

Bring Many Names

May 14, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: John 14: 15-21

Allow me to set just a bit of context before I share our reading for today. We are about to hear an early part of Jesus's so-called "Farewell Discourse" in John. It spans chapters 14 through 17 and follows John's account of the foot washing before Jesus's arrest and crucifixion. Unlike the other gospels, John's gospel doesn't record the full story of the last supper but there is, just after the foot-washing scene, a brief reference to Jesus dipping and passing bread to Judas. So, as we take in these words, imagine Jesus sitting around a table in a home, sharing a poignant, tender time, a last meal, and some last teaching with his closest friends. In the verses immediately prior, he's told them he will be leaving them, and that he's going to prepare a spacious place for them. We pick up in Chapter 14: 15 reading from the Inclusive Language Bible translation:

"If you love me and obey the command I give you, 16 I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Paraclete, a helper, to be with you always— 17 the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you. 18 I won't leave you orphaned; I will come back to you. 19 A little while now and the world will see me no more; but you'll see me; because I live, and you will live as well. 20 On that day you'll know that I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you. 21 Those who obey the commandments are the ones who love me, and those who love me will be loved by God. I, too, will love them and will reveal myself to them."

Will you pray with me again please: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you O God our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen."

So, I wonder how that reading lands for you, especially given my short preface that this is part of Jesus's last words to his friends. There's a helpful and tender tone of care, here, and as we'll see, Jesus gives his disciples and us a wide berth for understanding an ongoing relationship with God beyond his life and teaching. To be honest, I'm reluctant to invite us too deeply into the space of sorrow and confusion that his disciples may have felt in their hearing. After all, it's not Holy Week! It's Mother's Day. It's another gorgeous day outside! I don't plan to bring everyone down here with a sermon about sad goodbyes! But let's face it, for some, depending on the vast array of relationships we have with our mothers or mother figures in our lives, even with Mother Nature these days, Mother's Day can be complicated and challenging. A tender tone from Jesus, a wide berth for locating ourselves in a relationship, may be just the thing. For some, Mother's Day may well call to mind some farewell discourses we ourselves experienced, or longed for, or our facing now. Besides, the fact that this conversation is happening as if at a kind of family meal, with all its inherent complexity, therein may lie some helpful guidance, too! Before we turn to what Jesus says, I wonder: how many of you have meals planned for later, maybe with family whether biological or chosen, or if not maybe a long-distance Zoom-calls with your sibs, parents, kids, or a go-to Mother's Day friend? Nancy and I are headed to the Cape later today to take my mom out to dinner and show her some love. She's probably watching now, so since I can...Hi mom! Thank you for being a wonderful mother! Pro-tip: I read an article this week in the Times saying apparently, according to moms, one of the best things you can do on Mother's Day

is tell them they were right about something you once argued about! For better and sometimes for worse, my mom already knows this. But let me say it anyway, for all to hear: Mom you were right (about many things at least)! Details at 5!

Ok. Back to our passage! Again, what struck you most in your hearing? And what do we think Jesus most wanted them and us to know here? He's clearly underscoring that he won't be with them forever, and that another one like him is coming, the Spirit, in whom our love and his love and God's love abides! What may have stood out the most was that Greek word: Paraclete! Though it's translated in the version read as Helper, it can mean several things, and therein lies that wide berth of understanding. The plurality of possible meanings captures a wide range of ways to consider our connection with God, a variety of entry or access points.

In fact, Paraclete is most commonly translated as "Advocate" or "Counselor." Helper, yes, but the term was actually used for one who helped out in a law court. Mediator or legal assistant are other translations, and another is "broker"! I hope our dearly departed former Treasurer and Finance guy par excellence Brian James is listening and getting a good chuckle somewhere! The Lord is my Shepherd, yes, but the Spirit is my Broker! Or, even the Spirit is my lawyer!

This sounds funny but check out how the writer Steve Garnas Holmes offers a deeper meaning for these legal images and a sense of why Jesus may have chosen this word to introduce the Holy Spirit. He writes:

"We're familiar with the image of God as our Judge (or if we're honest, maybe even prosecutor), but that's not how Jesus sees it. The Holy Spirit is your Advocate— paraclete in Greek, a person who accompanies you in a legal trial. God is not your judge: God is your defense attorney.

God defends you against all society's judgments: whether you're successful, good-looking, happy— you know, normal. And God defends you against all your own judgments: whether you're good enough, lovable, forgivable— you know, worthy.

