

SERMON Pastor Cris

I had an epiphany this week. I know it's not the right season for that, and I'm not sure it's actually a new thought for me, maybe I was just reminded of it. But nevertheless, as I explored this Gospel reading, I had, what feels like, a new understanding of what Jesus was saying.

But first a reminder of where we are: last week we jumped back in the timeline to the Last Supper. Jesus is in the middle of this long farewell discourse as he tries to get the disciples ready for what is to come: the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension – the time when they will be doing God's work without Jesus standing right there with them.

We're picking up right where we left off last week when he told them that he was "the way, the truth, and the life." He begins this week's portion of his instructions and encouragement by suggesting they show their love for Jesus – who is in fact also the Father – by keeping his commandments.

Whenever those two concepts – God's love and God's commandments – are connected, it's easy to hear that God's love is conditional. But remember that Jesus has just given the disciples a filter with which to interpret the law. This is the Last Supper in John, which means the "commandment" he has just given them is to love one another, to do what Jesus has done – exemplified in the washing of their feet.

Then we get a bunch of sentences that sound a bit like "word salad" as Jesus once again connects them to himself and to the Father who has sent him. We can get quickly lost in the prepositions and repetition, but the point is relatively clear: when we live in God's love, we do what God commands, and that's how we recognize when God abides with us.

For this Gospel, that sense of God's abiding presence is the very definition of salvation. It is the central message of all that Jesus said and did. It is the point of his ministry, of his death, and of his resurrection – to build an everlasting, deep abiding connection between God and God's people...us. And it starts with God loving and living in us.

When Jesus ascended back to the Father – and I'm not going to dig into that complicated concept or we'll be here all day – when Jesus left this earth after the resurrection, he asked for/sent/breathed into life another Advocate...with a capital "A". Which brings me to my epiphany of this week.

Our translation referred to an “Advocate”, but it is perhaps one of the richest words in all of scripture in its depth of meaning. You can tell it’s a complicated word to translate by just looking at different published Bibles to see what word they use. Our translation is advocate. Other words and phrases that are used to try to understand this word include “helper, comforter, encourager, counselor.” Sometimes they’re capitalized, sometimes they’re not. In one translation I found, the word is not translated as a noun, but the whole sentence is written to be an action of the father to comfort.

All of it is an attempt to capture what was meant by the original Greek word, “paraclete.” It’s often suggested we should just keep that word and it’s in English dictionaries. It literally means “called to one’s side.” In Greek – “para” is side, “clete” is a form of the word “to call.”

I was particularly struck by the way this word evolved in non-English contexts. One Lexicon talks about it being “expressed idiomatically, for example, ‘the one who mothers us’ or, as in one language in Central Africa, ‘the one who falls down beside us,’ that is to say, an individual who upon finding a person collapsed along the road, kneels down beside the victim, cares for his needs, and carries him to safety.” (Louw & Nida) Does that image sound familiar?

I looked at my “First Nations Version” of the New Testament – a translation grounded in Native American traditions – which renders this verse, “I will ask the Father to send one who will always walk beside you and guide you *on the good road.*”

All of these words and phrases are trying to capture what happens when God comes to us and walks alongside us. In this setting, that’s the work of the Holy Spirit as Jesus defines it for the disciples – to, literally, come to our side.

That was the beginning of my epiphany. The follow-up question to understanding “paraclete” as the one who comes alongside us is: to do what?

Our translation of “advocate” has an underlying legal connotation. And I think we’ve often interpreted that to mean that the Holy Spirit is going to advocate for us to the judge – the judge being that almighty God sitting on a throne ready to pass judgment.

But God has already passed judgment and sent the Son – Jesus – to absolve us of our sins. That’s the whole point of this Gospel. God abides in us so that we are loved, so that we can follow the commandments. **And that’s what we need the Holy Spirit for.** What if the judge we need the advocate for isn’t God, but the forces of this world that don’t care about God’s love?

We need the Holy Spirit to come along side us to guide us as we walk the road in front of us and follow the way that Jesus has gone. Not so that we can find our way to God, but so that we can find our way through the...stuff of this world. Once again, I am reminded that the work in front of me – the work of discipleship – is not about proving myself to a God who already loves me, it's about doing what Jesus has done for those I encounter.

If the Spirit has come alongside us, then we should be coming alongside those who we encounter. The truth we bring to the world is not a proclamation of God's damnation or a requirement to "turn or burn." The truth we bring is this never-ending presence that walks alongside of us and carries us from death to life, from hunger to fullness, from brokenness to wholeness, from scarcity to abundance.

We aren't called to proclaim God's judgment; we're called to walk alongside those who have been judged unworthy by **this world**, and remind them that God loves them. That takes a tremendous amount of humility. That takes an active openness to the truth as others experience it, not just the truth that we've tried to claim as being the **only** way that God is at work. That takes a willingness to walk down paths we haven't taken before, without confidently knowing where they end.

Because we trust that whatever that path is, it doesn't take us away from God. It can't, because **God is walking right beside us**. And that is good news. God, the paraclete, is right here beside us. Thanks be to God. Amen.