

A sermon preached at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, April 27, 2008, by the Rev. Canon Rick Cross

The Mysterious Advocate

It is a common tradition to preach on the Gospel reading, which leads one to ask, not “Where is the beef,” but “Where is the Good News?” Here is where I see it today. In the context of human loss we are given the opportunity to discover the gift of the Spirit’s presence in our lives.

Put yourself in the scene described by John’s Gospel. You finally meet a spiritual leader who is so compelling that you leave your means of earning a living in life, your family and friends, and follow him on an extremely uncertain, shaky and irrational journey. Meeting him personally and being with him and the small intimate team of eclectic misfits, has transformed your life. He has taught you more wisdom than you ever dreamed was in existence. He has shown you healing of body, mind and soul. You have given your life to him in utter obedience. You have fallen in love with him. He has become the center of your life, and you depend on him. And right in the middle of finally achieving some modicum of stability and rhythm, he announces he is leaving.

Where were you when something like that happened to you? You have experienced moments of abandonment and the threat of devastating loss in your life. You may encounter this “ton of bricks” coming down on your head tomorrow, or next year. It happened to me as I was standing in the ER at Bethesda North Hospital eight weeks ago, when the neurosurgeon took me aside and said, “Your wife has had a bleed in her brain, and I need the go-ahead to operate as soon as possible. I cannot promise you anything, and the prognosis ranges from vegetable, to good recovery.” Since then I have been grieving a real and anxious loss. I am a disciple.

What is your story? When have you found yourself feeling abandoned in a relationship, left behind in a job, alienated from joy or meaning in life, or lost in a world that is moving too fast? You are a disciple.

Thomas felt left-behind. “Lord, we do not know where you are going.”
Phillip was bargaining. “Show us the father and we will be satisfied.”
Judas queried, “How is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?”

The disciples were about to experience the greatest loss in their lives, as Jesus left. Seeing the violent murder of their best friend and brother shook them to the core, and left them as numb and frozen as we feel at the precipice of, or in the wake of, great loss in our lives. They could not have understood what was happening, and they were filled with fear of the unknown future. What was left of their lives, seemingly gone awry?

I imagine their questions: “What will I do without him? How can I survive? Am I somehow to blame? Why do I feel so alone? What is there to hope for? What consolation is available?” Talk about a crisis of faith! Faith wears thin in the face of tragic loss and

the human fear of abandonment.

But Jesus says I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you....God will give you another Advocate to be with you forever.”

The word “Advocate” is the English translation of *Paraclete*, which comes from the Greek “one who consoles, one who intercedes on our behalf, a comforter or an advocate. Paraclete appears in the New Testament in the Gospel of John

14:16 “God will give you another *Advocate* who will be with you forever...”

14:26 “But the *Advocate*, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

15:26 “When the *Advocate* comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.”

16:7 “...It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the *Advocate* will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

20:22 “When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the *Holy Spirit*.’

Another use of this word appears in 1 John 2:1, the text for one of the sentences of absolution in Rite I of Holy Communion: “...if anyone sins, we have an *Advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous....”

Rene Girard, a Christian anthropologist and philosopher, argues that *Paraclete* ought to be translated as the Defense Attorney who is defending human beings against the assaults of Satan, the Prosecuting Attorney, the Accuser, the fomenter of violence.

The ‘clete’ word stem comes from the same etymological origin as ‘ecclesia,’ the infinitive of which means “to call”. By the ‘ecclesia’ the church is called to assemble. Similarly, the Paraclete is “called” to the side of the one on trial.

Muslims identify Muhammad as the “Paraclete” or the “Messenger of God” promised by Jesus to his followers, as another counselor that would come after him.
(wikipedia.org/wiki/Paraclete)

As we approach the season of Pentecost, and celebration of the many gifts of the Spirit God gives us, none perhaps is as important and practical as the mysterious gift of advocacy. We all need an advocate... a Spirit of truth, in many areas of our lives. We are put on trial every day by challenges from the world and by circumstances in our lives.

When my family and I lived in Baltimore, Katherine was in early elementary school and

getting quality special education to meet her needs was a horrific struggle. We became discouraged as we were defeated time after time in our attempts to bring about change against a huge school bureaucracy, whose bottom line was saving money, not meeting Katherine's special needs.

Finally, we became aware of a non-profit organization in Virginia called "The Advocates," which was made up of staff attorneys willing to represent the parents of special needs students in court cases against incompetent school systems. This organization came to us, stood beside us, affirmed our legitimate needs, gave us hope, and refuted the untruthful message we were getting from the system that we were crazy and totally unreasonable. That organization played a "Holy Spirit" role in our lives.

There are many other less obvious situations when I have become aware that the Defense Attorney was right beside me, holding my hand. Sitting alone with Amy in the ICU, waiting several days for her to wake up, is a recent one. Yes, I was afraid and tempted to worry, but I knew I was never alone. He came to me and stayed with me. I am certain you too have known the gift. In fact, you are the gift.

As we learn to let God use the gifts of the Spirit we have been given to care for one another, to play defense attorney for one another and for those beyond who are on trial, this wonderful *ecclesia*, Christ Church Cathedral, called to assemble as the Body of Christ, will continue to become a true center for advocacy. I can envision one of those formal flat black signs with gold leaf lettering over the front door of the Cathedral reading "Public Advocate." We are called to be a center for the Spirit where Jesus loves us and reveals himself to us, his disciples, and his beloved.

"Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me." Amen.