

“Close-Beside”
John 14:15-21
Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Westminster, Greenville
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If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

‘I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

There are many images and names for the Holy Spirit found in Scripture - dove, breath, wind, *pneuma*, fire, counselor, *ruach*, helper, *paraclete*, sustainer, advocate. I tossed a few Greek and Hebrew words into this list because, while we also use their English translations, sometimes the original language of a word captures its intention more fully. The specific word for the Spirit, and all the imagery associated with it, that we have before us today is the Greek word PARACLETE, translated here as advocate.

I’ll admit that this is my favorite word and image for the Holy Spirit. I like the way the Greek word Paraclete rolls off my tongue as I say it. And I connect with it’s primary English translation – Advocate. When I hear the word Advocate, I think of someone who is strong, reliable, and passionate. Someone like Erin Brockovich or Katniss Everdeen. One a real life person whose life was made famous by the film of the same name and played brilliantly by Julia Roberts. The other a character brought to life by novelist Suzanne Collins in the Hunger Games trilogy and played on-screen by Jennifer Lawrence. Both use their voices to make the plights of others known to the world. Both are selfless and use their prowess to help others. Both fight for the weak, downtrodden, and suffering. What characteristics, images, or people come to your mind when you hear the word, Advocate? Is it a wizened lawyer, a steadfast friend, an inspiring mentor? Do you think of a character from a film or novel, perhaps a world leader or a celebrity, or just an ordinary person in your own life?

Paraclete comes from the combination of two Greek words. “Para” a preposition that means close beside and “kaleo” a verb that means to make a call. Properly this word means “a legal advocate that makes the right call because they are close enough to the situation.”¹ Other

¹ Strong’s Concordance #3875

translations of Scripture use words like counselor or helper to try and capture the full meaning of Paraclete. Advocate, helper, comforter, intercessor, counselor, one who is close beside and makes the RIGHT call. Do you see what I mean...one definition cannot capture its full meaning? It only makes sense, the disciples needed a big word in this moment. A reminder that they weren't alone. An assurance that their world wasn't completely falling apart. A promise that they weren't going to be abandoned. That even though it felt like it, Jesus' departure would not leave them ORPHANED.

This passage from the Gospel of John comes from what is known as Jesus' Last Discourse. The Last Discourse is a series of conversations that propels the narrative forward in chapters 13-18. These conversations occur among Jesus and his disciples over the course of one night, between the sharing of the Passover meal in the Upper Room and Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. This particular snippet of the conversation comes after a lot of important things, but before some monumental ones. It comes after the meal, after Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, after he has given them a new commandment to love one another, and after he has predicted Peter's betrayal, but before they have embarked for the Garden of Gethsemane, before Jesus prays for his followers, before they cross the Kidron Valley, before the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.

In some ways, like Jesus and his disciples in the moment of this text, we too, find ourselves in a space between. **Liturgically** we are between the important day of Easter and the monumental day of Pentecost. As we approach the end of the Easter season, we look back to some of Jesus' final words and we look forward to Pentecost and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. In the words of our text, "he will give you another advocate," we are reminded of God's advocating nature. That in the depths of who God is exists this advocating nature. And we see this most clearly in the person of Jesus – the one who called lowly fishermen and tax collectors to be his disciples, stood up to religious bullies, loved the sinners, welcomed the outcasts, and healed those considered unclean. **As Karoline Lewis, Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary, says of this passage, "To have seen Jesus at work is to anticipate the work of the Holy Spirit."**² In the words of our text, "I am coming to you," we are called to look ahead...to look out...to look forward to the Spirit of truth who will always be with us and who will show up again and again, like the mercies of God that are new every morning. Just as we're in this space between liturgically, we also find ourselves in an in-between time in our **societal and communal life**. We remember what it was like to be together...physically. We ache for it. We look forward to the day we can be together again. But it is not here yet. Things are reopening and there is talk of more things going back to normal, but we all find ourselves in different spaces with regard to what we're personally comfortable with. Some parents are being called back into work yet their children have nowhere to go. Some of us have bubbles of socialization in our neighborhoods or within our families while others of us are still not leaving the house very much because of pre-existing conditions or the levels of worry and concern that plague our hearts and minds. Some of us can continue safely and comfortably working from home while others of us own businesses and need to get them or keep them up and running. We are in

² Commentary on John 14:15-21 - https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1995

between opinions, we are in between before and after the pandemic, we are in between isolated and over-programmed.

