

May 17, 2020  
Year A  
John 14:15-21

The Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA  
Zoom Worship

Probably my favorite book when I was a preteen and early teenager was Anne of Green Gables by L.M. Montgomery.

I had been given a copy of the book years before I first read it. When I first received it, I thought that the cover looked boring, just a picture of a red-haired girl with a suitcase, sitting at a train station, and I would never read it. I don't know what made me finally pick it up and start reading it, maybe I was bored enough to give what I thought would be a boring book a try, but once I started reading, I was hooked.

Is it too dramatic to say that that book changed my life? Maybe it sounds dramatic, but it's still true. In fact, more than changing my life, given the age I was when I read it, that book and the books that came after it in the series shaped my life. I found in Anne a kindred spirit and a role model.

She grew up a lot faster than I did. I read probably in one summer about her childhood, starting at about the age that I was when I read the first book, and then about her time in a boarding high school, her time teaching school, her time in college, her first career, her first love, her engagement, her marriage, and the way that she raised her children.

She was a good role model, optimistic, always finding or creating beauty in the world. She was wise, loving, studious, loyal, grateful, and articulate. She showed me a good, happy, and hopeful way of inhabiting the world. She taught me about character.

Of course, I didn't know it at the time. At the time, I was just enjoying a good book, a good book series, the characters of which became friends.

It's only been as I've gone back and read the books again as an adult that I have realized how much I internalized them and how much they shaped me when I was young.

And it wasn't until right now, that I have truly questioned anything that I learned from Anne. But, lately, I have come to question one of her precepts, one of her ways of being in the world.

Anne is an unashamed, unabashed optimist. She looks forward to things with relish. She dreams and hopes and anticipates. In fact, she gets into a debate with another character in the series about her optimistic attitude, the way that she looks forward to things.

She discusses it with Marilla, the woman that she lives with at the beginning of the first book. Marilla says,

“You set your heart too much on things, Anne...I'm afraid there'll be a great many disappointments in store for you through life.”

Anne's response to this warning is,

“Oh, Marilla, looking forward to things is half the pleasure of them. You mayn't get the things themselves; but nothing can prevent you from having the fun of looking forward to them. Mrs. Lynde says, 'Blessed are they who expect nothing for they shall not be disappointed.' But I think it could be worse to expect nothing than to be disappointed.”

All my life, I've been sure that Anne was right, that it's a good thing to be hopeful and optimistic, with things to look forward to, rather than to take Marilla or Mrs. Lynde's point of view, not courting disappointment by not looking forward with hope.

But now, I'm not so sure. When I look at things rationally, as we make our way through this pandemic, I know that I am in a very good situation. I still have my job, Britton still has his job, our kids are still getting an education, our extended family is still healthy, safe, and provided for, we have so much to be thankful for and we are.

But I'm still struggling with the weight of worry, for my congregation, for my community, for my country, for the world. And I'm struggling with the weight of disappointment. There were many things that I have been looking forward to for months and even years that now are not happening or going to happen.

And it has been hard to take my eyes off of those disappointments and focus on the things that are happening, to try to seek joy and peace in the here and now, beyond the worries and the disappointments. It's made me wonder, with apologies to Anne, if it would have been better, if I had never hoped, never planned, never dreamed, never looked forward.

So, perhaps, this crisis calls me to take my philosophy, my stance toward life, from deeper wells, even than Anne of Green Gables. And I find what I need in the first place we should always look, in the words of scripture, in the words of Jesus for today.

The words that Jesus speaks in our gospel reading for today were spoken to his disciples after his last meal with them before his arrest.

He knows when he speaks them that he is about to be taken from them. He knows that they will see him arrested, beaten, put on trial, convicted, and crucified. He knows that they're about to have all of the things that they had looked forward to taken away from them. He knows that they are about to suffer loss, that they will be disappointed, scared, and worried.

He had tried, at other times in his life with them, to prepare them for his crucifixion and for his resurrection, but he knows that the human mind has trouble grasping resurrection. How can they picture, how can they hope for what they have not seen?

So, he knows that when he is taken away, by soldiers, by the might and power of empire, when he is executed, when he dies, they will struggle to see beyond the tragedy. They will only see the loss.

So, he tried, in his last night with them, before his death, to get them ready; to give them a new way to frame hope in their minds, to teach them to hope for what would happen, rather than just what they wanted to happen.

And he told them that he would not leave them alone. He would be with them, no matter what, through the power of resurrection, through the power of the coming Advocate.

In our Wednesday prayer group, we spent some time with this gospel reading, thinking about it, praying with it, and one of the things that came up as we talked about this reading was that word, Advocate.

I'm so grateful that thanks to our discussion in prayer group, three different people went and did research into the word, Advocate, and sent me their findings. They discovered, what I thought they would discover, what I would have discovered, if they hadn't done the work for me.

The word that is translated "Advocate" in our gospel reading comes from the Greek word, *paraclete*, and could be and has been translated in many ways in many different English translations of the Bible.

It can be translated as: Advocate, of course, but also, Helper, Intercessor, Encourager, Counselor (as in one who defends and advises you), and as Comforter.

