

“The Paraclete”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
May 22, 2022

Friends in Christ....

Today is the sixth Sunday of Easter which means that we are just two weeks away from Pentecost, considered to be the birth of the Christian church with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit in our Gospel text from John. Our texts from the book of Acts today and in recent weeks have the Holy Spirit being very active.

The Greek word *paraclete* is used for the Holy Spirit, and it has many possibilities. While the literal meaning of the related verb (*parakaleo*) means "to call to one's side" -- usually asking the other for help -- the noun took on a legal meaning as "helper in court". Thus, we have translations like "counselor," "advocate," or "one who speaks for another" as well as the (too) general translation of "helper". In the CEB, the word is translated as Advocate.

Besides, keeping the word untranslated lends itself to some fun puns. For example: The Paraclete is not a little yellow bird. Paracletes are not those things on the bottom of football and baseball shoes.

This word occurs five times in the NT. It is used in 1 John 2:1 to refer to Jesus; and four times in John's Farewell Discourse (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

Our Acts reading continues to trace the progress of the Gospel to the ends of the earth as it comes as a part of Paul’s second missionary journey. It tells how the Gospel got to Europe. This journey is an example of how God closed and opened doors for these early missionaries as God still does today with us.

To understand the history being told here, we must back up to Acts 15:36. At the Jerusalem Conference, the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, had decided what to do with the question of Gentile inclusion in the church. “Sometime later, Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us go back and visit the brothers in the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.’” That’s how the Second Missionary Journey began, as a pastoral visit to fledgling churches. No new missionary ventures were planned, just a friendly check back. But God had other ideas, much bigger ideas. God stopped Paul several times in order to get him and his little band to Macedonia (which is north of Greece), where we pick up today’s text from Acts 16:9-15:

Acts 16:9-15

⁹A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” ¹⁰Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Lydia’s Conversion

¹¹We sailed from Troas straight for Samothrace and came to Neapolis the following day.

¹²From there we went to Philippi, a city of Macedonia’s first district and a Roman colony.

We stayed in that city several days. ¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the riverbank, where we thought there might be a place for prayer. We sat down and began to talk with the women who had gathered. ¹⁴ One of those women was Lydia, a Gentile God-worshipper from the city of Thyatira, a dealer in purple cloth. As she listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul's message. ¹⁵ Once she and her household were baptized, she urged, "Now that you have decided that I am a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house." And she persuaded us.

Sure enough, on their first night in Troas, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia asking them to "come over... and help us." Immediately, Paul's little group of missionaries got ready for their trip to Europe. When the little band arrived in Macedonia, Paul made two strategic decisions. First, they immediately moved to Philippi, because it "was a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia." Paul picked an important city sitting on the famous Egnatian Way that linked east and west. This crossroads town was full of retired Roman soldiers, who were free to travel the Empire. It was a perfect launching point for the mission to Europe.

His second strategic choice was on the Sabbath when he went outside the city gate to the bank of the river, where he found a group of women praying. The Macedonian call had come by way of a man, and it was not considered appropriate to socialize with woman, but Paul and his friends immediately sat down and began to talk with these women about Jesus. We know he talked about Jesus, because in a very short time one of them has become "a believer in the Lord."

Her story is not about Paul's eloquent presentation of the Gospel; it is about the intervention of the Lord Jesus. Lydia was not a Jew; her name is Greek. She had immigrated from her home in Thyatira, which is, ironically, in the region of Asia where Paul had just been prohibited from preaching. Somewhere along the line, she had encountered the Jewish faith and had become "a worshiper of God," a proselyte to the Jewish faith. An independent businesswoman, she apparently had some wealth, as she owned a home and had "a household," which may have included relatives, children, servants, and assorted friends.

Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth. Purple was the most precious of ancient dyes. A total of 250,000 mollusks were required to make one ounce of the dye, which partly accounts for its great price. Purple was the color of royal robes as well as garments of the wealthy.

The key part of her story is told in few words. "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." Even as the work of God led to the first non-Jewish convert in Judea (Cornelius), so the work of God led to the first non-Jewish convert in Europe, and she was a woman. And just like that, there was a toehold for the Gospel in Europe, in the home of a Gentile woman. The combination of shrewd strategizing, bold preaching by Paul, the Spirit's direction and the Lord's intervention has moved the church into new, fertile ground for the Gospel.