I mentioned Erin Brockavich and Katniss Everdeen as examples of advocacy a few minutes ago. But they're almost these larger than life examples. Most likely, none of us are preparing to fight to the death in the Hunger Games or currently investigating a case of contaminated drinking water. But what about Virdie Montgomery, the principal of Wylie High School, outside of Dallas, who drove 800 miles over the course of 12 days to visit each of the 612 seniors at his school?³ What about Luciana Lira, an elementary school teacher in Stamford, Connecticut, who is caring for her student's newborn brother because he and his parents are currently battling COVID-19?⁴ What about the Amish community in Sugarcreek, Ohio that organized a sewing frolic to make 12,000 face masks in two days for the Cleveland Clinic?⁵ What about Dennis Cockrell from right here in Greenville, who sets up his chair outside of the St. Francis Cancer Treatment Center where his wife is undergoing chemotherapy treatments with a sign she can see from the window that says, "I'm here. I love you."⁶ These are all embodiments of the word PARACLETE. Who knows better what a senior class has persevered in order to graduate than a principal? The very definition of a being "close enough to the situation". Is there are more accurate term to describe the kind of help a sick mother needs in the care of her newborn? What better describes an entire community coming together to reach a hospital's monumental goal? What more accurately captures the comfort a spouse offers to his beloved who is fighting a vicious disease?

When I hear stories like this, I get a glimpse of the divine. I am reminded of God's advocating nature. I am compelled to cultivate that nature within myself, too. Earlier this week, I experienced the embodiment of the word Paraclete through my daughter's kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Strange. Twice a week Mrs. Strange gathers with her class on Googlemeet to teach a lesson, work on a project, or play a game. Tuesdays at 1pm and Thursdays at 11 am. I know this. It is on my calendar. I think of it each Tuesday and Thursday morning when I wake up. But this pandemic has caused me to forget things. Time melds together and sometimes even the days slip by unnoticed. On Tuesday, I completely forgot about the Googlemeet and the kids and I embarked upon a walk after lunch. Halfway through our walk I noticed my husband David pull up beside us. "We forgot her class meeting," he said. Immediately, my heart sank. There are few things on our calendar these days and there are only two tangible things a week my child has that connect her to school. And I forgot about them. I felt this hot flush of embarrassment and frustration come over me. And because the pandemic melds time and heightens emotions, I even felt tears prick the back of my eyes. But my husband looked at me with kindness in his eyes and said, "Don't worry, I'll run her home and get her set up." When I walked in the front door 15 minutes later, I heard Mary Eliza talking to her teacher, one-

³ As reported on May 1, 2020 - <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/01/us/principal-visits-seniors-trnd/index.html>

⁴ As reported on May 6, 2020 - <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/connecticut-teacher-cares-student-s-baby-brother-family-recovers-coronavirus-n1201601>

⁵ As reported on April 9, 2020 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/us/politics/amish-coronavirus-ohio.html>

⁶ As reported on April 28, 2020 - https://www.foxcarolina.com/upstate-man-supports-wife-with-homemade-signs-while-she-undergoes-chemotherapy/video_24acd263-0cfe-570a-a525-7acb1b70bed5.html

on-one. When I asked David about it, he told me that Mrs. Strange noticed that Mary Eliza was upset about showing up to the meeting late and that she seemed confused about the assignment because she missed half of the instructions, so just as everyone was preparing to get off, Mrs. Strange said, “Mary Eliza, would you mind staying on for a few minutes?” Mrs. Strange then proceeded to spend 25 minutes engaging my child, making sure she was okay emotionally, and walking her through the assignment, praising her and encouraging her as she did. What a gift of help, comfort, advocacy, guidance that was for not only my child, but my entire family.

The space between. That’s where the disciples were. That’s where we are. Dealing with cabin fever, heightened emotions, the passage of unmarked time, unrealistic expectations, and even a bit of mourning and grief. Tired of hunkering down after two full months, but longing for connection and assurance. Peeking out to see if its safe, but knowing it will be a while before things are fully normal again. Maybe they never will be. Because we, like the disciples, have been changed by these important, monumental experiences. And we’re called to look back and remember the work and witness of Jesus and we’re called to look forward to and anticipate the continual coming, work, and witness of the Holy Spirit. For all the examples of good advocacy or absent advocacy that we’ve seen in this pandemic, we can trust that God’s advocacy through the power of the Spirit is more than we can ask or imagine. It is steadfast, powerful, grace-breathed, and never fails. It inspires our own advocacy. So, as we exist in this space between, we give thanks for the embodied paracletes in our midst and look for the ways to be a paraclete for others, knowing that it is God who inspires and perfects all efforts and who is our ultimate PARACLETE. I offer you these words, written by the Rev. Julia Seymour of Big Timber, Montana called, “We Have An Advocate”.⁷

We are not alone, sliding through a mystery with no guidance.
We have an Advocate who guides us with power and truth.

We do not pray alone, worried about “getting it right” or being heard.
We have an Advocate who prays with us, in deep, wordless sighs.

We do not work alone for the healing of the world.
We have an Advocate who directs our paths and reveals Christ to us.

We are born of water and fire, adopted into the family of God.
We have an Advocate who strengthens our relationship with the Holy.

We are a people of bountiful gifts and many connections.
We have an Advocate who blesses and encourages us.

⁷ As published in Liturgy Link on May 21, 2015 - <https://www.liturgylink.net/2015/05/21/litany-of-affirmation-we-have-an-advocate/>

We are yet coming to know more fully the height and depth and breadth of the love of God.
We have an Advocate who does not rest in revealing that truth to all creation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.