



Paraclete

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Philippians 1:1-7; 2:1-7; 4:13

The Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 19, 2016

I'm going to give you a quiz. I would love to tell you to raise your hand when you think you know the answer, but Presbyterians don't do that; Presbyterians aren't very demonstrative at church. Barbara Wheeler was President of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York for thirty years. She says, "I became a Presbyterian because it minimized my chances of getting hugged in church."

So we don't raise our hands in church, but just nod at me when you know the answer to my quiz. What do these famous people have in common? In historical order:

St. Paul
St. John of the Apocalypse
Miguel de Cervantes
John Bunyan
The Marquis de Sade
Fyodor Dostoevsky
Adolf Hitler
Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Eliezar Wiesel
Victor Frankl
Martin Luther King Jr.
Alexander Solzhenitsyn
Nelson Mandela
Václav Havel
John McCain
Piper Kerman

You've got it, right? They were all prisoners and wrote famous books or letters from prison, or in a couple of cases, books or letters *about* their imprisonment.

It's striking the number of world-changing books that got their start in prisons:

The Revelation of St. John
Pilgrim's Progress
Don Quixote
Mein Kampf
"Letter from Birmingham City Jail"
The Gulag Archipelago
One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich

And of course, Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Bible scholars aren't sure about this, but Philippians is probably Paul's last letter. We guess that Paul is about sixty years old at the writing of this letter. He's in prison, as he points out, awaiting trial before the emperor in Rome, and it's possible that Paul never made it out of this prison alive.

When you're in prison, which two kinds of people are most important to you? Who leaps instantly to the prisoner's mind, especially if he never married and has no family of his own? Well, of course, your *friends*, and your *lawyers*.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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Alone, afraid, imprisoned, Paul thinks about *encouragement*, and after *love* and *grace*, *encouragement* is my third favorite word in the Bible. “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation of the Spirit, complete my joy by being of the same mind with Jesus Christ, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.”

“So if there is any encouragement, complete my joy,” says Paul. The Greek word Paul uses is *paraclesis*, and it comes from a verb which means “to call someone to your side.” An agent of *paraclesis*, an agent of encouragement, is a *Paraclete*, and you recognize that word because it is St. John’s label for the Holy Spirit. When John calls the Holy Spirit a *Paraclete*, sometimes our English Bibles leave it untranslated—just *Paraclete*—but when our Bibles take a stab at its English translation, they call the Holy Spirit “The Comforter,” or “The Consoler,” or “the Advocate.”

A Paraclete is someone you call to your side when you are in trouble for your life, when you’re in prison, for example, or alone for any number of frightening reasons. Your friends: A paraclete is the person who comes to your door with five gallons of chicken soup or a fist-full of flowers when you lose your husband of forty years. She might not say a word. She’ll just sit there with you and listen to you cry. She’ll run the vacuum, she’ll answer the phone, she’ll load the dishwasher, she’ll mow the lawn. She is a Comforter. She is a Paraclete.

The Greeks used the word *Paraclete* a lot at the Olympics. Paracletes are the fans who sit in the stands cheering the athletes on to victory. You’ve heard of “home court advantage.” The fans in the stands are the sixth person on a basketball team, the twelfth on a football team, the tenth on a baseball team. It’s one reason no men’s basketball team wants to visit Cameron Indoor Stadium in Durham, North Carolina. The Golden State Warriors are 50-3 on their home court at Oracle Arena in Oakland this year.

The word *paraclesis* was also used in legal contexts. Lawyers are paracletes. They stand by your side and argue your case. Friends. And lawyers. You see why Paul’s mind gravitates to the concept of *paraclesis* in this his last letter from prison. “I thank my God every time I think of you,” says St. Paul, “you, my friends and my attorneys, because you’ve never left my side.”¹

By the way, this is apropos of almost nothing, but do you know what the Yale Divinity School soccer team is called? Yes, there is a seminary with a soccer team, and they have one of the greatest team names in the history of mascots. Can you guess? Yes, they’re the Paracletes. If you’re a theologian, you can say PARAclete, and if you’re a soccer player you can say pair o’ CLEATS.

A *paraclete* is someone who, in Paul Tillich’s beautiful words, will help you “strive for the sublime against the profanity of the average day,” someone who will help us “conquer the sloth towards what you know is the aim of your life.”²

Is there someone in your life who helps you conquer the sloth toward what you know is the aim of your life? Our English word *encourage* gets the sense of the Greek Paraclete just right—“to encourage,” “to put courage into somebody, to embolden them.

