

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
June 5, 2011

Advocate of Encouragement
John 14:15-21

In John's Gospel, one of the names used in the NRSV for the Holy Spirit is the Advocate. Have you ever thought about the fact that an advocate is essentially a lawyer? Anna Carter Florence notes: “To my mind, this is not exactly a comforting thought. Friends do not tell friends to get a good lawyer unless there is something to really worry about. So I am wondering why Jesus thinks there is cause for concern. Why would Christians need a lawyer, an Advocate with a capital "A," by their sides at all times?”¹

One possible answer is that the Christian life is inherently dangerous, and we need someone who can defend us, who can plead our cause better than we can do it ourselves before both God and humans. The Advocate does indeed intercede for us “with sighs too deep for words” before a God who, as C.S. Lewis put it, is good, but not safe. But Carter Florence also believes that the Advocate also pleads God’s cause. God’s Advocate speaks on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, and the lonely. God’s lawyer helps

¹ Anna Carter Florence, GoodPreacher.com, May 25, 2011.

wake us up to the miseries of violence and instills in us an aching hunger for justice and peace.

If you've been coming to this church for awhile, you've heard me talk about the Greek word for "Holy Spirit" or "The Advocate." The actual Greek word that's used here in John's Gospel is made up of two parts: first, *para*, which means alongside, and *kaleo*, which means to call or to come. Literally, then, the Holy Spirit, who is also known as the *Paraclete*, is the one who is called to one's side, the one who comes alongside of us. That's why the *Paraclete* is known as the Advocate or the Comforter. It's also the biblical definition of encouragement. Encouragement is coming alongside someone for their good. The Spirit comes alongside of us when we're faced with life's challenges and helps us to get through those times.

Now, remember, the biblical concept of encouragement is coming alongside someone for their good. There are times when people come alongside you for bad reasons who try to take advantage of you. A friend of mine once told me that in Rome, he was advised to always take the express bus, because the local bus was usually full of pickpockets. A pickpocket is someone who definitely comes alongside you, but not for your good.

Encouragement, on the other hand, is always a positive thing. It's coming alongside someone for their good. Notice, however, that to be

encouraged doesn't necessarily mean that an encourager always agrees with us – it doesn't mean being a “Yes Man”. Sometimes, it's more encouraging to disagree with a position, or to challenge someone. It's how parents often encourage their children. However, the encourager is someone who stays with you through thick and thin, who doesn't write you off.

Also, notice that to be encouraged doesn't mean being carried – it means to come alongside of someone. Have you ever had that kind of experience in life? I remember in high school running track. Whenever I trained by myself, I never ran as fast as when I trained with my teammates. They came alongside of me and helped me to run faster, just as I also encouraged them. We didn't carry one another, but our presence as teammates helped all of us run faster.

It's important that the Holy Spirit acts as our Advocate, our Comforter, because being a Christian and a member of the church will not raise us above the problems of life. Life is often tough, even, and sometimes especially, for Christians. Christians are not exempt from getting injured in accidents, or from getting sick and having to go to the hospital, or from being victims of crime.

And in some countries, Christians are still persecuted for their faith. Some of you are aware of this, but Seattle Presbytery has been instrumental

in establishing the Presbyterian Church in Vietnam. The Vietnamese government makes life difficult for Christians, but the church is rapidly growing. A number of years ago, we had the privilege of a visit from our principal contact in Vietnam. He shared with us the four lessons they teach new believers in Vietnam: God the Father, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, and Persecution – they need to prepare themselves, because in Vietnam, once they confess their faith, they *will* be persecuted. New Christians who are taught this truth from the beginning are already prepared when the government comes for them.

How are the Vietnamese Christians able to endure the persecution? They, like all Christians, have the advantage of having the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, who comes alongside of us when we face challenges. The Spirit encourages us and helps us to deal with life's problems. This is better than pretending we'll be lifted up above life's problems because the Spirit works in the real world and helps us to face real problems. Our faith works in less than ideal conditions. We don't have to retreat from life's problems; we have the Holy Spirit who comes alongside of us and encourages us in the midst of life's turmoil.

It was the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, who came alongside the disciples on Pentecost and enabled them to add 3000 members in a single day! And it

is the very same Spirit who continues to come alongside of us today, comforting, encouraging, and sustaining the people of God.

Sometimes, God's encouragement is offered to us in human form – through brothers and sisters in Christ who themselves come alongside of us and share the wisdom of their experience with us. The point is that we are not alone. God puts us in community to encourage one another, so that we can be called alongside one another in times of need.

My preaching professor (Tom Long) tells the story of the advocacy, empowerment, and encouragement of a couple of young Christians by their distinguished father, infusing them with the power of God in the face of government-supported racist evil: The late Howard Thurman, who was dean of the chapel at Boston University, the first African American professor at that institution, and a mentor and counselor to the leaders of the civil rights movement, attributed much of his own sense of dignity and vocation to his grandmother, a former slave, who repeated to her young grandson a message she had heard in worship. Over and over she told him, “You are somebody!” She was bearing witness to her grandson of a truth she heard in church.

Once when traveling through the South in the 1950's, Thurman and his family stopped to rest for a few moments at a park along the highway.

His daughters immediately spotted a swingset on a playground in the park and pulled their father toward it to swing. They couldn't read the sign that warned that this playground was for "white only by state law." Sadly but patiently, Thurman told his little girls that they could not play there and explained why. This was their first real encounter with the cruelty of racism, and they instantly burst into tears. So, much as his grandmother had done when he was a child, Thurman gathered his children into a warm embrace and said to them, "Listen, you little girls are somebody. In fact, you are so important and so valuable to God and so powerful that it takes the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the whole state police force to keep you little girls off those swings!" (Testimony, Long, p. 64.) That's Advocacy!
That's Encouragement!

When we face such deep, troubling issues like racism, the good news is that we're not left to ourselves, because the *Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit, comes alongside of us. The good news is our faith works in less than ideal conditions. The good news is we have the Holy Spirit who encourages us in the midst of life's turmoil when we allow him to, and this same Spirit can work through other people if we hang in there with the community of faith. So no matter how dark things appear, hold on to Jesus' words, for we are

promised Jesus' peace and the encouragement of the *Paraclete*, our
Advocate. Amen.