

Paraclete Strategies for the 21st Century Reading: John 14:15-21 Easter 6A
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Jesus said to his disciples: I will not leave you orphaned...I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth. {Jn. 14}

A few weeks ago, a woman shared with me her experience of going to Catholic High School. The Holy Spirit was explained to her as “the Paraclete.” And since she had previously connected a heavenly dove as representing the Holy Spirit, she assumed her teacher had said “parakeet.” The Paraclete (not parakeet) is another name for the Holy Spirit. It is the spirit of God that infused the disciples after Jesus had departed from his earthly ministry, transforming them from fearful disciples hiding in the upper room, to courageous apostles willing to sacrifice their lives for the good news in Christ. Today I would like to speak about the Paraclete and its relevance in the 21st century. Let’s take a closer look at today’s gospel.

The context is the last supper. Jesus has gathered together with his disciples to impart his final wisdom, to show them what true servanthood looks like, to speak about God, his relationship to the Father, and finally to let them know that he will soon be departing from his earthly ministry. Naturally the disciples are overwhelmed, having a difficult time imagining how they can continue without their leader. Their hearts are troubled as the ground beneath begins to shift. Jesus has been their advocate. He has walked alongside of them for 3 years, showing them the way to God, the path of compassion. In summary, he has been their paraclete, their counsel, the embodiment of God’s truth. Now he is ready to depart but promises his disciples that he will not abandon them. Instead, God will send them another paraclete who will comfort them and lead them into all truth.

A paraclete is an advocate. The Paraclete is the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, who leads us into all truth and enables us to grow into the likeness of Christ. The word *paraclete* means *to be called to one’s side*. It is often translated into English as helper, counselor, mediator, advocate, or intercessor. We recognize the presence of the Paraclete when we are “brought into love and harmony with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all of creation.” {BCP 852} Because God is that in which we live and move and have our being, we are never alone.

Before he died, Jesus told his disciples that he still had many things to tell them but that they could not bear them now. However, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth would come along side of them and lead them into all truth and remind them of Jesus’ love and teachings. The Paraclete continues Jesus’ ministry of pointing to the truth of God’s love, a love that dwells in us and a love that overflows from those committed to walk in the ways of Jesus. When you think about it now, there are so many things that are happening today that were not even on Jesus’ radar 2000 years ago: Issues concerning global warming, nuclear energy, gay rights, test tube babies, and inter-continental ballistic missiles. How should we think about these things? When we open ourselves up to the wisdom of God, the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, we will know the right way to respond.

When the disciples were at a low point, Jesus said to them: “I will not leave you orphaned!” To be orphaned is to have no parents. If someone does not immediately step in to care for the young orphan, then s/he will have a hard time surviving. It is estimated that 140 million children worldwide are orphans. (UNICEF) The number of orphans is of course higher in war-torn nations, regions that experience epidemics, and areas of extreme poverty. To be left alone in the world can be devastating. Edgar Allen Poe, Mohammed, and Nelson Mandela were all orphans. (*story*)

In our own country, during the age of the industrial revolution of the 1850’s, crowded cities along the east coast saw a rise in orphans who were homeless or had been abandoned. In an attempt to deal with this crisis, these orphans were relocated to rural areas, sent out to the Midwest and beyond in orphan trains. The hope was that farming families would foster them and the children would ultimately help out in the household and on the farms.

Jesus said to his disciples: “I will not leave you orphaned.” This gospel passage speaks to the fear we have when we lose a loved one who has played an important role in our lives. When this happens, it is easy to think catastrophically: How can I go on living without this person? Or how can I adapt to such a radical change in my life? For those of us who have lost a parent, a best friend, a child, a capable doctor, a smart teacher, or a loving pastor, we know how troubling it can be when that special person leaves us behind. During these difficult times, we need the faith community or someone special to walk along side of us, giving us comfort, confidence, and courage.

Jesus said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” What are those commandments? They can be summed up in the ethical mandate to love. Love is at the core of the gospel. If God is love, and God’s love abides in us, then our call is to walk along side of others as agents of love. This is not a warm fuzzy feeling but rather love put into action. This is the life to which we are called.

The call to discipleship is a call to care about other people, to walk beside them when their hearts are troubled or to be an advocate by standing up to the truth or offering counsel as they seek a way forward. So the important question for us today is this: Can we or will we be the paraclete for others, walking alongside our friends in faith and all those troubled souls who need a friend?

Last week, a special meeting was held by the Amador School Board in response to the bullying going on at an elementary school in Sutter Creek. Parents were outraged, teachers overwhelmed, and board members were barraged with complaints. And while I hope the School Board comes up with a better solution than what they now have, the reality of life is that the human heart is often wounded, ignorant, and selfish. This means that at times, there will be hardness of heart that expresses itself with bullying, derogatory comments, and shunning.

Given this reality, we need more paracletes in our lives! What if instead of making more rules and regulations, we were to teach our children how to be paracletes in action; children standing up for other children, making a tight circle around the victim, sharing the heat of the bully. Sometimes we have to stand up and be counted. This means that we must take risks, speak the truth, and be engaged even when it is inconvenient.

(Story)

So how can you be a paraclete during this time of transition at Trinity Church when your full-time rector steps down? At the vestry retreat yesterday, one of our goals that we aspire to as a congregation is radical hospitality. This means reaching out beyond our friends with a generous embrace or simply sharing a cup of coffee with someone who is sitting alone and wondering if anyone cares. It means being welcoming to the newcomer, the oldcomer, and those in need of a friendly visit. In summary, it means being a human paraclete who cares enough to walk along side of others in need.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus promised the Paraclete as a way to sustain his community after his departure. This is the Holy Spirit who is Jesus’ continued presence in the world. Throughout the history of the Christian Church, whenever the Holy Spirit becomes primary in guiding the lives of Christians, barriers of division and prejudices are torn down and new joy emerges. St. Francis of Assis is a symbol of one who allowed the Holy Spirit to take primacy in his life, thus tearing down old ways of doing church, leaving only love at the center.

We are all called to this paraclete kind of life. So perhaps this week, you can begin to think about those persons who have been the paracletes in your life. Who are they? And for whom are you the paraclete in someone else’s life? Maybe it is time to call up a few of our paracletes and let them know how important their support has been. Come Holy spirit, Come!