

“Another Advocate”

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John 14:15-21

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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Sixth Sunday of Easter

We are all here because we are trying to follow Jesus. This is hard. It is hard enough trying to follow somebody when you can see them, listen to them, ask them questions, and engage in dialogue with them. In the Gospels we read about the people who were closest to Jesus, people who had trouble understanding what he was saying and following his teachings. How much harder it is for us, when we do not have the luxuries that they did. We can't *see* him. We can't *hear* him, at least not audibly. We can ask him questions, but it's hard to discern the answers. And we can't exactly engage in dialogue with him, not in normal speech. What are we to do? How can we follow Jesus when he is so *elusive*?

The answer is found in this morning's reading from John's Gospel. At least, it's the *start* of an answer. These are words of Jesus, words that he spoke, so John tells us, at the Last Supper, not long before his betrayal and arrest, less than a day before he was publicly executed. Jesus is fully aware that his hour has come, that his doom is near at hand. So he takes a few minutes to try to prepare his disciples for what is to come. He doesn't give *everything* away, of course; he speaks somewhat cryptically, in ways that they will understand later, when they look back on the events of this night. In this, one of his final teachings, he gives them some guidance, and he makes some important promises.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” This is very straightforward. Did those people care about Jesus? Yes, of course. Were they devoted to him? Yes, immensely. Would they miss him when he is gone? Yes, absolutely. They *love* him. But Jesus tries to turn their attention away from *him* to *what he has taught them*. He is implicitly saying that *his teachings* are more important than *his life*. If they truly love him, then that love has *implications* for how they are to go about living the rest of their lives. The teachings of Jesus aren't just teachings he wanted them to follow while he was *alive*, while he was physically *with* them. They are teachings that will endure when he is gone. Just because Jesus is about to leave them doesn't give them the right or the ability to abandon everything he has taught them. His *ministry* is coming to an end, but his *instructions for how to live life* are most certainly *not*. Once he has left them, they will still have something to hold onto: *everything he has taught them*.

This, of course, has huge implications for us as well. We never had the pleasure or privilege of spending time with Jesus face-to-face, of getting to know him as a flesh-and-blood *person* whom we could walk with and talk with here on earth. But we can still *love* Jesus. How do we do this? Simple. *Keep his commandments*. Follow his teachings. Let them serve as a *compass* for how we live. Let them be the values and principles that guide all our decision-making. Let them influence the way we treat all other people. Let them influence when and how we worship and pray. Let them influence what we do with our time, energy, and resources. Let them influence how we vote. Let them be our guiding light.

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” This is a significant promise. Jesus does not want his followers to have to live life alone. He does not want *us* to have to live alone. So he is going to make – he *did* make – a special request to God: to give them – to give *us* – another Advocate, to be with them – with *us* – forever. What is he talking about? Who is this “other Advocate”? If you look in other translations of the Bible, you will see several different words here. Many translations from the past century use the word “Advocate.” The King James Version, and many other translations, use the word “Comforter.” A number of translations use the word “Helper.” A dozen or so translations use the word “Counselor.” At least one translation uses the word “Companion.” A couple translations don’t even try to render the word in English; they just give the original Greek word, which is “Paraclete.” In the ancient world, a “paraclete” was someone who was *summoned* or who was *called to come to one’s side* for the purpose of giving assistance. This could occur in judicial settings, like in a courtroom, where a “paraclete” took the form of legal counsel, like a defense attorney. In a religious context, a “paraclete” could be anyone who intercedes with the divine on behalf of someone else. And in a general sense, a “paraclete” was anybody who gave help, aid, or assistance to another person. There is a broad range of possible meanings, which makes this word difficult to translate. “Comforter,” “Advocate,” “Counselor,” “Companion” – they all convey a part of what a “paraclete” is.

So Jesus is promising his beloved followers that God will give them “*another Paraclete*” – another Comforter, another Advocate, another Counselor, another Companion. By saying “another” he is saying that *he has been a Paraclete for them already*, and if you think about it, that makes sense – he has *comforted* them, he has been *advocating* for them before God, he has *counseled* them, he has been their *companion*. There’s a verse in the first epistle of John that explicitly calls Jesus a Paraclete: “we have an *advocate*” – a Paraclete – “with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (1 John 2:1) So Jesus is the *first* Paraclete. He’s the *original* one. Now Jesus is saying that someone *else* is coming that will do for his followers what *he* has been doing for them. Who is this? Who is he talking about? Jesus tells them: “This is the Spirit of truth.” That is to say, this is the *Holy Spirit* of God. The Holy Spirit that, according to John, the risen Christ would *breathe* upon them on the evening of his resurrection – only about 72 hours after the conversation he is having with them in this passage – and that, according to Luke, would *fill* them seven weeks later, at the festival of Pentecost. Jesus is effectively telling his followers: *the Holy Spirit is going to do for you in the future what I have been doing for you in the present*. It will *comfort* you, it will *advocate* for you, it will *counsel* you, and it will be your *companion*. *It will be like me*.

