

What Is Spirituality?

A sermon taken from John 14. 15-21, and preached on May 29, 2011 at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.

In the rhythm of a church year there are two broad movements, one toward Christmas Eve and one toward Easter. These seasons culminate in major festival type services, with stirring music and beautiful visuals. They correspond to two core doctrines of the faith---the incarnation at Christmas---the word became flesh and lived among us (John 1) and the resurrection at Easter---the Lord is risen; the Lord is risen indeed (John 20). Each includes a time of preparation, Advent on the way to Christmas and Lent on the way to Easter.

It would be easy to shape our spirituality around these two seasons, but we would be missing something essential to the faith, and that is upon us, the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the day in which the Holy Spirit is given to the church. It is also preceded by a season of fifty days, when the disciples were instructed to wait, watch and pray. It is the necessary fulfillment of the first two major movements in a given year: The Father sends the Son into the world, the Father raises the son from the dead, and, now, as the Son is leaving to return to the Father, the Spirit is given to us. In this way we see the outline of the nature of God as Trinity.

Most of us, if we are honest, have some confusion about the Holy Spirit. We may have the sense that God is creator, as we experience the natural world, although this is not obvious to those who do not see through the eyes of faith. We may have the conviction that God is Savior, our sins are forgiven. But God as spirit is another matter. There is also the confusing language of the "Holy Ghost", which does not help! As a child, my mind always went immediately to "Caspar, the Friendly Ghost", a cartoon. I was grasping for a way out of the confusion. It made sense, but it made no sense.

The Day of Pentecost is two weeks from today. In conversation with Adam Ward, he has designed a service where we will celebrate the Holy Spirit in scripture and in music---almost like a Lessons and Carols service for a part of our faith that is essential but less explored. And as I read the gospel for today I sensed that it would be a good preparation for the Day of Pentecost, and a meditation on a more elemental question: "*What is spirituality?*"

In John 13 Jesus had shared the Passover meal with the disciples, and washed their feet. He had experienced the betrayal of Judas and commanded them to love one another. He had given them a promise: **I go to prepare a place for you.** And he had given them guidance on the destination and the journey, when he said, "**I am the way, the truth and the life**".

Now he is getting ready to leave them, and so the parting words: *Continue in my teachings*, Jesus says. *Continue to love one another.* And then there is an additional promise: **The Father will give you an Advocate, to be with you**

forever. The New Testament was written in the Greek language, and I want to spend some time with this Greek word this morning, because it is so important. In verse 16 the Greek word is paraclete. The Father will give you a paraclete, to be with you forever.

This word is so rich that it has multiple meanings, and we need to grasp them all. Our English Bibles are translations of the Greek, and there are five common translations of this one Greek word: The King James translates the word as "*comforter*". The New Revised Standard Version translates the word as "*advocate*". And the New International Version has it as "*Counselor*". The Message renders the word paraclete as "*Friend*". And the new Common English Bible translates the word as "*Companion*".

Jesus is leaving the disciples, but the Paraclete—will be with them forever. The promise to the disciples, and to us, is that in times of *uncertainty, confusion, loss, and grief*, we will have the presence of a comforter, an advocate, a counselor, a friend, a companion. This is the Holy Spirit, a gift of God to us in our time of need, who not only stands alongside us but, Jesus says in verse 17, lives in us.

Comforter

When we think of **comfort** we may think of the *Peanuts* cartoon where Linus carries around his blanket, and that is a part of the meaning: we need someone who will be with us, like that blanket was with Linus. If you have ever had a child who became attached to some object, something that comforted them, you know how important this is...and you may know how miserable they could become, and you could become when they didn't have that comforter. Life could become pretty uncomfortable!

But the word comfort points to something more. The second part of that wonderful word, comfort, is the word "*fort*". A comforter is one who strengthens, who builds a fortress, who gives courage.

We need a comforter, a strong presence, an encourager, with an emphasis on courage. I have a friend who attended Greensboro College, a small United Methodist school. He grew up in a church in that city, was involved in Sunday School and the youth group, and was raised by a mother and father who were both leaders in that congregation. His name was Eddie.

Eddie was naturally quiet and shy growing up, not one to take the lead, never one to speak out. It was not who he was. As he moved through his high school years and into college he felt a call to full-time Christian ministry, but then he also had the sense that he was not cut out for it. He didn't think he was outgoing enough.

