

# Comforter, Advocate, Teacher

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*Pentecost (C)  
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*Text: John 14:8-17,25-27*

This has been a busy week in our household. Thursday night was my daughter's end-of-year band concert. Friday morning was my son's end-of-year chorus concert. And Saturday brought two ballet performances for both of them with the production of "Alice in Wonderland" that they have been learning and rehearsing since February. Their grandparents and parents have been cheering them on, but I've been really struck by their teachers, and the way that these folks not only manage the barely controlled chaos they've taken on, but also support and encourage and love these kids.

The band teacher, for example, took time during the performance to recognize the kids who had taken a risk and volunteered for a solo, or written a part for themselves. She encouraged the kids to ask for help, if they needed to check the tune of their instrument—and they did. She talked about the way that she and the kids had struggled and triumphed together. I've seen band directors that acted like martinets, like petty dictators, and she wasn't that. I've seen teachers that transmitted information without heart, and she wasn't that either. She walked alongside the kids through this performance—and really, through the school year—and it showed in the respect they had for her and the way they all rose to the challenges she set before them.

This day in church, Pentecost, is all about the Spirit. And we heard a story from the book of Acts about the way this Spirit exploded in the room where the apostles were staying, the way it blew them out onto the sidewalk speaking beautiful messages about God's power and love in every human language. And that's one way to understand the Spirit—the Spirit is the animating force of the church, the fuel that powers our teaching, our service, and our fellowship in Jesus' name.

But in the gospel lesson today, there's another way of understanding the Spirit. Jesus promises the Spirit to his disciples, not when they are energized, animated, and raring to go. Jesus promises them the Spirit on the night of his arrest—a time when the disciples are confused and fearful and sad. And maybe it's just me, but his promise of the Spirit is one I can connect with, one I especially hope for just now. Because when Jesus describes who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does for us, it sounds a lot like that band teacher I was telling you about.

Our text begins with confusion. Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father. He wants to directly perceive God in the way that he imagines Jesus does, not as a distant idea, but as a living presence. But Jesus reminds him that God is near, God is present, when Jesus himself forgives, heals, feeds—that God is working in Jesus, and God's presence is in the works of power and grace that Jesus does: "the Father who dwells in me does his works," Jesus says. Jesus and the God he calls Abba, Father, dwell in each other. If Philip and the other disciples have been with Jesus this long, there is nothing more they need to see—they have seen God's power at work in Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't want Philip and the other disciples to imagine that once Jesus is gone, God's presence will depart from them as well. So much of their fear and

confusion that night in the Upper Room comes from this idea that when Jesus is no longer physically present with them, the power and grace of God will no longer be with them either. And so Jesus makes an amazing, outlandish claim that this same presence of God, this same loving power that they experience when they are with Jesus, is present in those who believe in him, so much so that they will top the miracles, the wonders, the signs that Jesus himself has been doing.

Let that sink in a moment. Jesus points back to everything he's done—turning water into wine, feeding thousands of people with five loaves and two fish, giving a blind man his sight back, raising Lazarus from the dead. And he says to the disciples, "All that? It's *nothing* compared to what *you're* going to do!"

I just want to pause here again, so we can appreciate where Jesus is trying to lead his disciples. They are starting off in a place of grief and hopelessness. One of their own, Judas, has just left their table, left their fellowship, to betray Jesus. Jesus has told them he is going away, and that they can't come with him. And so they're afraid. They're grieving. They don't see the way forward. They feel abandoned. And Jesus is telling them to believe in him, just believe, and all the wonder, grace, and power of God will abound for you beyond anything they've known with him.

And the gift that makes this possible, the gift we celebrate today, is the Holy Spirit.

