

Sixth Sunday in Easter
May 10, 2026 • 10:30am
Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. E. Gary Taylor

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.

One of the things I'm most proud about Trinity School is our mission statement. In Headmaster School, they teach you that a compelling and clearly articulated mission statement is the cornerstone of a healthy culture and a healthy school.

Words matter. They shape priorities. They tell a community what it loves, what it values, what it hopes to achieve.

And Trinity School's ethos is wonderfully clear. Our mission statement ends with the phrase, to make the world a better place. That's our reason for being, our guiding star in shaping young people, inspiring them to be both competent and compassionate, to empower the leaders of tomorrow not merely to be good at things, but to be genuinely good.

At the center of our mission statement is a word many of you have heard me say before, upstander. Our mission says that we seek to build confident and resilient upstanders on a foundation of academic excellence, moral responsibility, and faith. When we first unveiled the new mission centered on the word upstander, some worried that no one would understand it.

But we welcomed the confusion, because in the explaining of it, our most fundamental goal became clearer to us and to all who would listen. An upstander stands up for what is right, even when it's hard. An upstander refuses passive indifference.

With courage and conviction, an upstander acts, speaks, accompanies, protects. An upstander knows what is good and true and right, and will go to the mat for it,

come what may. Our Gospel reading today contains a similar word for the Holy Spirit of God.

In Greek, the word is *parakletos*, or paraclete. In some Bibles, like the NRSV that we read from here, this is translated advocate. In others, it is comforter, helper, counselor, intercessor.

The truth is that all of these are right, and none of them are enough. I wonder if the best translation would be upstander. The Greek word *parakletos* literally means one called alongside, someone who comes near, like the best mothers showing up for their child in need.

Someone who stands up beside you when things are tough, so that you don't have to go alone whatever it is you're in. That's why many translations choose the courtroom-sounding word advocate. An advocate stands beside someone vulnerable, speaking when another cannot, defending the condemned.

The first letter of John tells us, if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous. Not because Jesus has to persuade an angry father to become merciful, no, the Gospel of John insists over and over that everything begins in love, for God so loved the world. Christ stands beside humanity and says, these are mine.

They will never be abandoned. They belong to love. Our Gospel reading today comes from what scholars call the farewell discourse in John's Gospel.

Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. He knows fear and confusion are coming. Within hours they will watch him arrested, humiliated, and crucified.

Their whole understanding of power and victory is about to collapse. They will feel abandoned and alone. And so Jesus speaks to them tenderly, you will not be orphaned, he says.

Jesus describes his relationship to his followers in family language, the language of kinship commitment. He loves them across social boundaries and invites them into a new kind of human community, not built on bloodlines or status or empire, but on love. This really hit home for the Christians who first heard John's Gospel, which was written near the end of the first century.

Most of them had never met Jesus in the flesh. They lived under Roman occupation. They lived in the shadow of empire.

They were marginalized, vulnerable, anxious. And John's Gospel poses a daring question for them and for us, a timeless question. Can you see and trust a new reality based on divine love, even while living in systems built on domination, hierarchy, and fear? In this, the reality of Jesus stands in sharp contrast to the world around him, around his disciples, in contrast to the world around us.

This is the Holy Spirit that John asserts the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. The Roman Empire believed power existed to preserve hierarchy, to protect status, to reward loyalty to the powerful. But Jesus embodies an entirely different power.

For Jesus, real power is the flourishing of all people, regardless of status or social standing, regardless of who your father is or what social class you were born into. And he demonstrates that vision not with domination, but with kneeling down and washing the disciples' feet shortly before the speech we heard today. The truth about God is not found in connection or coercion, Jesus assures us.

The truth about God is found in active, self-giving love, available to all. Which brings us to another title the Gospel of John gives the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth. In John's Gospel, truth is never merely an abstract information.

Truth is embodied. Remember the scene where Jesus stands before Pilate and Pilate cynically asks, what is truth? Jesus says nothing. But his very presence shouts, truth is standing right in front of you.

Watch me. Watch what God's love looks like, truly looks like. Watch me forgive.

Watch me feed. Watch me heal. I kiss lepers.

I dine with outcasts. I wash feet. I refuse vengeance.

And I will die forgiving my enemies. That's the truth. After I am no longer with you, Jesus is promising, when you follow my path, you shall not be orphaned, not left alone.

The Spirit of Truth will draw you into an alignment with the deepest grain of reality itself. That love is more powerful than fear. That mercy is stronger than cruelty.

That self-giving is stronger than domination. That resurrection is stronger than death. Jesus goes even further and makes another subtle but important point.

Many English translations read his promise as, the Spirit will dwell in you. But the Greek can also legitimately be read to say, the Spirit will dwell among you. Among y'all.

Not merely inside isolated individuals, but within the community of Christ's followers itself. We too easily think of spirituality as private and individualized. My belief, my prayer life, my personal relationship with God.

Those are important. But John's vision is so much more. It's communal.

The Spirit dwells among the people gathered in love. The Spirit inhabits the church as the body of Christ. The Spirit becomes visible in the service we do together, like at the TLF function a couple nights ago.

In our communal worship today. In the sacrament. In forgiveness.

In fellowship. In shared life. The Spirit moves among us and is still teaching us.

Still deepening us. Still profoundly drawing us back toward Christ. Perhaps that's why John's poetry sometimes feels mystical, almost tangled, frankly a little hard to read, a little hard to follow.

John's grammar stretches and overlaps and blurs together, abiding, knowing, loving, healing, feeding, comforting. Because John is trying to describe something beyond words. That in Christ, the boundaries blur and meld between the lover and the beloved.

Between God's life and our life. Between divine love and human love, live faithfully in community. You are in me, Jesus says, and I am in you.

This relational dance of love between Father and Son and Holy Spirit, the perichoresis we'll celebrate at Pentecost, is a dance that includes and inspires us. And empowers us to follow Christ wherever he leads us in the way of truth. To receive the paraclete is also to become paracletes for one another.

In a world riven by contempt, division, exclusion, accusation, a paraclete does not observe from a safe distance. A paraclete comes alongside to stand beside the lonely, the poor, the frightened, the immigrant, the forgotten, those whose dignity the world has denied. If we are, indeed, the body of Christ, then we must go where Christ goes.

We must stand where Christ stands, beside, beside as advocates, beside as helpers, beside as comforters, beside as upstanders. For when we do this, we will know, with all that we are, that Christ is in us, and we will never, ever be alone.