Not Leave You Desolate***

Delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno, June 22, 2025

Based on John 14:18-19a, 25-27.

There’s a darling cameo appearance in the film, “Field Of Dreams,” by Burt Lancaster. He plays an old fellow named Archibald “Moonlight” Graham. He’s a doctor, but once, in his youth, he’d been a two-bit professional baseball player who got to play one inning of baseball in the major leagues. One inning as a major leaguer …. And he never got up to bat.

In the film he tells the Kevin Cosner character, “You know we just don't recognize the most significant moments of our lives while they're happening. Back then I thought, ‘Well, there'll be other days.’ I didn't realize that that was the *only* day.”

Have you been there? Of course you have. You had a future in mind and somehow it melted away. Someone wrote you a note, or didn’t write you at all, and that was it.

Or, It was just the end of something – the last time. You didn’t know it was the last time, and then it was.

Here’s a little bit of a poem I wrote a dozen years ago on that realization.

There is a book

that marks my daughter’s

first words,

first steps,

first tastes.

Why, then, can’t I remember

the *last* time

I carried her

upstairs to bed,

the last time

she called me

daddy, the last time

I read a picture book to her?

Because I didn’t know

it was the last time.

If I’d known,

would I have wept,

marked the moment

with an extra kiss,

held her closer,

longer? *(“Faminesia”)*

The disciples don’t know it, but the text we have today is about their last extended visit with their friend, leader, and lord. Jesus knows this will be their last time together like this, and we do too, reading it. This makes the story very poignant for us. All the more poignant because James, and John and Peter and the rest don’t have a clue.

Jesus’ words and attitude are a model of consolation for any of us who have lost someone we love.

Jesus says to the disciples, “Now I am going to the one who sent me,” the one who made it possible for him to be with them at all. This is the one who will take him back again. But this is not the end.

Jesus promises that once he is back in the lap of the one who sent him,

he will then send the “comforter,” a spirit who will wrap the mantle of assurance around the shoulders of the disciples in times of discouragement, doubt, disappointment and discomfort.

It will not be easy for them. He knows this and acknowledges it, but he says he will not leave them desolate. He will, in a new way, be with them through this thing called the Holy Spirit.

Now, note that Jesus is not just saying, “It’s going to be okay.” He is not pretending that they won’t feel loss. This new era that is beginning will not be the same as the old dispensation. It will definitely be different.

It’s like the mother who says to her anxious child who’s sleeping alone in his own room for the first time, “Now, don’t forget that God is with you here in this room all night long.” The child says, “Okay, but what I need is someone with skin on.”

The child wants something warm, cozy, familiar, right? Of course.

Jesus will not be patting the heads of children any more when he goes away and that will be a loss for those who know and appreciate his tender touch. Just thinking that will be lonely-making for his disciples.

Now, look at it from a parent’s angle. When your child is small they are like an extra appendage. They are there looking for hugs, throwing their legs across your legs on the couch while you both watch a movie on TV.

Yes, and when they go away to school or move to take a job, or get married that’s just over. You can talk to them on the phone. The sound of their voice can even make your heart leap. The words, “I love you,” in your ear are so powerful and buoying. It’s still great, but it’s different than when they were small and threw their arms around your knees and buried their little heads there.

This is what we are talking about when we talk about the difference between the era of Jesus walking among human beings, and the era that followed which is the era of the Spirit.

My daughter’s first year of college was for me a little like the Pentecost experience must have been for the disciples. She was away at college, 200 miles away, but it was like she was just on a little trip away and would be coming home any day. I know that’s not how it was, but it was what I told myself to cushion the loss.

That must have been how the disciples felt about Jesus’ absence. It must have been a little like when he would rise early in the morning, and they would notice his blanket was empty, before they would turn over and sleep another hour.

No , this time he was really gone, and something new was expected of them. They were left to carry this enterprise on in his name. It would now be *their* hands on the heads of little children in blessing, it was now *their* words of love and encouragement people would welcome and count on.

But they weren’t capable of stepping into his sandals yet on Pentecost. Pentecost was an in-between time for them. This happens a lot in life – it’s just part of life’s design.

It is now graduation time, and that too is an in-between time for young people. They’ve accomplished something big, but the future looms, and new challenges are just being born. It’s a time of anxiety for everyone.

I remember experiencing depression for the first time in my life the September after college graduation. The summer after graduation was just another summer, that’s what it felt like. But September came and it was only then that I realized in my bones that I couldn’t really go back to the cozy womb of a new semester where I had been so comfortable; where I felt I so belonged.

