

## Sermon: God is always with us

I am sure we have all heard, it's about who you know, not what you know. In everything from running a business to getting your car repaired to enrolling your child in the best daycare – much of life is about building and maintaining relationships.

That's why financial advisers promise to get to know you – not just manage your money. That's why huge corporations spend millions on public relations and charitable endeavors.

It's also why many churches these days that don't really talk about Jesus or the Bible, but will make a really big deal of offering everyone a relationship with God.

It's an attractive concept these days when so many are isolated from human contact behind a computer or smartphone screen. It's also a completely natural desire because God created us as social beings.

In Genesis God declared that "it was not good for Adam to be alone, and he resolved to make a helper suitable for him". It's perfectly normal for humans to desire intimate, personal relationships – both with each other and with their Creator.

The problem is, no business and not even many churches today are honest about why our relationships with God and others so often seem broken. And unless we understand why our relationship with God was damaged in the first place, we cannot even begin to appreciate what Jesus came to do or the words we read this morning.

It does no good to point the finger at Adam and Eve, the serpent and the forbidden fruit. We can't blame our parents or our upbringing or our culture, although many try.

No, the reason you and I don't have a perfect relationship with God is because we have at some point, been sinners. Each one of us, despite how hard we find that to believe, we have all slipped somewhere, at some time.

So that begs the question: what is sin?

The essence of sin is disobedience to God's holy will. It is doing what we want rather than what God wants. And what does God want?

Jesus declared: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.**

In other words, God's will is for us to be focused on himself and others; and to sin is to be bent in on ourselves. To sin is to praise and serve ourselves instead of praising God and serving other people. Sin is an infectious disease that isolates us from God and from each other.

But God would not let this situation stand. His love, his very character would not allow his creatures to remain isolated from him.

In the upper room on the night that Jesus was betrayed and handed over to death, he would leave that room and allow himself to be hung on a cross, all to pay for our sins and clear the path for us to have a relationship with God.

Everyone who confesses their need for his sacrifice through repentance and trusts it through faith has a restored relationship with God. They – you and I – are, once again, God's dearly loved children.

And so, when we read these words in John, we shouldn't hear a demand but rather an invitation from the one who suffered – total isolation from God's love – so that we wouldn't have to.

If you love me, you will obey what I command.

It's important to note that Jesus did not say: "If you love me, you will obey what Moses commands."

Believers are no longer under the law, but under grace. Jesus did not come to be a new lawgiver.

Martin Luther explained this well: *"Therefore I lay upon you nothing but this, demand and desire only this one thing, that you faithfully preach concerning me, have my word and sacrament laid upon you, and keep love and unity among yourselves for my sake, and suffer with patience whatever on this account comes upon you. These are the brief commandments that are called my commandments, which I lay upon you only as you love me and for my sake do them gladly."*

To be clear, Jesus is not saying that our obedience earns God's love. God's love always comes first.

God is the sun, and we are the moon. We only reflect – often dimly – the love God has shown us in Christ. And yet, even though Jesus has put us back in a perfect relationship with God – we are not able to maintain that relationship on our own.

That's why Jesus goes on to say, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – 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”.

When you fall into sin, when your faith is weak, when you don't feel close to God – don't despair, after Jesus died for you, he sent the Spirit to counsel us in our relationship with God.

A counselor is someone who helps you through tough times. It means that the Holy Spirit stands by our side to testify to us of God's love for us. That's why Jesus calls him *another* Counselor.

While Jesus lived with his disciples, he filled that role. He was walking, talking proof of God's love and grace. Today, we don't see or speak with Jesus in the flesh. But we're not alone. He has sent the Holy Spirit to be with us, as confirmation of God's love for us.

So where is the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence? Does singing old hymns coax him out of hiding? Does he arrive when congregants are seating themselves for Sunday worship?

No. We cannot summon God any more than we can make the sun shine. Jesus compares the Holy Spirit to another invisible force: the wind. ***“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So, it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”***

So even though we cannot see or grab the Spirit, Jesus says, we will see the result of his work. The undeniable proof of the Holy Spirit's presence doesn't happen in front of your eyes, but in your heart. If you believe that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man, that he died for your sins and rose to life three days later, the Spirit lives in you because only the Spirit can produce that faith in a human heart.

Why doesn't everyone who hears the Gospel believe it? Many in the world don't see Jesus because many in the world think that he is dead and buried – like so many before him.

But, by the Spirit's work, we know and believe the truth: Jesus lives! He lives and he rules all things for our benefit. And because Jesus destroyed death's power by his own death and resurrection, we know that death has no power over us, and we will live with him forever.

But never forget – there is only one way anyone can believe these things – and that is through the work of the Spirit. But if the Spirit is invisible, how can we know where to find it? Wherever the means of grace are rightly administered – there the Holy Spirit is present and working. And what is it busy doing?

That's not a mystery either, because someday, the disciples and the church will realize that Jesus did everything to restore their broken relationship with God. What day is that?

Every day before us that we walk and live and love together with God's grace.

Jesus told us that we grow closer to God as we obey him.

Parents, I assume that your love for your children is not based on their obedience to you, right? Of course not. But you love them even more when they show their love to you by listening to you. The same is true here. God loved us before we could ever love him. He proved that by sending his Son to die for us. But those who hear God's Word, repent, trust in Jesus and obey his commandments – those are the people God happily calls his family.

Why do we need to spend so much time discussing the person and work of the Spirit? Many churches have turned the person and work of the Holy Spirit into at best, a total mystery, and at worst, just another thing we have to do. Neither of those are true.

The truth is that Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit to comfort us – by reassuring us that Jesus has restored our relationship with God. This does not mean that things will ever be perfect in this life. We won't be free from sin until God calls us home. But even though we are sinners, we are forgiven sinners – and that is the essence of a relationship with God.

If you ever feel alone and isolated in this world, that's not your imagination. Sin isolates us from God and from one another.

But we are never alone, as the Father has given us the Spirit. The Spirit sustains our faith in Christ. Through the son, we are loved by the Father.

Through the Gospel, spoken, poured out in baptism and offered in, the breaking of bread and drinking the wine, the Spirit proves over and over that Jesus has reunited you in a perfect, loving relationship with the one, true God.

May the Holy Spirit be upon us this day, and all days. Amen.