

“The Advocate”

Most of you have heard of a child being adopted. When you first think of this, you probably think of a baby being adopted by a couple who has been unable to have children. But adoption is much broader than this. I did adoptions when I was a practicing attorney. Most of them involved children who were in foster care with the Department of Social services. These children came from homes where they had been abused or neglected. They often had spent several years in foster homes. Some foster homes were good; some were not. They were looking for stability in their lives.

My experience with these situations reminds me of a story I read this past week in the magazine *Christian Century*. Andre E. Johnson, associate professor of rhetoric and media studies at the University of Memphis, relates a story he saw on the nightly news which highlighted children seeking adoption. One child said that he would like to have a permanent home. Having been in the foster care system practically all his life, he knew that any foster family’s relationship could end at any time. He wanted to be with a family to feel as if he was part of something. He was around people all the time, but he was lonely---and he was tired of it.

We want the same things this boy did. We want to be part of something. We want to be in relationship with people we know will be there for us. We want to be around people who love us.

Like the little boy, we don't want to be lonely. We want to be loved, cared for, supported, uplifted, embraced, and strengthened. No one wants to be lonely.

In his Farewell Discourse, Jesus tells his disciples that he must leave and go prepare a place for them. He knows this will not set well with them. He knows they will be hurt and will wrestle with feeling alone. They will have to battle bouts of feeling alone and depressed. This isn't going to be easy for them.

So Jesus gives them a promise. He has asked God to leave them with an Advocate---another person to stand up and speak on their behalf. This will be another person to care for them and watch out for them. This will be another person to move mountains and obstacles out of their way.

The Greek word for Advocate is *parakletos*. We can also say Paraclete. This word has a number of meanings that include "to exhort and encourage," "to comfort and console," "to call upon for help," and the one who appeals on one's behalf. Paraclete is not simply another name for the Holy Spirit but is a particular way of describing the functions of the Spirit, functions held in common with Jesus. What the Paraclete does is not new but is a continuation of the work of Jesus.

As the Spirit of truth, the Paraclete shares in the work of Jesus, because Jesus is the truth. The work of the Paraclete is to keep the truth of Jesus present in the world after Jesus's departure. The Paraclete's presence makes the events of the resurrection available beyond their limited moment in time. It is through the Paraclete that the fulfillment of Jesus's hour becomes an experience for all believers, not just for those of the first generation.

We must be reminded that the Spirit is working. And when the Spirit is working, God will have you doing things that you thought you would never do--- worshipping in places you never thought you would worship in, saying things you never thought you would say, going places you though you would never go.

This is a time we need the confidence of the Spirit, the Paraclete. With the limitation on how much we can go out and the suspension of our social activities, we may feel alone. We may be feeling depressed. We may believe we have lost power. If we did not already realize it, we have learned the importance of human relationships. Studies on the human brain at MIT have revealed that contact with other human beings is as important as food for human survival.

The passage today reminds us that we are not alone. The Spirit is with us. The Spirit is moving us, abiding in us. We are being fed and guided by the Spirit and we are not alone.

The Paraclete ensures that the revelation of God in the incarnation of Jesus does not end with Jesus' death and resurrection. We know God through Jesus' incarnation and work on earth. We continue to know God through the work of the Paraclete. Our relationship with Jesus does not depend on Jesus' physical presence but on the presence of the love of God in the life of the community. The believing community in any generation will enter into relationship with Jesus only when it takes on and lives out the love of the incarnation. The Paraclete aids us in doing this.

Jesus' words consistently point to the communal nature of union with God and Jesus into the communal nature of union and relationship with him after the end of his earthly ministry. Community is critical. It is important to realize that Jesus does not promise the Paraclete to individuals but to a community who lives in love. God, Jesus, and the Paraclete are inseparably interconnected with one another. We are interconnected with each other.

Jesus' disciples, both during his time, and today, can continue to love Jesus by doing his works and by keeping his commandments. Jesus tells us that his two greatest commandments are to love thy neighbor as thyself and to love the Lord thy God by keeping his commandments. The Paraclete aids us in keeping these commandments.

This is a time when we clearly need to love thy neighbor as thyself. There are many in need of help. People are sick. People have lost jobs. People need others to look after them. The good news is that the Spirit has been at work. There are stories of people helping out others. We know in this community of an anonymous donor who has provided meals for seniors. Some \$10,000 has been given to BIMA, our local food bank, by an insurance company and a local bank. I know that you have been checking on each other to make sure everyone has what they need and to provide assurance through telephone calls.

There are also stories of the pandemic creating new social bonding. In subdivisions throughout the years, neighbors might know each other's names but didn't necessarily get to know each other. There are now firsthand accounts of neighbors going outside, pulling up lawn chairs and visiting with each other. Ellisa and I have had much more interaction with a young lady who lives next to us. She has a three year old son who comes over and visits with us on our outside deck. She walks over to get him and talks with us. We also watch as she works with her beehive in her backyard. This new normal has given us an opportunity to get to know them better.

The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, helps give us the community we need with God, with each other. Because we allow the Spirit to work, loneliness and despair

disappear. Relationships are renewed and hearts become healthy. When we allow the Spirit to work, assurance abounds. Faith is formulated and love is lifted.

We can sing with the psalmist in Psalm 66, “but truly God has listened, he has given heed to my prayer. Blessed be God because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.” God works through us and with us. We will never be alone, because we will be with Jesus, and Jesus will be with us. Like the adoptive child, through the Holy Spirit we have a family that gives us the stability and love we need.