Unmistakably for Luke, this is the way upon which God plans the church to walk. We ought to follow God's call to reach across cultural and ethnic boundaries and learn to find

opportunities to do God's work in unexpected places. In Acts, the road is particularly marked by the wide range of people that the Paraclete reaches out to: Macedonian, Philippian, Thyatirian, Jewish, and Roman alike. God includes all, men and women alike.

In the Easter season we tend to read the farewell discourses, with their coming of the Paraclete. For the evangelist, they are discourses of the earthly Jesus, placed in the context of the Last Supper. The discourses were punctuated by the anxious questions of his disciples about his impending departure. They look through and beyond the death of Jesus to his glorification, which releases the gift of the Spirit. The function of the Spirit, Jesus says, is to teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you. From John 14:23-29:

John 14:23-29

²³ Jesus answered, "Whoever loves me will keep my word. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. The word that you hear is not mine. It is the word of the Father who sent me.

²⁵ "I have spoken these things to you while I am with you. ²⁶ The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you.

²⁷ "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Do not be troubled or afraid. ²⁸ You have heard me tell you, 'I am going away and returning to you.' If you loved me, you would be happy that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than me. ²⁹ I have told you before it happens so that when it happens you will believe.

May God bless our hearing of his Holy Word. Amen.

It is through the Holy Spirit, the Advocate or Paraclete that Jesus will continue to be present with his disciples. Jesus says that the Father will send the Holy Spirit to be alongside his disciples, to teach them and remind them of all that Jesus has said to them. Because Jesus said to them that he will be present with them through the Holy Spirit, his disciples need not be anxious. ²⁷ "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I give to you not as the world gives. Do not be troubled or afraid."

The Holy Spirit is still at work in our lives. So often we do not understand what God is up to. We do not understand how certain events could have any meaning or result in anything good. It is only with time and prayer and the aid of the Holy Spirit that we begin to see how God might be working for good even in the midst of terrible and confusing events. In other words, it is our hindsight that we see the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

This is not to say that everything that happens is God's will, for that would be to deny the reality of evil. The crucifixion of Jesus was clearly an act of human evil. But God is able to bring good even out of the worst evil. John's Gospel sees the death of Jesus in the light of the resurrection, in the light of God's triumph over evil and death. The incarnation, the ministry, the

death and resurrection of Jesus, the sending of the Spirit — all of these events together demonstrate the depth of God's love for the world.

Peace is a gift of God. It would be fantastic if we truly had world peace where everybody in the world got along. But that has never happened. There has always been wars and rumors of wars. Jesus is referring to a different type of peace, of one's-self. We can put the Advocate to work in our lives giving us inner peace. The Advocate or Spirit will serve as our teacher. Having a teacher who makes a difference in our lives is an important thing. Think about how many teachers that have made positive impacts in a young person's life, and that includes Sunday school and Bible school teachers. What we do for others can make all the difference in another person's life.

Throughout the farewell discourse, Jesus makes it clear that followers love him by serving others. Although we might distinguish between loving Jesus and keeping his word, and imagine that we can do one but not the other. Jesus does not recognize that distinction. The clause in John 14:23: "Whoever loves me will keep my word." Love for Jesus simply is love in action.

Whether the disciples, and that includes us, live that kind of love, they and we will need the constant presence of God in our lives.

Jesus was attempting to comfort his disciples because he was moving on, not just to different town, but he is about to move away from the world and into the Father's arms. What he was telling them was a good thing.

Jesus talked a lot about peace, yet all heck was about to break loose with his arrest, death, and resurrection. We need to be reminded of what Jesus promised would sustain his disciples in his absence, especially in those moments when they would be on their own. Throughout this discourse Jesus repeatedly tells his disciples that he is going away. It is going to be a new day, a graduation of sorts for them.

Because they love him, the disciples should rejoice that Jesus was going to the Father. As he left, he promised his disciples that as they too graduate into a future that has not yet been charted, they will not be left alone. The Paraclete is on the way. And the Paraclete is here today for each one of us. Trust in the Paraclete.

Thanks be to God. Amen.