

The Comforter

Our scripture focus today is John 14: 25-27: “These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Comforter, 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.” John 14:25-27: These verses are some of Jesus’ last words to his disciples in the Upper Room, after the Last Supper... in a few hours, he would be betrayed by Judas as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, arrested by the soldiers, and put to death upon the cross.

Can you imagine how the disciples were feeling that night in the Upper Room, as they listened to Jesus’ teaching? Their distress must have been so great. For 3 years, they had followed Jesus, soaking up every word he spoke, amazed by his message of God’s love & forgiveness, the promise of God’s kingdom on earth. And they had seen the signs of the beginning of God’s kingdom, in Jesus’ miracles of healing the sick and feeding the multitudes. The disciples had turned to Jesus for guidance whenever they were uncertain, and for strength whenever they were discouraged. However, now they realized that Jesus would soon be arrested and crucified. Their sense of grief and loss was overwhelming. How could they continue on? What would they do? To whom could they turn for direction and support? They would be all alone.

We can relate with the feelings of the disciples. We, too, have known times of deep distress and discouragement... Times when we have felt overcome with grief & loss... Times when we struggled to figure out the path forward... Times when we felt so alone.

Jesus made a promise to the disciples that night in the Upper Room—and he makes a promise to each one of us. Jesus promised that God would send the Holy Spirit. They would not be alone—we would not be alone—the Holy Spirit would be with us.

What does that mean? To answer this question, we need to look at the specific Greek word that Jesus used for the Holy Spirit. The word is *parakletos*—or, as it is expressed in English—“The Paraclete.” This description of the Holy Spirit is so important that Jesus used it 5 times in his farewell address to his disciples in the Upper Room. For instance, in John 14: 16, we read: “I will pray the [heavenly] Father, and he will give you another Paraclete, to be with you forever.”

The Paraclete—this word has so many nuances of meaning, that there’s no single English word that we can use. It literally means “someone who is called to stand beside.” In Jesus’ time, a Paraclete could be an expert called in to give advice in some difficult situation, or Paraclete could be a lawyer who was called in to stand next to a defendant in court to plead their cause, or a Paraclete could be a soldier, called in to a company of warriors who were discouraged & dispirited, to restore their sense of motivation and their courage (see *The Gospel of John, Volume 2*, by William Barclay, p. 167). Jesus promised the disciples that they would not be alone after his death; God would give them the Holy Spirit, “The Paraclete.”

I like the understanding of “The Paraclete,” which comes from when Bible translators were trying to find the right word to use in the Karre language of equatorial Africa. One day the translators came across a group of porters going off into the bush carrying bundles on their heads. They noticed that in the line of porters there was always one who didn't carry anything,

and they assumed he was the boss, there to make sure that the others did their work. However, they discovered he wasn't the supervisor; he had a special job. He was there should anyone fall over with exhaustion; he would come and pick up the man's load and carry it for him. This porter was known in the Karre language as "the one who falls down beside us." Now the translators had the Karre word for paraclete. *[Ian Coffey, "Deep Impact," Keswick '99 (OM Publishing)]*

All these nuances of meaning are contained in Jesus' promise that God will give us the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, in our lives. The King James Version translates this word as "The Comforter." Through the Holy Spirit, God is with us to comfort us, when our hearts are weighed down with grief. The Holy Spirit does this by "bringing to our remembrance" the many promises of Jesus (John 14:26); for instance, we think of Jesus' words, "In my father's house are many rooms... and when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (John 14:2-3).

Another translation is "The Helper" [NIV alternate]. Perhaps this is the clearest of all. Jesus promised that God will be with us through the Holy Spirit to help us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves and with whatever difficulties we encounter.

This is what the disciples experienced on the first day of Pentecost. They received God's gift of the Holy Spirit, and through the Holy Spirit, they were given the power, guidance, and strength necessary to go out and teach others about the good news of Jesus Christ.

So how can we experience the gift of the Holy Spirit? First, by asking God to send his Holy Spirit into our lives. In Luke 11:13 (NLT), we read Jesus' words: "So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the

Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” The first thing is to ask God to pour out his presence, his Holy Spirit, in our lives.

Secondly, it’s important to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit... to listen, really listen... Usually, the Holy Spirit speaks in a still, small voice, not in a booming, commanding voice. Day by day, we need to spend time in prayer, listening for the direction and encouragement of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, it’s essential to reach out and allow the Holy Spirit to take us by the hand and lead us. I think of a story about a 4-year-old girl who went to church one day with her dad. They had never been to this church before—they were visiting for the first time. The dad discovered that he already knew lots of the church members who were neighbors & co-workers, so he lingered after the services, enjoying visiting with his friends. He and his daughter were the last ones to leave. As he went out the door, it closed quickly, before his daughter could slip out. And worse, the heavy door was locked from the outside. Fortunately, it had a mail slot in it, and he peeked in and said, “Melody, are you there?” There was a quiet voice, “Yes, Dad.” “Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’m right here with you. I know the door’s too heavy for you to open, but I’ve sent someone to go get the key. It’ll just be a few minutes.” With a quavering voice, the girl answered, “O... OK.” Then, she put her hand through the mail slot, and her father took her small hand in his, and he held it tight, and her sobbing stopped, and she was comforted, until at last the key was found and the door opened.

[From correspondence with Garry Friesen, author and academic dean of Multnomah College (10-26-02)]

God gives us the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Comforter. And all we need to do is to ask, and to listen, to reach out our hand. Amen.