

Holy Spirit

John 14:15-19, 25-27; Acts 13:1-3

July 20, 2008

Think about it for a moment: it was about all to come to an end. The friend who had walked beside the seas with them – the one who had taught them on the mountainside – the one who had controlled their thinking every waking moment and even some moments when they were asleep was soon going to be gone. They more than sensed it. He'd been saying things to suggest it for quite awhile. And, they were beginning to sense it was **really** going to happen. What would they ever do? What would happen to them when his leadership and counsel would not be close at hand and the complex challenges of the day engulfed them? Where would they find guidance and direction?

We've all had occasions when we have felt like the disciples. We've all had to face the reality of the loss of a parent; or, we've had to face graduating and leaving behind a trusted teacher or coach; or, we've had to ponder the future without a close friend because of a necessary move. We all know the uncertainties that accompany such moments – the insecurities, the self-doubts, the reluctance to face the future without persons who have provided meaning and direction in our lives.

Beth was such a person in my life. She was one of the leaders of my core group in seminary. She met with four couples of us weekly for two hours for two years to evaluate how our seminary work impacted our marriages and to intentionally spend time doing something proactive to strengthen our marriages. We gained confidence in our marriages as a result. We were willing to try things. We knew we could talk with her about some of the marital counseling we were doing in our local churches. Despite her hectic schedule she always had time to talk an issue through with us. And, I remember well the apprehension I felt when I thought of being in ministry, especially counseling others, without her around to bounce thoughts off of.

So, the handwriting was on the walls. Even the *dumbkaufen* disciples had to have realized the tragedy that was just ahead. And so, they were gathered in an upper room. It had to have been an intense session as Jesus tried once again on that final night to share with them what they would need for the days ahead. Certainly he had not told them everything they needed to know for the uncertain future; nor could he have been able to meet every eventuality even if given a normal life span. In that final session though, Jesus tried to prepare his followers for life on earth after his ascension.

With the torch lights of that upper room on that final night flickering, Jesus reassured them that he would not leave them like orphans, "fatherless." Jesus told his disciples that it would not happen that way because "I am coming back." "And then you will know me in a new way." At that moment the disciples had to have been bewildered and numbed with the sense of the impending crisis. Oh, the day would come when their eyes would be opened – when their minds would understand – when their hearts would be kindled – when they would really see him. But, it couldn't have been that night.

So, in this passage, we are told how Jesus sought to give to them added courage by promising some things. These promises weren't intended just for their ears, but for the ears of the church down through the ages - yes, even ours today. Because we too know what it is like to live in a world confronted by issues undreamed of in the first century. We cannot find through any amount of searching the scriptures (in particular, Jesus' words) answers to some of the issues of our day. And yet, we are expected to speak – to have a position. The promises Jesus offered to the disciples and thus to us suggests ways the church can wrestle with some of the difficult issues of the day in the absence of the physical presence of Jesus.

There's one promise in particular I want us to consider this morning because it is the promise which, from my perspective, best highlights the way we are connected to God the Creator and Christ the Redeemer – the other two dimensions of the Trinity. It is that which helps us to know that God is involved in our lives. In the text we are told that Jesus shared with his anxious and confused followers that another would be sent after he was gone to continue the work he had started. "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you." "These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." "We (the Father and I) are not going to leave you alone to struggle with the issues of the world – we'll make our home in you through another which is a part of us (of the same nature as us – one with us) – it will be this spirit – a Holy Spirit."

Now, before you turn off the rest of the sermon, hear this: the presence of the Holy Spirit – the activity of the Holy Spirit – is not limited to those dramatic sightings demonstrated and proclaimed by the charismatic or Pentecostal movements in Christianity. Just because we don't experience the Holy Spirit the way they do we for too long have assumed the Holy Spirit is not at work in our lives. Granted, those who have had the more demonstrative experiences have done a fair amount of talking about it to make us feel inferior, but that doesn't need to be the case and ought not be the case. Fearing either that it is necessary to have such a dramatic encounter with the Holy Spirit or fear of having an emotionally draining experience too often causes us to believe we have to go it alone – that there really isn't any connection between what we're going through and the source of our being. Nothing is further from the truth. The truth is that the Holy Spirit is part of our religious experience. We just haven't been provided the resources to name what has been happening in our lives as fruit of the Holy Spirit's presence in us. Allowing connotations we are uncomfortable with to control our willingness to seek a better understanding of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, I would suggest to you causes us to miss out on a great deal of exciting, useful and practical dimensions of the spirit's ministry in our lives.

Our passage in John describes several things that the Holy Spirit does for us on behalf of Jesus. One of the first things is that the Holy Spirit is that power/that aspect of God which reminds us and teaches us.

We are always in process as Christians. We are constantly learning. Our teacher is the Holy Spirit – always leading us deeper and deeper into the Christian life. There is never a time when we can say that we know the whole truth; when we can close our mind to the ideas of others. We must forever be in dialogue if we are to fully understand the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And the Holy Spirit is at work teaching through our memories. We must think, but we must test our best thinking against the teachings of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is constantly bringing back to us the things which Jesus said. It is not so much the truth we have to discover; Jesus told us the truth. It's that we have to discover the meaning of the truth - the meaning of the things which Jesus said. The Holy Spirit saves us from arrogance and error of thought and keeps our faith alive and fresh, growing and changing.

