

Pentecost Sunday
“The Comforter HAS Come!”
John 14:15-21
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When I was in college, there was an old gospel song we would often sing during chapel services called “The Comforter Has Come.” Written over a century before, its message was that Christ had already arrived in the form of his Holy Spirit to accompany us and comfort us amidst the worst of life’s trials and tribulations:

*O spread the tidings ‘round,
wherever man is found,
Wherever human hearts
and human woes abound;
Let ev’ry Christian tongue
proclaim the joyful sound:
The Comforter has come!*

This was followed by the refrain:

*The Comforter has come,
the Comforter has come!
The Holy Ghost from Heav’n,
the Father’s promise giv’n;
O spread the tidings ‘round,
wherever man is found-
The Comforter has come!*

The notion that God offers “comfort” to his children is basic to any understanding of God and the Christian life. Ask people why they go to church in the FIRST place and quite often they’ll say they experience a calming presence and a peace of mind rarely found anywhere else, or that they’ve developed friendships there as deep or deeper than many in their OWN family. Or maybe they’ll say that when life becomes fearful and chaotic, it’s reassuring to know that someone greater is always there to help them through. It’s axiomatic that church and our relationship to Christ is grounded in large part in the promise of comfort one can discover in them both.

However, at this juncture in history where we are presently confronting a deadly plague of international proportion, that comfort has been replaced by depression and fear. This past week, the Census Bureau released new data concerning the effects of the coronavirus on our nation. It reveals that a third of Americans now show signs of clinical anxiety or deep depression with rates ESPECIALLY higher among younger adults, women and the poor. Of course, this is a disease that SHOULD be feared. For those of you who may have asthma or COPD such as myself--a condition which often prevents one from taking a complete breath, leaving you with the sensation that you’re suffocating or drowning--Covid-19 produces just such

an effect upon the body. As one of my closest friends, a pastor who contracted the virus HIMSELF told me, “David, it was so bad, I thought I was going to die!”

But the fear has also been financial. Having to sequester oneself for months at a time without a regular paycheck coming in, a large majority are left struggling to pay the bills; they find themselves without enough money make the monthly mortgage payment or even to buy groceries for the week. Many of the smaller merchants have had to lay off their staff and without income to cover any outstanding expenses, they wonder whether their business will ever recover once the quarantine has ended. Then there’s the terrible loneliness that comes with not being able to have human contact with family and friends except by phone or email. Of course this has been ESPECIALLY hard on the elderly who need to be checked in on more regularly. Persons who are presently hospitalized or in nursing homes are unable to receive visits from loved ones, while those who have died in such quarters must be buried without the traditional funeral rites being offered. And then, of course, there’s the anxiety of wondering when it’s all going to end and what will come next. We all know that after this experience, it can never again be business as usual, that this pandemic is forcing us to confront a whole new reality none of us could ever have expected.

Yes, in such uncertain times as these, this disease has spawned much fear and anxiety and hopelessness INSIDE us as well as ALL AROUND us. Yet as Christians, as beloved children of God, much of this apprehension is offset by the knowledge we’re NEVER truly alone in all of this, that there IS someone who cares about us and promises to draw close to us when we desperately need him. As you will often hear me say, the Bible offers us just one promise, ONLY one: “I, the Lord your God, love you with an everlasting love and nothing, no NOTHING will ever separate you from either my presence or my love.” What can be more comforting than THAT!

When I was a child, my parents took my brother and me to Miami, Florida during Easter vacation. One night, while asleep in our motel room, a savage storm suddenly arose, and if you’ve ever been to Florida, you know how loud and violent those storms down there can often become. Well it started thundering and lightening with an intensity I had never experienced before and I was instantly awakened from out of my sweet dreams to the sound of gigantic cymbals clashing all around me. In my fear, I started to cry and called out to my mother for help. She immediately rose from her bed to scoop me up into her arms and reassure me that everything was going to be all right, that it was just a passing rain storm that would soon end.

Although that incident happened over sixty years ago, I never forgot it nor the comfort derived from knowing that my parents were always near in the event I ever needed them. Well we find that SAME sense of security in knowing that our HEAVENLY Father is always near AS WELL. Take that deep note of comfort from out of the Church’s message and you will have removed what is the very HEART and SOUL of our faith. HOWEVER, if we only limit the gospel to what God can DO for us, for the ways God MINISTERS to us in our weakness and times of trouble, then sadly, we have missed what it REALLY means to be a Christian.

