

the Advocate; a sermon on Pentecost (John 16).

I didn't tell you earlier because I was going to be with you for a while longer. "But now I am going away to the one who sent me, and not one of you is asking where I am going. Instead, you grieve because of what I've told you. But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment. The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me. Righteousness is available because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more. Judgment will come because the ruler of this world has already been judged.

"There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can't bear it now. 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me. All that belongs to the Father is mine; this is why I said, 'The Spirit will tell you whatever he receives from me.'

I had today's sermon text in mind when a friend of mine wrote this on her Facebook page: *God works through us, not for us.* Yes, I thought. That's a good way of describing Pentecost – a wind whirled through the closed room; it was as if tongues of fire touched each person and they began to speak in the various languages of every nation gathered in Jerusalem for Shavuot. The spirit – God working through us. So why does the writer of the John Gospel take such pains to explain why Jesus left his followers? Today's text is the first part of the same text we studied at a month ago. Putting the two together, we get two very contradictory messages. In the first part, Jesus says, "I'm going to the Father and you will see me no more;". Only few verses later, Jesus says, "I'm going away for a while, but will come again." I can't tell you why these contradictory messages follow each other so closely. We do know that John was writing at a difficult time for the Jesus followers, both among themselves and in the world around them.

It is a century after Jesus was crucified. The great-grandchildren of the people who knew Jesus cling to the stories about him, among them being that, after his crucifixion and burial, he had appeared to some of those people. Their courage and patience, however, is being worn thin. Paul's letters had been in circulation for decades, all promising the immanent return of the Christ – the messiah. They wait and wait while the cruel emperor Nero thinks up ever more brutal methods to torture and kill them.

How does one give comfort to people who have been waiting to be rescued for generations – if Jesus is the messiah, the rescuer, where is he? What's he waiting for? The way you give comfort to the disempowered is to empower them. I think that's what the writer of John is trying to do. Over the course of 3 long chapters, John refocuses the picture, pointing the early church toward taking responsibility for each other. In a story unique to this gospel, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples – an act of humility, of respect and service. He says, *Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'* *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

A new commandment; well, it's not so new. It shows up in the 3rd book of Moses, Leviticus, which is a book of guidelines, among which are how one should live morally:

When you gather your harvest, leave the edges uncut; leave what falls from the gathering for the poor and the stranger. The poor is your neighbor; the stranger too. When you profit from your business, be generous: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Don't steal or deal falsely – don't lie to one another. Don't oppress your neighbor or withhold the wages of a worker. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Whether your neighbor is rich or poor, be fair. Be fair in disagreements. Don't take vengeance or bear a grudge. Love your neighbor as yourself. That's all in the third book of Moses: Jesus knew his Bible.

I'm confused by the resistance I sometimes get to studying the Hebrew texts along with the Christian so-called New Testament. Sometimes I hear, "the New has replaced the Old – we don't need to waste time with the Old." To me, that is like saying a plant doesn't need its roots. Actually, I think it would help us a lot to think along the line of concrete example for loving one's neighbor. We are often too quick to parrot Bible verses but have little taste for their words in our mouths. Love your neighbor – a nice sounding generality. Don't withhold the wages of a worker: don't take all the food for yourself and leave the stranger hungry – pretty specific.

If the Christians weren't going to be bound by the law of Moses, what was going to guide them? The word in Greek is *paraclete*. That means Advocate, counselor. In its verb form, *paraclete* means called to one's side; it is the term for legal counsel in modern Hebrew. It is the Advocate, our personal legal council – we often say the Holy Ghost – that speaks in our ear, to our heart: the guiding voice of spiritual empowerment. John explains Jesus' absence, not as desertion but as the necessary step that empowers us to spiritually grow up:

*in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the **Advocate** won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.*

Something my daughter wrote to me on Mother's day has helped me understand what John was getting at. She's a ballerina, and she thanked me for teaching her how to be self-sufficient in ways that has impacted her life. She said: "thank you for teaching me how to take the subway and bus on my own to get myself to ballet class. Thank you for teaching me to sew so that I can always so my own pointe shoes. Thank you for waiting patiently in the lobby (and not at the studio window) for countless hours of class and rehearsal. Thank you for knowing when I needed you to be hands on and for not being a crazy ballet mom. And for doing it in a way that always made me feel supported and encouraged."

I made a lot of mistakes as a parent – I guess we all do. So it was gratifying to hear I had been a good advocate for my daughter. Part of being a good advocate is to be a good teacher so that when we go away, our children have the skills they need to go on. Jesus, the good teacher, spent 3 years – day and night – with his disciples. He had taught by word and example. His work was done. Now it was their turn, as now it is our turn. The spirit of God seeks communication with us, is called to our side, is our Advocate, our counselor. I can't tell you how the Advocate reveals itself to you. For me, it's often in life's rearview mirror, after the fact. And then; well, then I say, "Oh... Thanks."

Amen