

The Helper

John 14:12-17 ~ January 15, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

In 1978 the Puma Corporation introduced the first Velcro ties for shoes. It was a wonder. Keeping children's shoes tied had been a nightmare for many parents. Velcro made it so easy. Even toddlers could reattach the Velcro fastener on their own shoes. Needless to say the Walker family was an early adopter of this pervasive trend.

Things went along quite well in the footwear department until our eldest child, Ryan, was ready to go to kindergarten. At that point, to provide better support for active play, we added laced shoes to Ryan's wardrobe. We thought we were helping him when we would carefully cinch them up and tie them tight for his morning at school. And all seemed to go well until we got Ryan's first ever report card. As we expected, Ryan did quite well, pulling in such high marks as they give in Kindergarten on every category except one. He was failing in shoe lace tying.

As parents we were mortified. We had worked quite hard to help Ryan get ready for school. We didn't even know that shoe lace tying was a graded subject in Kindergarten. Here he was our first child in school and he was flunking shoe lace tying. Needless to say we set about to help Ryan overcome this deficiency right away. Kris sat down with him that very afternoon and carefully took him through the process of tying his own shoes. Looping and wrapping and then pulling it tight. Kris demonstrated, then coached, and then helped to practice. In almost no time at all, with his mother's help, Ryan became a master shoe lace tier. And I don't think he has ever met a pair of shoes since that he could not tie.

Now of course as we look back on these events we see the circumstances that caused us to send our son to school without being fully prepared. I think we were pretty embarrassed and concerned at the time, but now we see it as an ordinary part of the process parents go through to better help their child learn what they need to know in life. The central focus for parenting is about preparing our children for their lives. But long after they are launched we work to support them as they move ahead into life.

Now this illustration corresponds quite nicely to the situation Jesus finds himself in with the disciples in today's text. Not that shoe lace tying was a crucial skill for the mission of the apostles. But, years of work had gone into what Jesus had taught them in order to

prepare them for what they faced. In today's text, Jesus is speaking with his disciples in the upper room where they are sharing the Passover meal that we commonly call the "Last Supper." We call it "The Last Supper," because this is the last time that Jesus and his disciples are together as teacher and students. Jesus knows that he is about to die on the cross. All of his teaching and preparation is about to be tested in the coming months and years when they continue on without his personal presence.

This is where most human ventures come apart at the seams. The leader leaves and the followers are not able to carry forward. But Jesus had quite a different plan. He had a plan for how his apostles would succeed in their mission even after he leaves. Jesus explains this to his disciples:

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper..." The disciples are not left on their own. They have another helper. They have the Spirit of truth. They have the very Spirit of God. They have the Spirit of Jesus himself to guide them day by day. The situation is that Jesus is sending the disciples off on their own. It was a little like sending a child off to school. The commandments and teachings Jesus had taught them was what prepared them for life after Jesus left. But, what about the unexpected stuff that the world threw at them? What about the situations that made it difficult for the disciples to apply Jesus' teaching to real life experiences? Like Ryan not being able to tie his shoes, being on your own gives rise to unexpected situations. In Ryan's case his mother and I were there to help him get through it. But for the disciples something else needed to be done. So Jesus asked the Father to send another Helper. And it is this same helper that guides and supports the life of every Christian to this day.

So who is the Helper that Jesus sent? We call him the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the intimate guide for every single Christian that ever lived or will ever live. And just as Jesus promised the disciples, this Helper is the same Spirit who dwells with and is in each of us. This is pretty exciting if you think about it. It means that each one of us has a deeply personal and direct connection to God. As we confess in the creed, the Holy Spirit is one person of the Trinity. He is God, just as Jesus and the Father are God. What is different about the Holy Spirit is that he is not distant from us in heaven. Instead he is

right with us in this life. He is so close to us that we can say that he is in us and all around us.

But there are some things we need to know about God's Holy Spirit. As Jesus says he is the Spirit of Truth. This means that God's Holy Spirit will never speak to us in a way that contradicts the Scriptures. In the Holy Scriptures God has given us his Word. In that Word we learn the truth and by its light we understand God's will for us. The Helper never contradicts this Word. This is vitally important, because there are other spiritual presences in our lives. They want to confuse us about the truth. There is a reason that Satan is called the Father of Lies. This is why God has given us his Word in the Scriptures. It is written. It is written so that it can be objectively understood. It is written so that it can help us to know which is the Spirit of Truth and which is a different spirit that is seeking to mislead us and do us harm. So the helper that God sent to the disciples and to us is the Spirit of Truth. His guidance always conforms to the teaching of Scripture, and he leads us into loving Jesus and keeping his commandments.

Another thing we need to understand about God's Helper in our lives is that he is there to help us with anything and everything. Many people wait for really big things before they turn to God's Helper for guidance. This is underestimating the nature of the Helper's presence in our lives. For instance when we go shopping with a friend, do we ask our friend their opinion about clothes that we are trying on? Of course we do. But do we ask God's helper what he thinks of our preferences and tastes? Probably we don't. I think this is a mistake. If God's helper dwells with us, if he dwells in us, wouldn't he care about things like what we wear, what we eat, how we treat ourselves and others. This is the level on which people who love us are willing to participate in our lives. Why wouldn't God's helper, his Holy Spirit, care about those things too?

This everyday walking with God as we involve the Helper in every aspect of our lives brings us great benefit. We learn how much God loves us and how willing he is to become part of our daily life. We also learn to hear his voice. This may sound odd to some, but God really does speak to us when we are listening. Sometimes we hear the Helper's voice in a twinge of our conscience. Sometimes we hear his voice in the joy and pleasure of a wonderful moment. Sometimes we hear his voice in the deafening silence of God's displeasure at our sin. But we do hear it, when we listen. As Jesus teaches the Helper cannot be seen, or heard, by the world. But by faith in Jesus we are able to hear the Helper's voice. The Holy Spirit does speak to us in order to guide us.

Now, it is my privilege to tell you that Jesus promise to the disciples is the same promise he gives to you. Jesus and the Father have sent you a Helper. This Helper is with you every moment of your life. Even when God seems very far away, I promise you he could not be more near. He is so near that he is in you. His purpose is to guide your life and to help you live it. And through that process he achieves the primary fruit of his work. That is to create faith in you. He creates faith in the power of Jesus to save you from your sins. He creates faith in the power of the Father to raise you from the dead. And he Creates faith in the destiny God has set for you to live as a child of God forever.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.