Our text this morning is part of John’s “Farewell Discourse” which is comprised of chapters fourteen through sixteen of his gospel. As Jesus’s Passion draws near, his anxious followers are forewarned that he must soon leave them. Therefore, to calm their troubled hearts

and prepare them for what they could expect once he is gone, he offers them this assurance. According to the King James translation, Jesus says to his disciples, “And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another *Comforter*, that he may abide with you forever...” However, the idea that Christ will never abandon them but will remain with them in and through a “Comforter”—what would be his OWN PERSONAL PRESENCE in the form of the Holy Spirit—actually comes from a MISTRANSLATION of v. 16. The Revised Standard Version provides us with a more ACCURATE translation when it says, “And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another *Counselor*, to be with you forever...”

Now please note that Christ did not promise them another “comforter” but rather a “COUNSELOR” which is the PROPER translation of the Greek word “PARACLETE.” This was a WHOLE NEW NAME for the Spirit of God, one that had never been applied to a Divine Agent before, and Jesus uses it four times here in his parting words. A “paraclete” is a “counselor” or an “advocate”—one who stands beside us and pleads our cause. It was often the custom in ancient law courts to have defendants appear with one or more of their most influential friends, who in Greek were called *paracletus* and in Latin, *advocatus*. These representatives advised them what to do, what to say, spoke for them, and acted on their behalf. They made the cause of their friends THEIR cause, standing BY them and FOR them in the trials, difficulties, and dangers of their situation. Elsewhere, John writes “We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous,” that is, there is one in heaven before God who appears there on their behalf, supporting their cause, urging their plea, and making intercession for them— one who would stand WITH them and SUPPORT them in the moments of their greatest trials. Thus, when Jesus announces that soon he will be leaving them, he is not declaring that he is departing from them FOR GOOD; we know he would NEVER abandon them! But with the promised gift of his “PARACLETE,” he is assuring them that they could depend on his CLOSE PERSONAL PRESENCE through the HOLY SPIRIT to serve as their “advocate,” their “counselor” in every situation and this would serve as the source of their confidence and courage in the days ahead.

Ironically, the responsibility of being an “advocate” is one I have assumed since I arrived in Pittsburgh Presbytery. The Commission on Ministry--the committee I serve on--has tasked me to work with seven churches by serving as their personal “advocate,” a role I am expected to maintain with each of them for at least the next five years. It is a RECENT innovation— one I had never heard of before, and so when they asked me to assume this responsibility, I was a bit perplexed. They explained that the advocate serves as a LIAISON of sorts, as someone who gets to know that church SO well that she or he can adequately represent them and their interests before Presbytery. It ALSO means that if a problem WERE to arise, COM wouldn’t be caught off guard. I’ve ALREADY begun making calls and meeting with some of their sessions to introduce myself and describe for them just what an advocate does. EVERY congregation in the Presbytery is assigned one and that includes THIS church as well. Thus, throughout the year, I will be on their email list, receive their newsletters, celebrate with them when they have special events going on, pray for them, etc. Our COM reasons that as we--functioning as advocates---- get to know our churches better, then it will be BETTER equipped to support and minister to them. Such is the role of a church’s advocate.

Therefore, with this “Paraclete,” Jesus is promising his disciples someone to serve as THEIR “advocate” or THEIR “counselor” and NOT a “comforter” AFTER all. He’s NOT

saying that when things get bad—and it WILL--and they are eventually delivered up before magistrates and tribunals--just as HE shall be--then he, through his personal spirit, would be there to HUG them and HOLD their trembling hand and REASSURE them that everything was going to be all right as my mother had done to ME so many years ago. No, the gift of the Holy Spirit is not intended to be some mystical analgesic- the spiritual equivalent of two Tylenol tablets to help us through an agonizing situation! Here Jesus is using a DIFFERENT image. He's NOT promising them "comfort" but instead he's promising them POWER, and that's something altogether DIFFERENT!