The word “Paraclete” is used to refer to the Holy Spirit only four times in the entire Bible, and all of them here in the Gospel of John, in fairly quick succession. Here are the other instances: “The *Advocate*, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26) “When the *Advocate* comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.” (John 15:26) “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the *Advocate* will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.” (John 16:7-8) So the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, will perform several functions for the followers of Jesus. It will *teach* them; it will *remind* them of all that Jesus said to them; it will *testify* on behalf of Jesus; and it will “prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.” It will essentially *function* for the followers of Jesus as *Jesus himself functioned* for them during his ministry on earth. Many decades ago, the distinguished biblical scholar Raymond Brown meticulously surveyed all the biblical passages about the Paraclete, and everything we know about how that word was used in ancient Greek, then he summed it all up by saying, very simply, that the Paraclete is “the Holy Spirit in a special role, namely, as the personal presence of Jesus in the

Christian while Jesus is with the Father.”¹ It is “the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent.”² To put this very simply: the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, is *Jesus without a body*. It is with us *just the same way that he was with those original disciples*, with only one difference: *it doesn’t have a body*. It’s just a *presence*.

To understand this, it might help to think *metaphysically*. We have learned over time that there are some things that exist that we cannot see. We can’t see ultraviolet light, but we know it exists. We can’t see infrared rays, but we know they exist. We can’t see radio waves, but we know they exist. We can’t see magnetic fields, but we know they exist. We can observe or perceive these things in ways *other* than by using our eyes. The same is true of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. We can’t see it, *but it’s here*. It is *with us*, all the time. Sometimes, if we’re paying attention, we can *feel* it, but not with our body. We can *hear* it, but not with our ears. It can *teach* us, if we’re willing to listen. It can *guide* us, if we’re willing to be guided. As Jesus says: “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*.”

While he was sitting with his disciples around a table on the night before his death, Jesus said to them, “I will not leave you orphaned.” They will still have someone to look up to, someone to teach them, someone to lead them. They will still have their beloved Rabbi, after a fashion. “I am coming to you,” he said. He’s not referring here to his presence with them for the first forty days after his resurrection, nor is he referring to his “second coming” at the end of time. He is referring instead to his *abiding presence with them* – and with *us* – through the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. *His presence will still be with them* – and us! – *always*. “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.” He can’t be seen with *physical eyes*, but for those with *spiritual eyes*, we can see him, hear him, and feel him. “Because I live, you also will live.” I don’t think he’s referring to life after death here; I think in this instance he is referring to the *spiritual life we have on earth because Jesus continues to be with us*. “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” When we see Jesus with our *spiritual eyes*, we know that he is in the presence of God, and we are in the presence of Jesus, and Jesus is present within us. He is in *you*; he is in *me*; he is in *all of us*, here and everywhere, now and forever.

So what does this mean for how we should live? Jesus brings it back to where he had started. Previously he had said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Now he says, “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me.” It’s a reminder! It’s a reminder to us. If we’re actually trying to be Christians, if we’re actually trying to follow Jesus, if we are attempting to be devoted to him the way his original disciples were devoted to him, then we really have one and only one job to do: *keep his commandments*. Let his teachings *permeate* our hearts and our souls. Let them serve as a compass for how we live. Let them be the values and principles that guide all our decision-making. Let them influence the way we treat all other people. Let them influence when and how we worship and pray. Let them influence what we do with our time and our resources. Let them influence how we vote. Let them be our guiding light. We do this not out of duty or obligation. We do this out of *love*. Jesus also tells us that we will receive some benefits from living this way. “Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” The more we follow Jesus, the more we *love* Jesus, the more love we will receive in turn, and the more we will be able to *see* Jesus.

The bottom line: Jesus is *always* with you. You will *never* be abandoned. You are *not* alone.

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¹ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday, 1970), p. 1139.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1141.