During his time at Greensboro College that school began a football program. Their team was named the Pride, and the mascot would be a lion. For some reason, Eddie became the first mascot. He would put on the lion costume and run around the field, inciting the fans to get into the game and cheer on the home team.

This was a bit unnatural for Eddie in the beginning, putting on the lion costume, getting into the action, but in time he grew more accustomed to it, and in fact it began to suit him. He became more confident, more assured. In time he became more like the Lion.

That is the Christian experience to which Jesus points us. The Holy Spirit becomes a part of who we are, giving us courage, comfort, confidence. The strong presence of the Paraclete sustains us in situations that we never thought we could make it through. **Blessed are those who mourn**, Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount, **for they will be comforted**

Advocate

The Holy Spirit as **advocate** is a sign that God is not only with us, God is for us. *The spirit intercedes with us, even when we don't know how to pray...*the Apostle Paul writes. An advocate is one who works on our behalf, seeking the best for us, steering us from danger, guiding us to safety. And that is the work of the Spirit. **If God is for us**, Paul asks, **who can be against us?**

Sometimes it helps to know that someone is on our side! I love watching ACC basketball games and Braves baseball games and Panthers football games. And I have to admit: I am not bi-partisan. I am not objective. I am for my team. I want them to win!

Jesus says **the Father will give you another Advocate**. Interesting word there: another, meaning, most scholars insist, that Jesus also is their advocate. Meaning, the Spirit is pulling for us, cheering for us, encouraging us. **If God is for us**, Paul asked in Romans 8, **who can be against us?**

What a wonderful concept. God is not some detached, objective observer. God is an advocate, who will be with us forever, through the Holy Spirit.

Counselor

Paraclete is also translated **counselor**. For me, this points to the still, small voice of God, to the wisdom of God that is there, that will guide us toward the truth, if we will listen, to the convicting power of conscience, to the peace that comes when we have settled on the correct decision and begun to walk in the right path.

I have known some wonderful counselors over the years. Many of them are men and women of deep Christian faith. The best counselors are people who listen, and because they are such great listeners they force us to say things that express the depths of our hearts. And when we have said these things---gotten them out before another person, there is often a clarity and even a freedom. Sometimes we are in bondage to powers that should have no control over us. And sometimes we make assumptions about life that aren't necessarily helpful to us.

The Holy Spirit as counselor guides us into the truth that God sees for us, and about us.

Friend

The paraclete is also a **friend**. To me this is the great-underrated dimension of Christianity: the importance of friendship. Friends are people who support us and who hold us accountable, who have seen us at our best and at our worst, who are there for us before we even have to call them. Sometimes they live near us, sometimes a great distance away, and yet, when we need them, they are there.

The Holy Spirit is the presence of God in just this way: supportive when we need it---hang in there!, and accountable when we need that too---you're really about to mess up! God can seem distant, and yet God can seem near. In the next chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus says something that is truly remarkable:

You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends. (John 15. 14-15)

Companion

A last interpretation of the word *paraclete*: Companion. The literal origin of the word companion was one "one who eats bread with us". The Spanish word for bread is pan; think of the Panera Bread Restaurants! There is something magical and mysterious about sharing a meal with a friend, it is often over a meal that barriers break down, that we come to know each other. Think of Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, how he was a stranger to them until the end of the day when he took the bread, broke it, gave thanks and they ate it. It is something of a joke that Methodists like to get together and eat, but there are origins of that in the relation of Jesus with his disciples, and, even farther back, in the Passover meal.

Jesus is about to leave the disciples, but he is making them aware of a wonderful gift, the paraclete: comforter, advocate, counselor, friend, companion. **I will not leave you comfortless**, he says to them. That was the great promise of Jesus to his disciples, and to us. **I will not leave you orphaned, comfortless, desolate.**

"When you ask me for anything in my name", Jesus says to the disciples, *"I will do it"* (John 14. 14, CEB). The elemental prayer---for the provision of our needs, for daily bread, our deepest human desiring for relationship and life itself---is answered in the promise of the paraclete, the Companion, the One who stands alongside us, with us and for us, the One who is our daily bread, who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Source: Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According To John, Volume II*.