If the disciples—and by extension this means ANYONE who would call him or herself a follower of Jesus Christ--intend to follow him all the way, then they can expect, NOT pampered softness but HARDSHIP and SACRIFICE as their lot. Two chapters later in John, he tells them, "I have said all this to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."(John 16:1-2) Thus he warned them early on as to the demands of being a disciple of his- that it may cost them their families, their friends, and even their VERY LIVES. They must be prepared for a struggle on the highest order, in a service that demands their ultimate commitment. The past three and a half years were not a game- it was BOOT CAMP TRAINING for a spiritual assault on the forces of this world. You see, with the Kingdom of Heaven preparing to invade, God's OWN D-Day was about to arrive.

And POWER was what those disciples were going to NEED. At the same time John's gospel and subsequently his book *Revelation* was written, the Church was experiencing intense persecution. Christians were being crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs and lions, while others were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and then burned as torches. More than just comfort, those disciples and followers of Jesus would need COURAGE in the face of great opposition. And yet they were assured that in speaking truth to power, what they lacked in eloquence would be MORE than made up by the presence of the "Paraclete" in their lives- that which represented the very presence of GOD HIMSELF speaking through them.

Therefore, when the day of testing DID arrive—and believe me it WOULD---they'd then be able to courageously take a stand on the side of Jesus Christ and his righteousness and speak truth to power without fear of the consequences. Their comfort and assurance would come from the promise that CHRIST HIMSELF, through his Holy Spirit, would be WITH them and even speak God's word of truth THROUGH them- beyond that they could expect nothing more. Earlier on in his ministry, he had told them that "when they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."(Matt. 10:19-20) And another time, he said to them, "And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."(Luke 12:11-12) Thus, they had no reason to fear. With this promise of the Paraclete--the Advocate or Counselor--he was reminding them of what he had promised them earlier, that God would be WITH them and even IN them, REGARDLESS of where they went or whatever might happen to them. As the Apostle Paul would later reassure the Church, if God be FOR them, how then could anything else in all of creation possibly be AGAINST them!

I recently read a prominent Christian writer ask the question, “What are we to make of this New Testament picture of God in our own lives TODAY?” In OTHER words, how does the Bible’s portrait of God and the Early Church’s understanding of Him compare to how we MODERN-DAY Christians comprehend and relate to God. He then went on to answer his own question, “For one, we can stop pretending God is nice, as if it’s his job to make our lives well-adjusted or religious or even spiritual. Jesus did not say he came to give us happiness, only blessedness. He did not promise an easy life, only an ABUNDANT one. He doesn’t call us to be religious or spiritual, but to LOVE GOD AND LOVE OTHERS.” Well on this Pentecost Sunday, we are reminded that, like those saints of old, we TOO have received the SAME promise of the Holy Spirit; we TOO have received the “Paraclete”- the Spirit of POWER, the Spirit of TRUTH, the INFALLIBLE Spirit of God who will ALWAYS be WITH and even WITHIN us. As the representatives of Christ to the world, we have been given a power UNLIKE ANY OTHER so that regardless of how HARD our lives may become, no matter what DIFFICULTIES life may throw our way, with the Spirit’s help, we can certainly OVERCOME them. THIS then becomes the BASIS of both our comfort AND our courage- NOT that God promises to PAMPER us in the days ahead, not that God will hold our hand and reassure us how everything is going to be all right, but to ENDUE US WITH POWER that we might remain his faithful followers and representatives to the bitter end!

However, the HARDEST thing about faith is not believing that there IS a God but believing that the God we ALREADY profess actually inhabits us with his personal presence and makes our heart his home as he SAYS he does. THAT is the hardest thing for ANY Christian to believe- that there truly IS a living Spirit of God resident deep within each one of us, and that that POWER for our lives is ALREADY a reality to be claimed and exercised. Regardless of whether we are young or old, male or female, black or white, gay or straight, our body is the “temple of the Holy Spirit” and our heart becomes his pillow. He is with us in our coming and in our going, in our waking and in our sleeping, in our successes and in our failures. And if we TRULY believe that in our heart of hearts, then OUR lives will be filled with a tremendous new conviction, and the song that will swell from OUR lips will sound very much like the one I used to sing in chapel so many years ago:

*O boundless love divine!
How shall this tongue of mine
To wond’ring mortals tell
the matchless grace divine-
That I, a child of hell,
should in His image shine!
The Comforter has come!*

Let us pray...

Gracious God, fill us this morning with this one conviction: that we may we never doubt either your presence in us or your love for us. Day by day, may the evidence of your care and commitment become increasingly evident to those around us in and through our OWN presence and love towards others. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.