¹Analysis of *parakaleo*, *paraklesis*, and *parakletos* comes from the articles by Smitz, Stahlin, and Behm in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), vol. V, pp. 773-814; and from Kenneth Grayston, “The Meaning of *Parakletos*,” in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, vol. 13, 1981, pp. 67-82.

²Paul Tillich, *Spiritual Presence*, “*The Eternal Now*” (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), pp. 83-85.

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“If there is any encouragement,” says St. Paul, “if there is any consolation, any compassion, any sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind as Jesus Christ.” Are you listening? Are you paying attention? *Paraclesis*, encouragement, is the MIND of Jesus. It is the *style* of his **soul**, it is the *habit* of his **days**, it is the *way* he **thinks**, the way he reaches out to the least, the last, the lonely, the leper, and the loser, because Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave; therefore at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD! Encouragement is not just what Jesus *does* or what Jesus *says*, it is what he **IS**.

So what’s the point of this linguistic lesson? I don’t have to spell it out for you, do I? This gift, the gift of *paraclesis*, encouragement, is the gift the world desperately needs, and which the Church can give. Am I right that the world desperately needs this gift? Am I right when I say that the world rehearses the denial of new possibility? Am I right when I say that the world has eyes sharp only for the impossible and a tongue fluent only for discouragement?

You know, I love our new culture of instant communication. God bless the Internet. It has contributed enormous efficiency to my work. In my business the search engine is the greatest invention since the Bible itself. It took me twelve seconds to find out the Warriors’ home record at Oracle Arena. At the beginning of my career it would have taken me a morning to go to the public library to look up a newspaper or to the newsstand to buy a magazine I don’t subscribe to. Twelve seconds. I love the Internet. Facebook is a wonderful thing. Twitter is a wonderful thing. Instagram is a wonderful thing.

But sometimes it seems as if the only thing all this instant communication has enabled is just extravagant meanness. Sometimes it seems as if trolls have taken over the ether.

When Malia Obama was accepted at Harvard a couple of weeks ago, the racist comments on the Fox News Page were so vile that Fox News had to close down the comments page. This included numerous instances of the “N” word.

Two years ago, Nina Davuluri was crowned Miss America; she was actually the second Miss New York in a row to win that title. Nina Davuluri: Bachelor of Science in Brain Behavior, University of Michigan, Class of 2011. Nina Davuluri is the first Indian-American to become Miss America. Her skin is that beautiful mahogany color of the South Asian. Twitter and Facebook instantly called her a terrorist and claimed she was not really American. Did you hear what Stephen Colbert said about her? “I knew the instant I saw her that she was a terrorist, because every female Muslim extremist I’ve ever heard of wears tiny bathing suits in public.” The world rehearses the denial of new possibility; the world has eyes sharp only for the impossible and a tongue fluent only for discouragement?

I’m not going to pin the Orlando shootings on a generalized culture of discouragement and negativity. Omar Mateen was a self-loathing loser who could not accept what he endemically was. You can’t blame the culture for a human mistake. The same thing with Dylann Roof. Do you remember what happened one year ago last Friday—June 17, 2015? White supremacist Dylann Roof sat in a Bible study for an hour at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston before shooting nine black people dead.

It’s hard to blame a whole culture for two aberrations, two losers.

On the other hand, whack-jobs don’t create themselves. They do not appear instantaneously or spontaneously. They do not create themselves *ex nihilo*. They grow from innocent seed to ugly weed in the soil of culture. And the soil we grow in, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the gravity that pins us to this earth, is the assumption that white people are superior to black people, and straight people are superior to gay people.

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Do you remember how Frances McDormand puts it to Gene Hackman in the old film *Mississippi Burning*? She says, “Hate isn’t something you’re born with. It gets *taught*. At seven years of age, you hear it enough times you begin to believe it. You live it, you breathe it, you marry it.” Yes? So watch your tongue. Mind your assumptions. Corral your prejudices. Teach your children well. Practice *paraclesis*.

Do you remember Simon Cowell, the extravagantly censorious judge from the original *American Idol* TV program? His slandering of underwhelming Idol contestants was slashing, witty, and brutal, and his facial sneers were positively gymnastic. When Simon Cowell was still holding forth on *American Idol*, someone said of him, “Simon Cowell has dashed more dreams than an alarm clock.”³ Have you dashed more dreams than an alarm clock? Is that what they’ll say of you as they tuck your ashes into that little cubby hole in the columbarium?

Your fifteen-year-old brings A’s home from school day after day after day to absolute parental silence, because that’s exactly what you expect—straight A’s and nothing less. Your assistant at the office pours her days and her life and her blessed imagination into some project perfectly accomplished and you take the credit but give nothing back. Your daughter is beautiful but she does not know it, because you do not tell her.

