

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

When I looked at the Greek text for this reading, I came across the word παράκλητος (*paraklētos*), sometimes rendered “paraclete” in some translations. It is one of those words that can be hard to translate because there are a lot of possibilities. The literal meaning is “one who is called to someone’s aid” which became “advocate” in the Latin translation. So we have all kinds of meanings such as “helper in court” or “counselor” or the entirely too general meaning of “helper”. So as we start our conversation this morning, let me share with you what the paraclete is not. It is not a little yellow bird, and the paraclete is not a pair of football or baseball shoes.

The thing about this word is that there really isn’t an English word which will properly convey the many sides of the Greek word. The folks who put together the translation before you, the NRSV, chose to render it as Advocate. Advocate works in this context and it certainly is part of what the Holy Spirit does, for example, it “intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words,” the Apostle Paul’s words from the book of Romans (8:26). The Spirit is there speaking for us when we can’t express all that we feel because of our frailty, it speaks for us in our grief, in our weakness, in our sin. But that’s not all.

As you might infer from my sharing from the book of Romans, the paraclete is also our “comforter”, as rendered in some translations. It’s there in our grief, in our joy, but again that’s not all. Loving words as I do, I referred to my Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories. There it includes the early use of the word “comfort” as “strengthening, support, consolation” with the emphasis on giving strength. Strengthening help, not just a pat on the back offered in consolation, but providing encouragement, even to the point of material supplies, or lending strength. In this case think of the Spirit as helping us get up and move forward for whatever lies ahead of us.

We are consoled in our grief and weakness, but also strengthened and exhorted to live our faith, to live as disciples of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit to respond and move forward, accepting the grace of God through the gift of faith, following Jesus’ call. We sometimes derive a physical strength through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit with each one of the baptized as we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

We are people, and like any athlete, any musician, anyone who does anything, we all need occasional support in our human endeavor, whether consolation, or encouragement and even occasionally the gift of strength. So it is with our discipleship. It’s not easy following Christ, taking the road less traveled, the high road, often whether we know it or not, we are carried along by the Holy Spirit’s activity in our lives, enduring when it would be easier to give up, trying to do the thing that is pleasing to God even when it flies in the face of our human wants.

Now you may have picked up on another phrase from our reading this morning, the Paraclete, the Advocate is called the Spirit of truth. So what is the Spirit of truth? Now this can be understood in two ways, first as the Spirit who communicates the truth, and second as the true Spirit. Both bear upon how we understand some of what the Spirit does.

The Spirit proclaims the truth about us, to us: we are sinners. We don't like to hear it but nonetheless it is truth. Think of it like this: Some of you may have experienced getting a speeding ticket. Even when we know we're speeding, we do not want to get caught, we don't want to see a state trooper flashing his colored lights behind us. We do not want to hear the truth about speeding. That particular truth means often means some sort of penalties for wrong actions, maybe a fine, maybe points on your license, maybe both. So we are confronted with our sins, and God's judgment against sinners. But then the Spirit of truth proclaims the truth about Jesus; Jesus came to save sinners.

Now here is a true story from a pastor I knew in northern California. He relates that one day he was stopped for speeding. He said he knew he was wrong, but he was late for a meeting. He was driving on a brand new four-lane highway with almost no traffic. When he saw those flashing red lights behind him, he said he knew he was going to be even later to the meeting. After the patrolman got his license, he went back to his car, while this pastor waited for him to return. As he waited, another police car pulled up behind the first. The officer who had his license went back to the second car, and the pastor's anxiety level rose. The officer left the second car and came back to the pastor's car. He handed the pastor his license and said, "The sergeant says that you're a friend of his. Keep your speed down and drive carefully." He returned to his car and drove off.

He was guilty, he had broken the law and deserved the ticket. He deserved to pay the fine, have points charged against him but because of a friendship, his mistake was forgiven and forgotten. There was no penalty to pay. That is grace. The pastor said he thanked the sergeant, who was a member of his congregation. Note that his comment to the other officer was that the pastor was a friend of his. There is a sense that our salvation is based on Jesus considering us his friends. Jesus tells us "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." [John 15:14-15: NRSV]

Sealed, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, strengthened, helped, encouraged, consoled, convicted and advocated for, all this by the Holy Spirit which has accompanied us on our journey with Christ, on our journeys with each other, through switchback and setback, through success and failure, through our blindness and our sins. Sustained by the faith that is a gift of God's grace, receiving mercy and forgiveness, enduring

and persevering, sometimes carried, sometimes tugged, persuaded, exhorted, stirred up, all with the help and love of our Advocate, our Comforter, the Spirit of our Father.

AMEN