This isn't only true with what we think or believe. It also influences how we act. Nearly all of us have experiences in life which are repeats. When we are tempted to do something wrong and at the very brink of doing that which we know to be wrong – there pops into our mind a saying from the scriptures – a teaching of Jesus' – a conversation with a parent or teacher or trusted friend – a lecture by a coach – the words of a favorite hymn – the saying of someone whom we admire. In these moments of danger, pictures flash through our

minds. I would offer to you this morning that it is the work of the Holy Spirit, this bringing into our consciousness things that we should never forget.

Now, there's one other dimension of the Holy Spirit's work I want us to consider. Personally, I believe it's the most important dimension of the Holy Spirit's work. The Greek word we struggle to have one English word adequately capture its meaning is: *Paraclete*. Now, I didn't say *parakeet*. A *paraclete* is not a bird. It's, well, let's quickly take a look at what some of the different versions of the scriptures translate it as.

Those who remember reading about it in the old King James Version probably are most familiar with hearing "comforter." Some of us may at first think that makes the Holy Spirit sound a little soft and mushy. I think it's helpful to know that the idea of comforter comes from two Latin words which really mean "to strengthen by being with."¹

Some folks prefer James Moffatt's translation as "Helper." Many of us are probably most used to hearing it according to the term the translators' for the Revised Standard Version used: "Advocate." J. B. Phillips didn't use just one word. Instead he offered the phrase: "Someone to stand by you." William Barclay similarly chose a phrase: "Someone who is called in." You know, like a person who is called in to provide testimony or to plead a case on behalf of the accused.² Barclay put it this way: "Always a *parakletos* is someone called in to help when the person who calls him in is in trouble or distress or bewilderment."³

A hospital chaplain told about his counseling with a young father of two small children whose beloved wife and mother was comatose from a massive brain hemorrhage and judged terminally ill. When the physician put her on intravenous feeding, the husband asked, "Why are they feeding her?"

For a week the chaplain worked through it with the husband. "I didn't make the decisions for him," the chaplain reported. "I just walked alongside of him." That's what a *paraclete* does. It travels alongside to guide and strengthen.

Miss Caroline Walker was a music teacher in Tennessee. Her story was told by Robert Drake who writes stories about growing up in that part of the country. Miss Walker had been teaching music for a long time – almost as long as anyone could remember – so long, she was a legend.

Miss Walker really had two teaching goals. One was to teach her girls to be ladies. She taught them manners as well music. She also taught them to play one piece as perfectly as possible for the May recital. She rehearsed them and drilled them all year long on playing that one piece as perfectly as possible. Included in her instructions were how to spread their skirt as they sat down at the piano bench. Included in her instructions was how to announce the piece they were going to play by standing erect and holding their hands together at their waists.

Well, the night of the recital arrived. Ten of Miss Caroline's students were present in the high school auditorium for the big night. Ann Louise was one of the students who stood in the wings waiting her turn. She was not calm. Terrified would be a better description. So terrified, she was fearful that she was going to faint. As she moved toward where Miss Caroline was standing she just knew that she was not going to be able to go out there and perform her piece.

It was obvious to Miss Caroline how nervous Ann Louise was. She put her hands on Ann Louise's shoulders, bent down and whispered in her ear, "You have worked hard. You know this piece. You have nothing to fear. And remember, I am counting with you all the way."

And with that, she gave Ann Louise a little shove onto the stage where she faced a very large crowd of all the performers' relatives – including her own. She announced her piece, just the way Miss Caroline had drilled it into her she should – she sat down on the piano bench spreading her skirt just the way Miss Caroline had instructed her to and, low and behold, she suddenly became aware that she was much calmer than she anticipated she would be. Then she noticed Miss Caroline in the wings and she remembered the last words she had said to her: "I am counting with you all the way." She didn't say, "I'm counting on you." She said, "I'm counting with you."

Robert Drake concluded his short story of Miss Caroline Walker's life with: "She (Ann Louise) felt that they were held together by something beyond either of them alone. Teacher and disciple were as one. She realized that it was this that she had been preparing for all year long, this test. And the music, at her command, came cascading out of the baby grand into the darkened auditorium full of joy and full of life, right on cue."⁵

"I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you. So let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

Parakletos – the helper, the comforter, the counselor, the advocate, the guide, the Holy Spirit, the one who stands beside, the one who is called in, the one who walks beside.

Yea, sometimes the result of the Holy Spirit's presence is something like a rushing mighty wind. But, sometimes it is also like a mild breeze with its comforting calming or a space in which stillness can be experienced.

Let us pray: Ever-faithful God, who is Guide and Protector to the church of Your people, we pray today with thankful hearts for the gift of your Holy Spirit. Open our hearts to her warmth and joy. Open our minds to his power and purpose. Open our ears to your word and our eyes to your mighty deeds, that we may know the Spirit among us and share its love with others. In the Spirit's partner's name we pray. Amen.

1. Donald B. Strobe, "The Shy Member of the Holy Trinity," Collected Words (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-0000-0000-26.
2. Ibid.
3. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), p. 194.
4. Mark Trotter, "The Paraclete Is Not a Bird," Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2007), 0-000-0444.
5. Ibid.