God advocates for you. God is on your side, not against you. God's judgment is always in your favor, not a verdict, but a promise: "I favor you, now and always."

All those charges against you— not good enough, all that— God has dismissed as spurious allegations. Are you still hanging onto them?

God holds our souls in the light of love and says gently,
“I rest my case.”

God as Advocate, as Counselor, as consistent trust-worthy Representation of how God sees us, day in and day out! This is strong stuff! And I love how the Inclusive language translation doesn't assume male language for this. It lets me imagine the Spirit as some heavenly RBG-like figure, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in her pre-SCOTUS prime, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a fierce defense attorney, a defender of just mercy and truth.

I don't know about you but when it comes to the amount of judgment I sometimes receive and project, let alone the self-recrimination I experience in a given day, the prospect of lawyering up and having some pro-bono Holy Spirit Counsel on retainer - what a relief not to have to litigate it all in my own head and heart! Think about how frequently we judge ourselves and others or think that we are being judged by God, our boss, our colleagues, mothers, fathers, partners, kids or friends. What a gift to have all the spurious allegations dropped! Imagine how much more freely we could live and love if all those proverbial cases could somehow be settled, our souls exonerated in the Spirit's deep embrace all for the sake of sharing God's love without fear! And yes, you can bet imagine God in this way, as an Advocate, extends to and strengthens calls for our own advocacy in the world, whether in criminal justice reform and prison abolition work, or elsewhere.

For today, for some of us, this bold image of the Spirit as our Advocate may be just what we need, even at some of our family dinner tables!

But remember the wide berth...there's another definition of Paraclete here, equally legit and compelling, yet softer! Paraclete can also mean Comforter, Helper, Succorer, or One who consoles.

Using Garnas Holmes's poetry as a model, a companion version might go like this:

We're familiar with the image of God as a Parent say,
(if we're honest, that image can sometimes be tricky)
It's not always how Jesus sees it.
But what if God is your Comforter,
one who offers tender kindness,
a gentle touch, a listening ear,
maybe home-baked goods on a hard day,
someone who covers you with warmth and safety.

This Spirit is with you, always at your side,
Ready to touch your cheek or wash your feet,
to ask what you need most,
to say just the right thing or nothing at all.

This Spirit is in you, too, like your breath,
in the movement of your chest,
In the wetness of that tear,
In the stretch of your back when you stand tall,
In the strength of your voice when you speak up!

You are inside of, and part of
this comfort, this reassuring strength, this love, always,
When you love, we love, together,
That love only expands and grows
and it never loses its own!

If God as your defense attorney our Counselor isn't a fit for where you are now, maybe try this one instead! God as Comforter, or Consoler - the Spirit as an everlasting source of solace and succor to soften the edges and hold with you whatever weight or sorrow.

Jesus says: The Spirit is coming! On our liturgical calendar, it will be here in two weeks at Pentecost, yet she is already and always with us - as Advocate, as Counselor, as Caregiver, as Comforter (take your pick)! This is what Jesus chooses to say in that tender moment, and with it a last reminder, a command really, to love one another! He's telling us, you've got everything you need, to face whatever challenges! Another Paraclete (as in one just like me) who will give you whatever resources, the strong defense and protection, the strength and tenderness, hope and love you need. She's on your side! She's with you! She's in you! She loves you. You aren't alone!

I wonder if we can set aside our own doubts and defenses or whatever might be holding us back from letting this good news sink in and give Jesus the benefit here and trust him! Can we go ahead right now and tell him we know he's right, like we might say to the moms who tried to teach us by their own words and deeds! Some of us may need this knowledge of the Spirit's abiding advocacy or comfort or consolation or all three today especially.

If we are being honest, Mother's Day invites us to sit with what one writer, Amy Young, has called "A Wide Spectrum of Motherhood!" understanding that the very idea of mothering conjures a vast range of emotions and experiences- love, and longing and loss, grief and trauma, excitement and exhaustion, excruciating pain and exhilarating joy.

As we sang at the start of our service, bring many names, indeed! Many names for God, yes.- Mother/Father/Sibling/Friend/Advocate/Counselor/Comforter/Consoler. Many ways of being in relationship. Many ways of honoring our experiences today and every day.

Thanks be to God for the sweet voice of Jesus, for tender conversations over family meals, for wide tables, wide berths, wide spectrums and many ways to know the Spirit's ever-expanding embrace of us all. Amen.