What Jesus promises in this passage is something he describes with a Greek word—the Paraclete. This is a deep, rich word, and our Bible's translation of it as "Advocate" doesn't quite do it justice. It's a compound word made of two parts—"para," which means "beside," and "klētos," which means "called." A Paraclete is someone called to come alongside you. It could be an advocate—someone who speaks up for you. Or it could be a coach—someone who stands next to you to help you perform. Or it could be a comforter—someone who offers reassurance and support. Jesus promises to ask the Father to send the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth. And there are so many ways to describe what the Spirit does, but given the disciples' anxiety, I want to point out that Jesus uses that other important word here again—μῆνειν, abide, remain. What Jesus is emphasizing here is that the Paraclete is coming to abide—to dwell, to live, to remain—with his disciples forever.

Who are the people who help you to be who you are? Think back to when we were locked down during the pandemic, and all the friends and family members and communities that you were separated from. Who were you missing the most? I want you to lay hold of that feeling in your heart again. I want you to sit with that sense of longing you had for someone or some group of people. Is there a part of yourself that this person brings forth from you, some part of yourself that's difficult to access when you're apart? Doesn't it stand to reason that there are people who feel this way about you too? Because it goes both ways, doesn't it?

The presence of the people we love helps us to be who we are. And we help them to be who they are too.

You see, the way Jesus talks to the disciples—"I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you"—is true about all the relationships that really matter. No one is an island. We indwell one another. But what is unique about Jesus is that through him, and through the Spirit that he sends, *God* becomes present to us, and that unlocks a piece of who we are, or who we are meant to be. As the beginning of the gospel of John puts it, "to all who received [Jesus], ... he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Have you ever thought, though, that maybe it works the other way around? That there is a piece of God's own self that comes out only through you? You are a unique and beautiful creation. God has made only one of you. And God's work wasn't done

when you were born, or on any day since then. Could it be that there something God needed to say or reveal or do that could only happen through you, through your life in its entirety? And if that's true, then wouldn't God want to be with you, to *abide* with you—to encourage and cheer you, to comfort and steer you? That part of God that abides with you and *through* you is the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete—the Comforter, the Advocate.

And it doesn't work if God is a dictator or martinet. It doesn't work if God is shouting commands at you, or imparting words or information that come from outside of you and remain something foreign or alien to you. It only works if God looks something like a good teacher, like the band teacher I told you about—walking with you, challenging you to take a risky step and praising your courage when you do, patiently helping you when you need it, and sharing in your successes and disappointments as if they were their own. The Holy Spirit, Jesus says, “will *teach* you everything.”

This is the Spirit that walks with us. And it's also the Spirit that shapes who we are meant to be as a church. The reason the Spirit spoke to the gathered crowds at Pentecost in their own languages is because God means to dwell with us, to come alongside us, to teach from beside us—not to command or control from a distance, from above.

This is the first Sunday of June, which is widely celebrated as Pride Month, a time when a lot of communities recognize our LGBTQ neighbors. And I'm glad to say that in the church it's becoming a time for us to walk alongside these neighbors of ours—to listen to the ways that they've been hurt (sometimes by our churches), to apologize where we ought to, and to see and reflect the beauty of God's image that shines in every person. The church is most genuinely the church of Jesus Christ when it walks alongside neighbors in love.

One of the symbols of Pentecost is a flame—and sometimes that's a compelling sign of energy and purifying power. But one other symbol is wind or breath. This week, I invite you to pray, and when you do, simply focus on your breath. Your breath is the spirit of life God breathed into you. And your breath also brings God's Holy Spirit. It powers your voice—to encourage and love your neighbors, to advocate for those who are hurting, to pray for others, and to pray for yourself. Sometimes it comes out only as a sigh or a groan—and the scriptures tell us that this is prayer too, the Spirit interceding on our behalf with sighs too deep for words. God has given you this breath to shape you as a child of God who loves with God's love, who carries God's own presence to comfort and guide. What is it that God can only say, only do, only build, only heal through your voice, or with your life?

Love me, keep my commandments, says Jesus, and the abiding presence of the Comforter, the Advocate, the Teacher, the Spirit of truth, will abide with you, now and always. Amen.