When someone you love dies there is …. an in-between time, too. Something has ended. It takes a lot to deal with that. Grief comes, not all at once, but in waves. Just when you think you’re ok, it brings you to your knees again. But something new is beginning, too, just the same.

If the loss was a big one you’re old life never really goes away – not entirely. By fits and starts it begins to close down, and as that happens something brand new begins to open up as well. When you sense that happening you find yourself in a kind of canyon; in an in-between time.

Yes, and there are things that happen when we find ourselves in such places that are unaccountable – and very like the promise Jesus offers about the coming of his Spirit. Magical things, in fact.

Here’s as good an example of that as I know. It’s subtle but also completely confirming. It comes from the life of a woman named Judith Coulter. She writes:

*"The sun, belying the thermometer's reading, streamed through the kitchen window, resting on the counter where an old apple sat. Three weeks ago, I'd bought it from the woman at the roadside stand. She and I praised the weather that fine Indian summer day, for it was the last of autumn's brilliance.*

*I sighed as I put the paring knife to the apple and prepared to cut away its bruised spots before slicing it for my fruit salad. Overhead movement caught my eye. I looked out the window to see a flock of birds fly in formation like winged soldiers in precise step with one another. They flew across my vision and out of sight -- no doubt to some warmer clime. It caused me to wonder for a moment if I, too, should fly away, chancing a new place where warmth might bring comfort.*

*I looked down at my paring to discover that I was removing the apple's skin in one long peel, round and round its surface in an unending circle, and I saw my grandmother's hands performing this task many years before.*

*When I came home from school tired, and fussing, she would take a bright red apple from the fruit bowl, peel it thus and slice it into six even pieces and silently hand them to me.*

*Abandoning my fruit salad, I cut my old apple into six even pieces, carefully placed them in the blue dish that had belonged to my grandmother and sat down to enjoy them, marveling at the small miracle that allowed my grandmother to return in memory to comfort me.*

Jesus said, “I will not leave you desolate. I will send you a comforter.”

I love that assurance. Now, I don’t know for sure that he said those precise words to his friends, or if we are, instead, hearing words that are coming from the imagination of the early Christians; hearing, maybe, their longing for his special brand of kindness and devotion. And, you know, I don’t think that matters.

Here is something very seminal by the late Biblical Theologian, Walter Brueggemann, who died two weeks ago at 92. Last week I quoted him on the Old Testament. Here is something memorable he said about the New; about the stories in it and what it means to us, especially in chaotic times like these when we are shaken, and long for some comfort.

*The church must endlessly tell its Jesus stories, because in these Jesus stories, we behold the glory of [God], full of grace and truth. The imposition of holiness does not happen in large, grand, religious, magnificent ways. It happens where a son is welcomed home, where a neighbor is honored and cared for, where a [prostitute] is loved, where a leper is touched and cleansed, where a crowd is fed, where a guilty man is forgiven, where a crippled woman stands up straight and laughs and dances. The claim about the glory of God in the life of Jesus is not mystical, supernatural voodoo, but it is the confidence of the church that in the life of Jesus, we see all that God intends and wants and acts and asks of us. It is so daily, so concrete, so engaged with hurt, so self-giving. It is the face of this one that dazzles with life-giving light and power.*

… the one who said, “it’s okay. I will not leave you desolate.”

Some say we are witnessing the end of democracy in America. Some say that the cruelty we are seeing with people being snatched up on our streets with no recourse to due process is the beginning of rule by dictator.

I wonder if, right now, we are looking at something like the disciples were witnessing at the time of Pentecost. Like then, it now looks, on the whole, like the forces of darkness are winning, or have outright won.

The future looks like a black hole and those in charge seem so very proud and puffed up and disdainful of us and of all that we hold dear.

Well, to those he loved who were living in just such a time as this, Jesus said, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.” (John 15:18)

You know, Jesus always took the long view. He had to. He had to look past the cross; his own and all the world’s crosses that would come after.

To those who could only take the short view (and that is all of us at least some of the time) he said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:7)

I prefer the long view; that what we are seeing is a temporary setback to a natural, spirit-propelled, inevitable movement toward globalization.

Why? Because it’s so clear that all our economies are interdependent and America will only thrive if the rest of the world thrives.

Bombing Iran. It’s a distraction, from the bad polls, and the Epstein files and everything else in the current mess-making going on at the top.

I mean, it’s clearer every day that we no longer exist in a world where one nation can succeed while leaving every other behind. That ship sailed a century ago. In the same way, one race in America, even the white one, can’t thrive without a strong partnership with all races and groups in our country.

“I will not leave you desolate,” he said. Let’s not forget.

Amen