

6th Sunday of Easter
Sermon 5.14.23

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." ²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

John 14:15-21

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (450)

I had an almost-friend before Covid. We got along really well, laughed at a lot of the same things, had a lot of things in common. We bugged each other just enough to give it all grist for the mill.

Then Covid hit and *everything* felt impossible. As for this not-quite-friendship, we moved it Zoom for a couple of "coffee" dates. It never quite took.

A year and a half into it, I gave her a call. Things had come apart. One of her kids had come unraveled. She'd had to leave her job, under sorry circumstances.

I felt terrible. I wished I'd known.

I told her as much and she got angry at me, thought I was accusing her of being a bad friend, thought I was trying to cut in line, to the front of her attention. All these

important things were happening in her life and here I was whining about her ignoring me.

No, I tried to clarify, that wasn't it.

I struggled to say what I meant.

I never quite got it.

We haven't talked since.

I wish I'd remembered this story from John. He gives us the perfect word: "Advocate." That's the English from the Latin, *advocare*, to call to or to speak for. But it's an imperfect translation from what Jesus according to John originally said, this perfect word, the original Greek, *paraclete*, that is *para-kalein*, to call from beside, also to console or to be a companion.

It's not nothing.

In a lot of contexts, the word appearing in ancient documents, it's a legal matter. The *paraclete* is someone who'll argue your case in court. In earliest Rome, the *advocatus* was a person of higher status who could speak on behalf of a defendant in a court of law before a judge. When Greeks came into contact with the Roman Empire, the *paraclete* was developed as an equivalent, though with a bit more "beside" in its shades of meaning, more "beside" and less "from above" from a higher status.

It seems then to have found its way into Hebrew tradition, showing up in Jewish letters to indicate angels and prophets and otherwise "one who consoles" or "keeps company."

John, for his part, takes this word to indicate one of the aspects of the Godhead, which elevates it in concept if not in the exercise of power. The *paraclete* is still beside, not over. But now one of the persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit: this elevates the whole endeavor. Suddenly, to keep company, to be a companion, is the stuff of the divine.

It's nice, because it can otherwise feel so useless. I mean, it's not as if, in keeping a companionship, you can make everything better, you can make it so the world doesn't hurt. But, imagining and experiencing that God means to send an aspect of Godself to be a companion: that's not nothing.

It shouldn't surprise us that this theological development would come from John, would come into Christian tradition by way of the Johannine literature and community. Because, maybe you noticed, we're still in the Gospel of John this morning. This is Year A,

of course, of the church's three-year lectionary cycle. This is Year A, which is to say we're mostly to follow the Gospel of Matthew as we journey through from Advent to Reign of Christ Sunday. But Eastertide of Year A, this seven-week season between Easter Sunday and Pentecost, has us just as often in the Gospel of John.

See, John isn't synoptic in structure; John doesn't tell a synopsis of Jesus' life. It's more theological in its focus, more *Christological*. The stories it tells of Jesus' life are arranged less in chronological order, more in theological order. Our writer is deepening our understanding here. For this, John's gospel doesn't walk us through the church year, as Matthew, Mark, and Luke each do. No, John instead gets dropped into the church years here and there, interrupting the year's synoptic flow to add an enriching moment, to slow down and go deep.

We're still in the Farewell Discourse this morning, where we found ourselves last Sunday too, where Jesus is gathered with his friends in an upper room on the night of his arrest, the night before his crucifixion. According to John, Jesus knew well what was in store for him. Judas had already gone out into the night to do quickly what he was to do, and now Jesus was with the remaining eleven, who must have begun to get a sense of foreboding, if also strange comfort. There was a coziness here in this upper room. That's how I imagine it, anyway.

This so-called Farewell Discourse has Jesus speaking in terms that might have mystified, might also have pacified. Jesus would be leaving them. Jesus would also return to them, and bring them to himself. And in the meantime, he wouldn't leave the disciples orphaned—for there would come among them another advocate, another companion.

And it shouldn't surprise us that this all comes to us, and to Christian tradition, from the Gospel of John, from the Johannine community, this which gives us the Johannine literature of the New Testament—that is, the Gospel of John, the three Letters of John, and the Revelation to John. This was a community in exile. That's what scholarship tells us anyway. Comprised of people who'd been disowned by their communities of origin, turned out of their families and households because they'd come to believe in Jesus, these were people who'd found one another, made families and households of one another. Exiled from the center of the region, they moved north, formed their own colony out there—outcasts making a new center in Christ.

