

May 20, Pentecost B (John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15)

## **Jesus has gone underground. That's the setting of our Gospel reading this Pentecost.**

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue

The authorities have been trying to get rid of Jesus for a while now. We catch the first glimpse into their plotting in chapter five of John's Gospel, when they accused him of blasphemy and "were seeking all the more to kill him" (5:18). When Jesus heard about these threats, he became more judicious with his travels, staying away from their heavily patrolled areas and only venturing into locales where he had a powerful base of support, people who would make a fuss if he were arrested.

He stayed away from Judea, for example, because the authorities "were looking for an opportunity to kill him" (7:1). When their surveillance police did track him down, agents converged upon him and attempted his arrest but ultimately failed (7:30-44). Later, the authorities incited a mob to stone him, but Jesus somehow escaped the execution (8:59). On another occasion they grabbed him, yet he miraculously slipped their custody (10:39).

The disciples soon recognized their own imperilment—their guilt by association—and as they traveled from town to town with Jesus, they knew their lives were at risk. "Let us also go," Thomas said to his fellow disciples, "that we may die with him" (11:16). Thomas and the others had every reason to fear for their lives as the opposition to Jesus intensified. Politico-

religious power brokers conspired "to put him to death" (11:53), devising sinister schemes, disseminating covert "orders that anyone who knew where Jesus was should let them know, so that they might arrest him" (11:57). Their malevolent conspiracies even extended to his intimate friends, like his beloved Lazarus, whom they planned to kill (12:10). So "Jesus departed and hid" (12:36).

He's still in hiding when we get to this week's passage, from chapters 15 and 16. Jesus has gone underground—that's the setting of our Gospel reading for Pentecost

this year. Everyone is afraid. Death is imminent. Jesus knows that he can't run for much longer.

So he assembles with his friends for one last evening together, a clandestine gathering. He washes their feet. They eat bread and drink wine. He knows he will die, that this night will be their last. So he tells them that he loves them—he professes his love over and over again, three times already by the time we get to our passage (13:34, 15:9, 15:21).

And he promises the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete: “the one who appears in another's behalf,” according to Walter Bauer's Greek lexicon. The presence of the Paraclete will remind them of Jesus—to bear witness of his life in his absence. In her commentary on John's Gospel, Marianne Meye Thompson describes the Paraclete as the one who “causes the disciples to recollect and understand all the truth of Jesus' words and deeds.” The role of the Spirit is to conjure Jesus, in some sense to re-present his body within them—to remind them of him.

Jesus knows his time is up. He knows he can't hide much longer. “His hour had come” (13:1). And he's overwhelmed with affection; he can't stop loving his friends. All he wants is everlasting communion with them. Every last moment with them is a delight, moments he will take with him beyond this world, cherishing the thought of his loved ones until they are reunited someday.

In the meantime, while he's gone, the Paraclete will keep alive the memories of their communion—the Spirit as the persistence of divine love's communication from eternity, the Son's transgression of the border between heaven and earth through the Spirit's power. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now,” Jesus tells his friends. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” And the truth is that he loves them—that he will always long for them, that he cannot imagine his life without theirs, that his soul groans with sighs too deep for words at the thought of them. Jesus reassures his beloved friends that in his absence the Paraclete will deliver his love notes to them, words written on their hearts.

The 17th-century scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal kept a folded piece of paper with him, a note sewn into a hidden pocket in his coat. Scribbled on the page were intimate truths about God, including this line: “Christ will be in agony until the end of the world.” I would add that his agony is love—the anguish of Christ's spirit as he

endures an unbearable separation from his beloved, his life straining toward his disciples on earth, his body pressing through eternity and reaching for communion with us. Pascal's hidden note to himself is called *The Mystery of Jesus*. That mystery is love—the love whispered by the Spirit, messages of love as the gift of the Paraclete.

Jesus still has many things to say to his friends. In his absence, it's now the Holy Spirit's work to bear witness to Christ's truth—to conjure in us the eternal love of Jesus.