One last thing and then I’ll quit. My friend Douglas, of Rye, New York, arrived punctually for worship at the First Presbyterian of Greenwich every Sunday morning at 10:25, as dependable as a Swiss watch. There’s only one problem: our worship service starts at 10:00. He comes to hear the sermon, you see, none of that preliminary stuff for him; he’s not crazy about the children’s sermon, for instance.

With the worship service in full forward progress, Douglas, poorly calibrated hearing aid whining away at a high screech, makes his halting way to the front pew of our nave, which puts him about twelve feet from my mouth, as the crow flies. He doesn’t hear very well, you see.

He listens to the sermon and then endures the post-sermon denouement—the prayers, the offering, the closing hymn, the benediction—and after church, no matter how ugly a clunker I have unleashed upon my congregation, Douglas tells me he’s never heard the Gospel preached so eloquently before. I know he’s lying, but I love him for it. About every third Sunday, when he shakes my hand, he is weeping uncontrollably. I don’t know if he means it as a compliment, but I choose to receive it as such.

Douglas is one of my Paracletes, you see. Someone once said that preaching a sermon is like dropping a rose petal into the Grand Canyon and waiting for an echo, so when you get an echo, you hold onto it in your memory.

This is neither here nor there, but for forty years Douglas was the official historian of the Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, New York, where they play the U.S. Open once every twenty years or so, and also where, in the 1920s, a Canadian golfer named David Mulligan started to take what he called “a correction shot,” and his name first made its way into the golf lexicon; we all know what a Mulligan is.

Once or twice a year, Douglas would invite me to lunch at Winged Foot, and sometimes he’d lead me on a guided golf-cart tour of the course. “This is where Fuzzy Zoeller hit his second shot to six inches from the pin for an eagle to win in ‘84. This is where Hale Irwin sunk a 40-foot putt for a birdie to win in ‘74. This is where Billy Casper bunkered out to save par and win in ‘59. Bobby Jones in ‘29. Douglas was only

³David Hiltbrand; “‘Idol’ Hands are This Devil’s Workshop, As He Rakes Teen Dreams Over the Coals.” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*; Aug 4, 2002.

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twelve and still living in Minnesota when Bobby Jones won in '29, but he seemed to know everything about Winged Foot.

Douglas is the only guy I know who wore his Purple Heart Medal to church. Most Purple-Heart Veterans I know keep their medals in a drawer somewhere for their children to find after the funeral, but Douglas wears his to church most Sundays, sometimes along with a whole chest-full of other World War II medals that I don't know the meaning of, but I know what a Purple Heart is.

I learned that Captain Douglas LaRue Smith of the United States Army landed at Normandy on June 10, 1944, four days after the D-Day landing, and started moving east across France to Paris and beyond. I said, "Wow, Douglas, that must have been quite an experience. Did you encounter enemy fire from the very beginning?" And he said, "Nah, I was one of the lucky ones; we'd won the beach and coast by then." "One of the lucky ones," I said. "When did you first meet enemy fire?" "Not till three miles inland," he said. One of the lucky ones.

He fought his way clear across the entire continent of Europe, ending up finally in Czechoslovakia; on the map it looks to me as if Douglas fought his way across nearly a thousand miles. In December 1945, seven months after Germany's surrender, Douglas was still in Europe, two years in the thick of the fight.

A couple of months before he died, we shared what I didn't know at the time would be our last Winged Foot lunch date. When I picked Douglas up at his condominium, I had to carry him from his front stoop to the front seat of my car, because Douglas needed a new hip, but the doctors were scared to operate because he was too weak.

He lives in a modest two-story townhouse, his bedroom on the second floor. He told me, "I take it one step at a time. On every step, I rest, and repeat that verse from Paul's letter to the Philippians: 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'; then I take another step; 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me'; another step; 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' All the way up the stairs. A step; a Bible verse; a step; a Bible verse. One step at a time. A man who marched across Europe under withering fire for two years.

The mind of Jesus, you see, is *Paraclesis*, Encouragement, and Jesus never left Douglas's side, not in Europe being shot at by Nazis, not at Winged Foot when he shook hands with Phil Mickelson, not on the stairs of his apartment when he is resting between steps.

In return, in gratitude, Douglas has become a *Paraclete* himself. Douglas encouraged me, Douglas put courage into me. How about you? Do you put courage into anybody, anybody at all? Are you a paraclete to anyone? Anyone at all?