And I must admit, Comforter was that word that I was hoping for, that word that I was looking for, when we read that gospel reading on Wednesday night. From somewhere in the deep recesses of my brain, I heard older language for that reading, from the Kings James Version of the Bible, a version that has never been my go-to translation of the Bible for worship or for study.

Still, in my head, I heard Jesus words in the King James version, I heard say, “And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Comforter, to be with you forever.”

Maybe I heard it that way, because it was what I needed to hear. To hear that Jesus will not leave us alone, that Jesus will be with us, through the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, to comfort us, no matter how worried we are, no matter how much we have lost, no matter how disappointed we may be.

In fact, I talked with my Godmother about it last Sunday, when I called her on Mother’s Day. We were talking about the challenges of these days that we all are living through, about all of the things that aren’t happening, about all of the ways that we are burdened.

And then, because that’s a pretty gloomy conversation to have on Mother’s Day, we started talking about other things, good things that are happening, blessings we were experiencing in a time of isolation that we might not have experienced if it hadn’t been for this shut-down.

During that phone call, I said, well, in next Sunday’s gospel reading, “Jesus said, “I will not leave you alone, I am sending another comforter.” And

I thanked her for helping me figure out my sermon for next Sunday, which, is, of course, this Sunday.

It was not a completely accurate quote of the text, but it captured the meaning of our gospel reading for today, that no matter what happens, we will see that God is always with us, giving us comfort and giving us hope, in ways we might not have been able to imagine, in ways that we might never have thought to look for.

In my Friday email, I sent out a request for people to send me their “silver linings” stories, stories of unexpected blessings, stories about how, in this time of loss and disappointment and worry, they are experiencing moments of blessing, of community, of hope, of joy, and experiences of the presence of God.

And many people responded. They talked about how this time of shutdown is giving them a chance to catch their breath.

Many of them talked about going through boxes of pictures and letters and other memorabilia that they have been meaning to get to in some cases, for years. They talked about how this time has given them a chance to catch up with themselves and to enjoy their memories, with laughter and tears.

One person talked about how the true colors of the company that she works for have been revealed in this time, in a positive way. She shared that everyone who works for her company is still receiving full pay and benefits, whether or not they can work from home, and how schedules are being adjusted, even for the people who are working from home, so that they can use this time as breathing space since, due to the nature of what they do, her company simply can't be working at full capacity during this time.

Another person shared how she was on the verge of retiring and now expects a better retirement package than she was thinking that she would be able to get, because her company needs to reduce staff.

Some parents shared that they were experiencing the extra time that they are spending with their children right now as a silver lining. For some of them, there's more time for family dinners, for movies nights, for playing games, for driving lessons, and just for slowed down conversations.

A couple of people talked about how this time has given them a chance to connect with Emmanuel again, through online worship, and many talked about what a blessing it is to worship with distanced family during this time.

A couple of people talked about how this time is giving them a chance to be more disciplined about exercise.

One person even talked about, as a positive, how this time is giving her a chance to grow her hair out and try a new hairstyle that she wouldn't have tried if she hadn't been isolated, and she likes it!

Other people are experiencing technology as a silver lining of this time. Being distanced has required and inspired people to learn to use new communication technology, like Zoom, and they are finding it to be a blessing. Families separated, not just by pandemic, but by miles, are connecting with each other more than they used to, using Zoom and other platforms, and are finding it to be a blessing, and something that they hope will continue once the shutdown is over. One family of siblings that hadn't been together since a family funeral three years ago are now meeting weekly on Zoom, which is a blessing to them and to their mother.

One thing that I have noticed and that a few other people mentioned as silver linings is the way in which this time is causing us to find new ways to

celebrate milestones. I have been so sad for people who are seniors and for everyone who was supposed to graduate or be promoted in school this year, but I'm seeing so many ways that families, schools, and communities are rallying to try to give people a special event to celebrate this rite of passage, so that it does not go unnoticed and unacknowledged. I have noticed that people are being even more intentional about reaching out to others for birthdays and other special events. People are trying to stay connected.

Even when there are not special events to celebrate, some people have mentioned that having some flexibility in their schedule has enabled them to re-connect with some of their friends they might not have talked to as frequently during "normal" times.

Other people mentioned feeling more connected with their neighbors, as they were going on more walks and people are less busy and more eager for connection. People they might have lived on the same street with for years are now stopping to chat, from a distance, of course.

Others mentioned saving money on gas and not having to commute as silver linings of this time.

A few mentioned having the time and the need to cook and bake more was bringing them joy.

There are still a lot of ways in which this time is a challenge. I think that most of us have our good days and our bad days, our good moments and our bad moments.

But I can't tell you how much joy it brought me to see, to write about, to share, these silver linings, and to reflect on my own.



Because they remind me of one thing that is always true. Just as Jesus promised, God has not left us orphaned, God has not left us alone, God has not left us only in loss and despair.

The Holy Comforter is with us, comforting us, inspiring us, giving us courage and hope. The Spirit of Jesus' presence, of Jesus' compassion, the Spirit of love is with us. We are not alone.

Take comfort. Amen.