

Sixth Sunday in Easter
May 17, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-18
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

Jesus said, "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 forever."

In my sermon on Mother's Day last Sunday, I allowed that "Father" may not adequately convey to us (in 21st century America) Jesus' intimacy with God.ⁱ But I open with the precise language we heard this morning because it is so precisely evocative of the Holy Trinity: Jesus, the Son, speaks of God, the Father, and of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit ... and this hundreds of years before the Church carefully defined the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

It's a good reminder that the ancient teachings of the Church, at their best, aren't just fanciful ideas dreamed up by philosophers and theologians to confuse ordinary folk; they flow from the lived experience of the first followers of Jesus.ⁱⁱ

That's all a bit beside the point. Except it's not. Because there is something about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit all working together that lies at the heart of this morning's gospel.

I remind you that here in church we're now six weeks into the Easter season, but these words of Jesus from this morning's gospel go back to Maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus' crucifixion. We're picking up precisely where last Sunday's gospel left off.

As I said last week, Jesus is trying to reassure his disciples, his nearest and dearest friends. On that terrifying and confusing night, he's telling them that they won't be left alone. So we hear this morning:

I will ask the loving intimate Creator to give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

An Advocate. Jesus uses a specific word here: παρακλητος. It's not an easy word to translate. Some Bibles go with "Comforter," "Helper," "Counselor," "Encourager," "Companion," or "Friend." They all have merit; they seem less "cold" somehow than "Advocate."

But "Advocate" is the word we hear here this morning, and I'm told – by those who know better than I – "Advocate" is the most literal option in any event.

The Lutheran pastor and commentator David Lose says this about the word:

You have an advocate! Someone who is looking out for you. Someone who is on your side. Someone who encourages you and supports you. Someone who speaks up for you and is willing to hang in there with you through thick and thin.ⁱⁱⁱ

And that's the point. Before Jesus is separated from those who love him and depend on him, he promises an "Advocate" who will be on their side, to encourage and support them, to speak up for them, and to hang in there with them through thick and thin. And they're going to need all that when they are cut off from one another physically.

But did you notice a tiny detail? Jesus says that God, the loving intimate Creator, will give them "*another* Advocate." This isn't going to be the first one; it's "another" one, a second one.

Which begs the question of who was the prior Advocate, the *first* Advocate?

But that's an easy question. Because Jesus was – and is – the first Advocate! So before we get ahead of ourselves, anticipating a second Advocate, remember the first Advocate; remember who Jesus was ... and still is for us.

Jesus is the one, early on in John's gospel, who told us that "God so loved the world"! That's a key point for us to remember this morning.

As John emphasizes, Jesus never had to argue our case before God as our judge in a court where the outcome was not guaranteed. Jesus came, as John tells it, to tell us that God loves us, all of us ... and the whole beautiful world God created and infuses.

And Jesus is the one, throughout all the gospel accounts, who makes that same point in all that he says and does. He's the one who crosses lines to associate with sinners and tax collectors. He's the one who speaks to crowds and gives them food that satisfies their hungers, who speaks to the woman at the well and offers water that quenches her thirst. Jesus is the one who reaches out to the lost, the lonely, the broken ... and tells them – in both word and deed – of God's love for them ... and for all who, like them, were looked down upon or overlooked by proper society.

He came to be on the side of those left without anyone to side with them. He's the one who came to encourage and support them, to speak up for them, and hang in there with them through thick and thin.

Jesus' closest friends knew it firsthand, though they often forgot. They were never, from the start, the most obvious choices for Jesus to choose as disciples. We know it. And they had to know it too. They were, several of them, simple fisherfolk. There was a tax collector among them. They often displayed their slowness of wit and their brute impatience. And there was, of course one in their midst who would betray Jesus.

None of them were aspiring scholars of the right sort, deserving to be called disciples.

And Jesus counted women as disciples, too, telling Mary of Bethany she had as much right to sit at his feet as any man. Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus' closest companions.

And though they were looked down upon or overlooked proper society, Jesus was always on their side, to encourage and support them, to speak up for them, and to hang in there with them through thick and thin, and telling them to do more than they would have thought possible.

And they're going to need someone to do that for them when he's gone. So Jesus promises them "another Advocate."

And make no mistake: it's the same job. The Spirit's activity will be the same as that of Jesus; what Jesus was to – and for – the disciples, that's what the Spirit will be as well.

And this is why I talked about the Trinity at the start: Jesus and the Spirit share the same work, the work of telling them and us of God's love for us, all of us ... and the whole beautiful world God created and infuses. And if that's not what the Spirit is saying still in our own day, it's not the voice of the Advocate; it's another voice.

