

Another Paraclete
A Sermon on John 14:15-21
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2023

Introduction

Today's text is the Gospel reading on Pentecost Sunday in Year C. It reflects John's understanding of the Holy Spirit.

It is different from Luke's story of Pentecost in Acts 2. There is no speaking in tongues. There is no dramatic, public event where 3,000 people are baptized. Luke focuses on the power of the Holy Spirit.

John instead talks about the spirit as another Paraclete. He continues with the themes we discussed last week. The disciples are anxious about the absence of Jesus; the Paraclete will comfort them and be with them. John further develops his image of the household of God by describing the Paraclete's role in it.

Paraclete is a funny word, and it has never really caught on in Christian imagination. Luke's Pentecost story is much more familiar to us as a narrative of how the Holy Spirit works. We can learn from the Paraclete, too. It is a more cerebral, complementary understanding of the Spirit.

First Move: Two Crises

John continues to act as a pastor. John's community was suffering from the trauma of being kicked out of the synagogue. We talked about that last week. There was another crisis in John's community. John, the Beloved Disciple, apparently died just before the Gospel of John was written. Most scholars believe that the Gospel of John was written by one of *John's* disciples.

The early believers cherished the apostles, the eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry. The apostles built the early church. They spread the word throughout Asia, Greece, Rome and North Africa. They were a link to Jesus and taught early Christians about Jesus' words and deeds.

It was hard on the early believers when the eyewitnesses to Christ began to die. According to legend, the last of the apostles to die was John, the Beloved Disciple.

Our Scripture today is intended to help John's community deal with that double loss: being kicked out of the synagogues and losing the Beloved Disciple. It is intended to assure them that Jesus will be present with them through the Paraclete.

The Greek word παράκλητος is transliterated in English as the Paraclete. Some English Bibles translate Paraclete as Advocate, Counselor or Comforter. It means all those things in Greek. It can also mean mediator, intercessor, helper or encourager, depending on the context. I will refer to the παράκλητος as the Paraclete so that we can keep the different meanings in mind without settling on just one meaning.

Παράκλητος literally means “one who is called to the side of.” It is someone who will be with John’s community. It will be right by their side.

When will the Paraclete be present? Jesus says, “When you follow my commandment to love one another, if you keep this commandment, I will ask the father to give you another Paraclete that he may be with you in the age.” After Jesus washed the Disciples feet in John’s version of the Last Supper, he commanded them to love one another. Not to love their neighbor, which we see in the other gospels, but to love one another, the other members of the community. John focuses more on bonding the community rather than bridging.

Jesus says he will ask the father to give you another Paraclete. That means Jesus was the first Paraclete. Jesus was present with his disciples and showed them how to love one another.

Jesus says that the Paraclete will be with them in the age. That is the new age. The present age is evil. In the new age, the kingdom of God, everyone will live as God intends us to live. Life in all its fullness, right here on earth. Jesus says you will experience the new age, the kingdom of God, right now if you love one another.

John is speaking through Jesus directly to his own community. They feel abandoned at the loss of the Beloved Disciple. Jesus again tells them that they are part of the household of God. “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.”

The household of God is marked by love. “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will come to him and we will make a place to abide with him.” The Paraclete will help the community love Jesus and keep his word to love one another. If they do that, Jesus and God will come to them right now and make a place to abide with them, here on earth.

The promise of presence is made to the community, not to isolated individuals. All the pronouns are second person plural. The gift is to you, plural.

“The Paraclete which the father sends in my name, that one will teach you all things and will remind you of all things which I said to you.” The Paraclete will teach about what Jesus said.

John could be talking about apostolic succession. The apostles who followed Jesus taught others what Jesus had said and done. In the Roman Catholic church, that

tradition has been handed down over the centuries through the bishops as there has been a continuous succession to each new generation through the laying on of hands.

Second Move: Hostility from the World

John also is trying to help his community deal with the hostility it feels from the world. Now that they have been kicked out of the synagogue, they may feel that they have no place to go.

Jesus says, “The world doesn’t notice me, either. It is as if I were invisible to the world.”

Jesus is a prophet. He has come to speak truth to the rulers of the world. Their society is unjust. They tax the people and take their lands instead of caring for them. The rulers ignore Jesus. When they finally notice him, they kill him.

Jesus has been building an alternative society. When Jesus was washing Peter’s feet, he said, “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” The leader of the community should serve the other members of the community instead of trying to control them and exert power over them. Everyone in the community should serve and support one another instead of trying to dominate one another.

