

Sermon on John 14:15-21, Acts 17:22-31
Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ, and our advocate, comforter and guide, the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In another week we will bid farewell to the Easter Season, the resurrection texts and Jesus's farewell discourses from the gospel of John as we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord and the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. So today we hear the last of Jesus' farewell to his disciples at the Last Supper, and his promise to always be with them even when he is physically "gone".

These days you can perhaps relate to the anxiety the disciples felt, when they heard Jesus say that he would not be with them much longer. What were they going to do without the presence of their teacher, leader and friend, the one who had called them together in the first place? During this *corona virus pandemic*, most of us have been separated from many of our loved ones, as we have sheltered in place. Many of us have been unable to physically see or touch family members in the flesh, unless they are living with us in our homes. Those of us who are lucky, have been able to see and hear on our computer screens or smartphones our grandchildren, children, relatives or friends on Skype, videochat, or Zoom. That's a gift of technology that no one ever had previous to this generation – the closest any of us "older folk" or our parents and ancestors ever had was the telephone, or ham radio, going back at most 100 years!

Long before the days of "Zoom" and internet technology, Jesus and the disciples could never have imagined any kind of presence with another human being without "physical" presence, unless it were a personal message delivered by a trusted messenger or friend, or a letter written in a loved one's own hand. The most spiritual among ancient peoples could have felt the presence of God in worship, through prayer or in visions and dreams, as we read in the scriptures and the prophets. In today's gospel, as human beings, the disciples felt sadness, shock, and despair when Jesus told them at the Last Supper, after he had washed their feet, that he soon was going to be leaving them. Where he was going, they could not follow. How devastating it must have been! But he would come again, and take them all to himself. They already knew the way. We hear Thomas ask Jesus how they could know the way, if they didn't even know where he was going?!

Then Jesus shocked them all by saying that even when he was gone, they would not be separated from him. Rather, Jesus promised an even deeper presence and fellowship than was possible with him in the same room! How was this possible? It was through the gift of what we now call the Holy Spirit, which Jesus

called a *paraclete* (the word in Greek). Literally, this means someone “walking with” or alongside you, perhaps like the disciples walking along the road to Emmaus on Easter evening, being joined by Jesus on the road to join their conversation and break bread with them when they reached their destination. The word *paraclete* is also translated “advocate, helper, counselor, and encourager.

Often theologians have used the term “advocate” like an attorney in a court of law, someone who “pleads our case” for mercy and forgiveness before God. Across church history we have heard how the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with God. So we even hear composer J.S. Bach write in his glorious double chorus motet to the words of Paul in Romans 8, “*Likewise, the Spirit also helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*” This is a very Lutheran understanding.

But why should we need a “defense attorney” to plead our case before God, who “*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life? Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*” Local Lutheran pastor David Lose, now of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, asks “what if” it’s the other way around? What if the Spirit intercedes with *us* on God’s behalf, to remind *you and me (and the whole world)* of God’s love for us, of our identity as children of God – every one of us – and that God is indeed present with you and me in our world TODAY, in all of our challenges?! That’s perhaps a radical new understanding of this text, and the work of the Spirit, but it is consistent with our Lutheran Christian theology of God’s grace, love and mercy for us, and very much in character with the teachings and the work of our Lord Jesus, whose compassion knows no bounds! By simply changing the direction, the “object” of the Spirit’s intercessions – toward us rather than God – we have new insight. Because we often need to be “convinced” that we are “deserving” of God’s mercy, forgiveness and love, and God needs no convincing to be merciful! As we also heard in John, chapter 10, Jesus is our Good Shepherd and we are the sheep who hear and recognize the voice of our shepherd. But sometimes – often, really – we sheep need to be convinced to listen for our shepherd’s voice, even when he laid down his life for us all! That sounds even more comforting and encouraging than the Spirit speaking for us before God – because what kind of God requires convincing and a spirited defense in order to forgive her children, or shepherd to protect their own flock? It seems more in character for God to be reaching out to us in order to bring us wayward sheep back into the fold of God’s loving arms, and Jesus’ warm embrace.

So the Spirit advocates for us – speaking *for* us on our behalf and *to* us for our own good - as Jesus’ way of walking with us, helping us, accompanying us in our walk through life, with all its many challenges, dangers, offering promise and

possibilities as well as protection. Hearing the apostle Paul's words in this way allows us to hear that the Spirit also helps us to trust in God's promise of forgiveness, that you and I and all human beings are worthy of God's attention and love – not just a few “holy and faithful” ones, for the “spiritual” as well as the “religious” children among us – for the non-spiritual and non-religious too!

During this pandemic when many of us are separated or isolated from each other, the Spirit can help us realize that we really are not alone, that Christ is indeed present, as he promised he would be. When we feel estranged from others who don't agree with us nor see our dilemma the same as we do, the Spirit can help us see how others may be frightened, and that it is perhaps “fear” of the unknown rather than simply “evil” or “sin” that makes some react with disbelief, mockery, anger or violence. The Spirit can help you and me understand that we can be present together in ways other than physical presence, through prayer and compassion for others, even more than mere modern technology or communications. There is a spiritual connection we can have with each other, as well as with God in prayer, because we know that we are “one in the Spirit”, united in baptism, by faith, and as one human family even when we are separated.

So, if Christ is with us even when he is ascended, through the gift of the Spirit which accompanies us in life, we too can learn to walk with one another by faith as well. Could it be that we share in this gift of the Spirit also? If the Spirit is our advocate, we can be advocates for others as well, in the challenges they face in their lives. Through faith you and I can reach out to others in new ways we had never before imagined, both in the complex ways of technology and cyberspace that some of us need to stretch ourselves to learn, and in simple ways of praying for each other and reaching out with a simple telephone call or letter. Remember letters? I think people still write those, and the post office still delivers them, and who doesn't relish getting a letter written by the hand of someone we care about? I even love reading my mother's old recipe cards, because she wrote them in her beautiful handwriting, and so I feel her presence just by reading a recipe that she carefully wrote down! And then I can taste and smell her presence when I cook and eat a dish I remember her making – it brings back memories of home and I can almost hear her voice. Couldn't that be a way in which you and I are connected with Jesus' presence, as we hear his voice of compassion and love in the gospel?

So how do you see God's presence in your life today? Write it in the chat bar! When do you hear the voice of Jesus, calling to you during this pandemic? What is Jesus calling you to do for those whom you love, for your neighbor? How is the Spirit active in your life, and where is she leading you this coming week? It could be as simple as calling another person who is living alone, separated from the rest of the world. It could be delivering a meal to someone who is running short on food, or donating a check to your local foodshelf. Maybe it's even

making sure every person around you has a mask to cover their face when they go out, or someone visits them. Maybe you could write a letter or call your state representative or senator, to make sure that funds are provided to help all our neighbors in Minnesota survive this pandemic. Some of these things are simple, some are more challenging, but they all bear witness to the presence of God in our world to give us life in the midst of death, to bring us together in spite of our separation, to bring us hope in despair, courage in our fears.

Friends, we live in frightening times, when many have lost their incomes and live with fear and discouragement about the present and the future. But this is a good time to be the Church! The spirit of encouragement and generosity are alive and well, and a very powerful witness to God's love! You and I can live with hope in the presence of Jesus Christ, in his promise to come again and in the Spirit, who helps us, walks with us, and is our advocate. For Jesus said, *"I will ask the Father, who will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth.... You know this Spirit, who abides with you, who will be in you."* Have trust in this promise, that Jesus is always with you, and remember that you are never alone, because of the gift of the Spirit, and the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.