And that's what unfolds for the disciples in the days of Resurrection. Throughout the whole of the Book of Acts, we see the Spirit, the other Advocate, taking the side of the disciples when they live in fear of all that threatens them. The Spirit, the second Advocate, encourages them and supports them when they want to hide ... and encourages them to get outside again. The Spirit, another Advocate (like the prior Advocate), hangs in there with them through thick and thin, especially on those occasions when the outside world seems bent on silencing them.

We see the Spirit at work whenever the followers of Jesus know that God, as Jesus first told us and showed us, walks beside us, supporting and encouraging us, hanging in with us through thick and thin, and getting us out into the wider world to speak words of love for all ... and that whole beautiful world God created and infuses still.

And to this day, we sense the Spirit still in our times:

when we hear – if only a still, small voice – that tells us the same things Jesus said;

when we hear a word that reassures us of God's love for us;

when we sense that though we are separated physically from one another – and cannot gather in a sacred space where our prayers have been prayed so many times over such a long time – that God is still in our midst in our worship.

If we hear that God is love for us, encouraging us, supporting us, hanging with us through thick and thin, then the Advocate is alive and well in our midst. God and the Spirit and Jesus ... the three in one and one in three.

And I suppose I could stop there. (And maybe I should.)

But all of this makes me wonder if there are yet “other” advocates?

For you see, I’m thinking that St. Paul, in our reading this morning from Acts, functions as yet one more Advocate. He got all caught up in the life of God and Jesus and the Spirit. I think we glimpse that in our reading from Acts this morning.

Paul had been going from town to town, proclaiming the good news of God’s love for all, a love that makes no distinction between Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, speaking of a God who loves the whole beautiful world ... and all who dwell therein.

And in the course of his travels Paul comes to Athens. But it’s not a place he enjoys. He finds it distressing, we’re told. It’s a city full of idols. The marketplace is filled with philosophers who have nothing better to do than debate one another. Paul meets Epicureans and Stoics, we’re told, and debates with them.

And if he finds *them* distressing, they find *him* unimpressive. “What does this babbler want to say?” they ask. “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities,” some say. But they invite him to speak in the Areopagus, all the same. (I wonder if they thought it would be amusing.)^{iv}

And that’s where we pick up the story this morning.

And what strikes me is that Paul – though he is distressed by the Athenian culture and though he is looked down upon by the city’s elite – speaks to them only of God’s love: for them; and for all; and for the whole beautiful world God created and infuses still.

He doesn’t take them to task. He doesn’t argue. He isn’t beligerant. Or condescending. He speaks to them of the God who made the world and everything in it, the one who gives life and breath to all God’s creatures, the one in whom we all “live and move and have our being.” He even draws a line from one of their poets: “For we too are God’s offspring.”

That sounds like what Jesus had to say to those he met. And that sounds like the voice of the Spirit. And that all sounds like the love of God.

God and the Spirit and Jesus ... the three in one and one in three.

God and the Spirit and Jesus ... the three in one and one in three. And in Paul and the apostles.

And in you and me, too, I think.

We, too, are sent forth, taking our place in the life of the Trinity, as Advocates for the God of love and the love of God. This is my takeaway this morning.

And so I celebrate with you the love of God, revealed to us by the first Advocate Jesus, given to us down through the ages by the second Advocate, and shared with the world around us by every advocate that ever was or ever will be.

Let me end with a prayer for today from our sisters and brothers from the Diocese of Oregon (on the other side of the Cascades):



ⁱ A brief excerpt from my sermon on May 10, 2020:

... there's the irony that even as some of us are thinking about Mother's Day our gospel reading this morning is chock full of references to God as "Father" – 13 times in just 14 verses. It's a powerful image for some, but this metaphor for God obscures the experience for others. So that's another distraction.

Of course, God is not man sitting on a cloud with a long white beard, but it's hard to translate Jesus' sense of intimacy today. "Parent" is, I think, too abstract. If "Mother" works better for you, try it out in your prayers. Or you could replace "Father" with something like "intimate loving Creator," but that's a mouthful – and probably a distraction all on its own.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, in *Wishful Thinking*, offers this pithy observation worth pondering:

NO MATTER HOW FANCY and metaphysical a doctrine sounds, it was a human experience first. The doctrine of the divinity of Christ, for instance. The place it began was not in the word processor of some fourth-century Greek theologian, but in the experience of basically untheological people who had known Jesus of Nazareth and found something happening to their lives that had never happened before.

Unless you can somehow participate yourself in the experience that lies behind a doctrine, simply to subscribe to it doesn't mean much. Sometimes, however, simply to subscribe to a doctrine is the first step toward experiencing the reality that lies behind it.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose @ <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/05/easter-6-a-you-have-an-advocate/>.

^{iv} To put this morning's reading from Acts 17:22-31 in context, it's worth reading vv. 16-21 (as well as previous chapters/verses):

While Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy to join him] in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the market-place every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him.

Some said, 'What does this babbling want to say?'

Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.' Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.