Jesus brought outcasts into the community. This is bridging work. The outcasts are more receptive to his message because they have nothing to lose. The first person to respond positively to Jesus was the Samaritan woman at the well. She was a double minority, a woman and a despised Samaritan. The blind beggar has the courage to confess that Jesus is the Christ, while Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, is attracted to Jesus but can’t bring himself to give up his power and privilege.

Jesus is gathering a community of nobodies, the invisible people. He says, “This is the spirit of truth, which world is not able to accept because it neither notices it nor knows it.” This is God’s vision for how the world should be, but the world can’t handle it.

“Peace I leave to you, my peace I give to you; I do not give as the world gives.” Rome offers a false peace. It is peace through military power. Peace is only temporary. It is a cease-fire, a cessation of hostilities. Defeating people in battle only makes them bitter and resentful. Jesus offers true peace. The community is at peace with each other because they love one another. Civilization has always preferred Rome’s vision of peace.

Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be cowardly.” You must have the courage to form an alternate society based on love for each other instead of power and control.

Jesus is the Logos made flesh. That would have sounded strange to Greek sensibilities. Stoic philosophers thought of the Logos as the divine order that gives structure to the universe. It transcends the material world. John gives flesh to the Logos and makes it part of the material world. The Logos comes down to earth from the heavens and pitches a tent among the nobodies. Logos and intellect were associated with free men of the ruling class, while flesh and bodies were associated with the lower classes, slaves and women. The Incarnation of the Logos is a radical act of downward mobility. It overturns hierarchy.

The irony is that God is invisible, too, and is made visible only when the Logos becomes flesh. God is visible through the works of Jesus. The world can't see God because it rejects Jesus.

Third Move: The Paraclete Works in Two Ways

The Paraclete is John's version of the Holy Spirit. The comfort that the Paraclete gives the disciples is helping them understand what to do. It was easy for the disciples to know what to do while Jesus was around: follow Jesus and do as he tells you.

It is more challenging for the disciples and for us when Jesus is not around. How do we know that we are following God's will?

That was a burning issue for theologians for 1500 years, from Augustine to Anselm to Aquinas to Calvin to Jonathan Edwards. They believed that our own will was corrupted by original sin. They debated how it was possible for us to follow God's will.

The most helpful to me has been Thomas Aquinas, who believed that we could control our will if we followed reason. God or the holy spirit was acting in us through the power of reason. What we need to do is build good character by being intentional about our decisions. The holy spirit is essentially our conscience.

We have less confidence in reason today. We know that we make most decisions without thinking instead of by reason and that reason is most often used to justify the decisions we have made instead of helping us to decide what is the best option.

Process theology is heavily influenced by Thomas Aquinas. It is hopeful about our ability to make good decisions. It modifies Aquinas by relying on God's call instead of reason. It suggests that we feel God's presence through God's call.

It would be so easy if Jesus was still here walking among us. We could just follow him. Catholics understand apostolic tradition as being passed down through a series of bishops. The bishops are at the head of the household of God. Protestants

are less hierarchical and more democratic. We look to saints, ministers and spiritual advisers as people who reflect Jesus' ministry and teaching.

Sister Helen Prejean is one of those saints. I was at a press conference with her ten days ago. A Republican legislator was blaming the district attorneys for the cruelty of Oklahoma's criminal justice system. Sister Helen said that the district attorneys were under a lot of pressure, that people make bad decisions when they are under pressure. Yes, our criminal justice system is broken. We need to do better. Demonizing people is not the way to reform it. Sister Helen embodies the gospel of non violence. She loves and cares for all people, even the district attorneys who are the architects of a broken criminal justice system.

Feeling the presence of Christ is often made out to be about comforting us, as if we are needy and can't cope without affirmation. Feeling the presence of Christ in the Gospel of John is about getting help to do God's will. The Paraclete teaches us Christ's commandments and helps us comply with God's will.

"The one who has my commandments and keeps them, that is the one who loves me."

The Paraclete encourages us to know Christ's teachings. That is how it comforts us. Knowing that we are following the will of God gives meaning to our lives. We are not pursuing our own self interest. We are working toward something that is bigger than all of us. We become part of the household of God.

Studying the Gospels, discussing them with other followers of Christ, holding each other accountable, conforming our character to our best understanding of Christ, that is how the Paraclete works through us to be one with God and Christ. The Paraclete is the Holy Spirit. It works in two ways, through God's call and through the saints and spiritual leaders who guide and enlighten us.

Conclusion

The Paraclete is the Spirit of Truth. It gives us a place to stand in the post-fact world that we are living in. We are Disciples of Christ. We take our identity and our values from the kingdom of God and the household of God. The Paraclete helps us build that identity and embody those values. We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

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