And they developed a particular theology out of it all, a particular Christology, which then gave foundation to the thinking of the whole developing church. Jesus was as such because God dwelt in Jesus and Jesus dwelt in God. By this, Jesus also made possible the people's dwelling in God for their continuing always to abide with Jesus in their abiding with one another, these their chosen families. The thickness of the interrelatedness of God with Godself—the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, the love itself the currency of the Spirit—played out in the thickness of the interrelating of the Johannine community. As above, so below, God a dynamic of love so alive that it can't get help but to appeal to everything to join in with it—as if God had mass, gravitational mass. Just so, for those of John, for their abiding together in a world that otherwise had kicked them out, they would find among them in a particular, poignant way, the very presence of God manifest in Jesus and made ever-present in the Holy Spirit, the *paraclete* indeed to be their constant companion along the way.

It's not nothing.

It's *not*.

A recent article in the *New York Times* suggests as much. About why so many Americans suffer with chronic pain, this cites a study of a cluster of symptoms that co-occur, pain, fatigue, and depression. A stressor for this cluster of symptoms, and indeed a *predictor* of them, is loneliness. People who are chronically lonely will be more likely to come to suffer chronic pain, fatigue, and depression—which then will result in deepening loneliness, deepening isolation. A vicious cycle. And Americans are some of the loneliest people the world has ever known.

The Holy Spirit is said to be the aspect of God most ignored, least spoken of, at least among us mainline types. I don't think that's true for me, but that is what's often said about our tradition.

It might be that this aspect of God seems most defiant of the Enlightenment mindset by which most of the likes of us make it through any given day. The world is what we can prove of it, or what we can at least best relate to of it.

Jesus might outpace our regular experience of our own humanity, and might not fit our expectations of what a savior should be like. But he was, if nothing else, someone who lived a lot like as any of us live. He ate meals, he made friends, he walked a small patch of earth as he went about his life.

God the transcendent, though personal, creative power of all things likely strains our understanding, more at least than Jesus. But to the degree that we might wonder about the being of anything that has being, the degree to which we might wonder at the very discernable difference between a body that is living and one that is dead, the degree to which we sense ourselves to be powerful but also frighteningly vulnerable, we are in the territory of God.

As to the idea that this God who transcends all history and matter might enter history and live as matter in a man in 1st century Palestine: that's a bit mind-bending, but it's something we're likely familiar with.

The Holy Spirit though: it's said this is the least testified to aspect of God, the least intelligible, for being the least imaginable, it being so difficult to *image*. Breath. Wind. The sensation of truth. The arrival of trust. A visitation upon a collective, as everything falls into place, a balance of justice, an appearance of beauty. A visitation unto a solitary human soul, a peace that passes all understanding, wisdom that has nothing of arrogance or willfulness.

Even Scripture has little integral agreement about what this spirit is, what it *feels* like, how it can be sensed. It is out-going in the book of Acts, thunderous noise drawing all the world unto its cacophonous understanding. This we'll see on Pentecost Sunday in a couple weeks. This we also sense in the sort of preaching that generates new community of the sort we heard in the other reading this morning, Paul in Athens appealing to the people there who yearned to hear something new.

Meanwhile, the Spirit is felt as studious in the books of Wisdom—Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Psalms, Song of Solomon, a mature, thoroughly probed project in human thinking, human study and reason. It is wholly original and originating in the Pentateuch, those first five books, creating the heavens and the earth, creating humankind in the image of God the plurality. And it is, in Johannine literature and the Johannine community, individual, quiet, consoling, peace-making, an ever-abiding companion that makes loneliness flee away, that makes exile full of other possibility, that makes broken relationships find new root and flower, that makes the sudden annihilation of all that holds anyone in a confirming embrace renewed in a new and eternal confirming embrace.

And it makes for good company, good, resilient, faithful companionship—the sort that can't necessarily amount to heroics, saving the day! but that can at least amount to

connection so that moving through hard times is possible at all and might even end in safety on the other side.

The work of the church in any of our lives on any given day isn't about heroics, but about creating the sort of communities by which heroics are less in demand. It is long, slow work, a daily showing up, a weekly renewing of gentle, resilient bonds—which, again, isn't nothing, and it might eventually reveal itself to be everything.

It is to me anyway.

Thanks be to God.