

Text: John 14: 8-17, 24-27
Title: What's a *Paraclete*
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I was recently with two of the finest pastors I know.

One is a natural leader. An extrovert who leads with passion and panache, he's all joy and energy and confidence. You want to follow him. The other is gentle and thoughtful and always believes the best in others. You want to be a better person when you're with him. You trust his wisdom and winsomeness.

I've known these two pastors for almost 40 years.

Both love Jesus and love people.

Both have served churches and colleges with distinction.

Both are gifted preachers, leaders, theologians, pastors....

And both have been betrayed and had their hearts broken by the people and institutions they've loved. One decided to retire and the other is serving a bruised and battered inner-city church. I never would have guessed that 40 years later they'd both be marginalized and broken by the church that they've loved.

The one who retired believes that the Spirit has left the church.

As his denomination splinters over same-sex marriage he's learned that there's little grace or space for those who are wondering how to love and welcome gay members. He now believes that the Spirit is active outside the church and he's eager to follow the blowing of that wind.

The other is tending after the glowing embers of a tiny little urban church.

I don't think there's any more gifted for that calling. He will listen to and love people, fix-up the building, and faithfully serve a flock of a few dozen that are mostly not sure how they'll make it week to week. On his best days he's content to be out of the grind of denominational dynamics. And he knows, deep in his bones, that if this little church survives, if they make it, if the embers blow up into a flame, it will be the work of the Spirit. So, he tries to listen each day for the leading of the Spirit.

Dear friends, both of these fine pastors believe that the Spirit of God is alive and active. They might be looking in different places, but they both believe that God's spirit is loosed upon this world, blowing and leading and burning. They don't think God has abandoned this world, they're still believe in the Spirit....

What do you believe about the Spirit of God?

Where do you look for the Spirit?

What do you think the Spirit is up to?

Where do think the Spirit is blowing, leading, burning?

I've noticed that we think of, or identify the Spirit, in a variety of vastly different ways....

For some the Spirit lines up logistics. They see God's spirit in how appointments work out, the kindness of a new doctor, the way in which the details of a trip are smoothed out, or a purchase works out. It's a "God thing" when circumstances go better than expected. The Spirit works externally.

For others the Spirit is a feeling. While life may be chaotic and difficult, the Spirit shapes and calms and soothes how we feel. The Spirit affects our interior life. They know a "peace that passes all understanding." For those of us who are anxious that sort of peace does in fact surpass understanding – we don't get how it's possible. But, for some the Spirit works internally.

And still for others, the Spirit is at work with signs and wonders. There are events or healings or miracles that seem supernatural and outside of the normal course of events. And those experiences are evidence of the Spirit. For example, I heard a CRC pastor who went on a mission trip to Central America claim that he was able to speak Spanish and lead people to Christ without actually knowing Spanish. He couldn't speak it when he returned home, but while he was there the Spirit worked in and through him ~ bearing witness in a language he didn't know. The Spirit is active in miraculous ways.

You get the idea. There are all sorts of experiences to which people attach the Spirit of God. There are all sorts of ways that we think about and look for the Spirit. But, I want to draw your attention to what Jesus says about the Spirit in this morning's text.

We find ourselves midstream in the long-last-prayer-sermon that Jesus offers his disciples on the night of his betrayal. Quite frankly, Judas asks a question in the section that our reading skips over. It is all coming to a head....

And in response to this coming crescendo Jesus promises that God the Father will send the Holy Spirit in Jesus's name. The Greek reads that he will send the *Paraclete*. It's an odd word; and given the back and forth with the disciples throughout this discourse I've always wondered why no one asks, "What's a *paraclete*?"

So, what is a *paraclete*?

What is Jesus promising that God is sending?

Paraclete gets translated in different ways in different places. In the first century it could be understood as a sort of attorney ~ who comes along side people in times of trouble to advocate on their behalf. So, you'll see *paraclete* translated as Advocate, or Counselor, or Comforter, or Helper.

And, actually, in verse 16 of chapter 14 Jesus says that the Father, "will give you another *paraclete* to help you and be with you forever." The first *paraclete* is Jesus. As it reads in I John chapter 2:

But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate (paraclete) with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

Jesus Christ is our first Advocate.
The Holy Spirit is the second....

As one theologian puts it:

Jesus is our Advocate or Paraclete before the Father, who pleads the case of our righteousness in Him secured by His blood. The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, Comforter, or Paraclete before the world, who comes alongside us to give us strength and courage when we must stand for Jesus amid hostility and persecution.

That's a long way from the Spirit helping us find a parking spot.
But, what does it actually mean?

Look. It seems to me that, at least in this text, the Holy Spirit serves two functions.

One, is that the Spirit points us back toward the teaching of Jesus.

I can't think of a time in scripture where the Spirit takes center stage. The Spirit is always pointing back toward God in Christ. When Tony Reppmann ~ bright, gifted, thoughtful, handsome, high school grad ~ offered his Profession of Faith he said that the Spirit is the shy one of the Trinity – always deferring to God the Father and Christ the Son. So, in some ways, God sends the *Paraclete* to remind us of the words and way of Jesus. The Spirit serves to shine a light back on Jesus....

Which leads to the second function: that we might have strength and courage to face the trouble that this world dishes up. The *Paraclete* serves to remind us that we belong, come what may, to God in Christ.

My pastor-friend, who serves the city church, told of the church lawn being ragged, barren, and something of an eye sore. So, he went to work figuring out how to repair the sprinkling system. He was an electrician before college and seminary, so he's handier than most....

However, this system was beyond his capabilities, until a couple local contractors surfaced and offered help without expectation and within weeks the sprinkler system was working and the grass was green and growing. Only now they didn't have a lawn mower.

The pastor mentioned this turn of events at the end of a service and on her way out the door the proverbial widow offered her mite. She handed him a ten spot and told him she was starting the "lawn mower fund." Later that day a visitor called to report that she'd left her purse in the pew and hoped it was still there. He found the purse. When she came to pick it up she reached in, pulled out a wad of cash, and said, "Thanks. Put this toward a lawn mower." The next day he found a fine used mower with the gifts from the previous day. The movement of Spirit?

What he said next sticks with me.

The following Sunday, when people showed up to a freshly mowed lawn, they translated that chain of events as God not forgetting them. God knew that they were still there. God was still with them. God remembered them. The Spirit wasn't in the details; the Spirit was in the reminder that God didn't abandon them. The *Paraclete* is God with us.

Jesus promises the *Paraclete* to disciples who have no idea what the next few days will hold. At the opening of our text Phillip is still trying to figure out how Jesus might show them the Father. (After three years together, he still doesn't get it. I take great comfort in that.) But, Jesus promises the *Paraclete* before they see him betrayed, beaten, and buried. In the face of coming trouble Jesus promises to remain with them.

Dear friends, the Holy Spirit is experienced and thought about in all sorts of ways. We attach the activity of the Spirit to all manner of events and circumstances, and there are other functions of the Spirit, but for this morning, let us give thanks for the work of the Spirit that doesn't leave us abandoned.

Jesus doesn't say that things will be smooth.

Jesus doesn't say that we won't have trouble.

Jesus doesn't say that we won't be broken and betrayed.

Jesus says that God the Father will send the *Paraclete*.

Jesus says that we're not alone.

Rev. Tony Van Zanten, who served for years in Roseland, cobbled together a few lines from our text with a few other lines from Jesus and turned them into a benediction. Almost every week he would offer this blessing:

Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world. Peace I leave you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives give I unto you, don't let your hearts be troubled, neither be afraid, go in peace."

Amen.