

Sermon – Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 14: 15-21 – The Promise of the Holy Spirit

“In” – is one of the smallest words in the English language. It is a word that we probably don’t pay much attention to in the ordinary course of our lives. In the context of our gospel story for today, “in” is an extremely powerful word conveying a key moment, a powerful moment, that changed the disciples lives and the way they experienced Jesus.

The setting for today’s gospel passage remains the upper room and the last supper. Jesus had washed their feet and they had broken bread for the Passover meal. Judas had dipped the bread and then departed filled with the urge to tell the authorities where Jesus was to be found. Peter had also just triumphantly declared that he would lay down his life for Jesus, before Jesus predicted Peter’s later crushing denial of him.

In the few hours Jesus had with his eleven key disciples he directed the conversation toward preparing them for what lay ahead – his impending death and thereafter. It was a tender and poignant scene and we can imagine the charged atmosphere. Jesus felt that he must assure them that they would continue on to live after his death, even more fully and that they would not be abandoned having come so far with him.

One of the aspects of life that we all might find interesting is to know the day and hour of our deaths. If we knew such a date and time we could be prepared and have said all our goodbyes. But life isn’t like that for most of us. Death comes for most of us at an inopportune time.

As a hospital chaplain, and now as a priest, I have stood with many patients and families in the uncertain days before the patient’s probable death. As I stood amongst those families I’ve witnessed the many ways families handle end of life situations. If the patient was conscious they would often feel the need to recount aspects of their lives, the fond memories, the happy times. If they were really in touch with their spirit they would often want to give voice to the painful times as well, often voicing regrets and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.

In other encounters, patients would want to reassure their loved ones and friends about the days ahead when they would not be with them physically. In some cases family members or friends would chastise them for speaking that way trying to reassure the patient that all would be Ok.

Patients nearly always know more about their mortality than the family member or friend and want to give a voice of reassurance to their family members and friends to carry on with life and live it to the fullest. The pain of impending separation though causes some family and friends to try to negate the emotional truth that the patient is trying to express.

One of the saddest aspects of the current pandemic is that those people admitted to hospital are not permitted visitor, and if they lay dying the only comfort they might experience comes from a stranger – a nurse, doctor, chaplain but most often no family.

It is always important that we give space for those that are dying to voice what ever is on their hearts. We have to allow them the opportunity to speak and to prepare themselves and their families for the physical separation that is to come. There is ample evidence that having these open conversations around death and separation leads to healing both for the patients and their families and friends. It also softens the grief associated with death, which is a natural part of our life experience.

Again the tragedy of a loved one dying alone resonates very deeply with those who are left and deepens grief to very deep levels of anguish.

Jesus knew this probably better than anyone. He knew his life arc more than his disciples and he felt he needed to prepare them for his departure. He wanted to build a bridge for them between his life, their discipleship and friendship and his impending death, resurrection and ascension. We might call this the Bridge of Hope!

Jesus wanted to make the bridge strong and the way to cross clear. This was a risky time for them all as his death at the hands of the state could have led to the disbanding of his friends, disillusioned by the pain of their messiah's end. I believe it is a testament to the truth of Jesus' life that we are still strong communities of faith some 2,000 years after this conversation recorded in John's writings.

The essence of this section of the conversation on that last night is that Jesus promised to seek from his Father another Advocate, a spirit who was to remain with them forever. This was to reassure them that they would not be abandoned but instead it would give them hope. The Greek word used by John was *Parakletos*, a word found in only one other place in the New Testament, the first letter of John.

In the fourth gospel *parakletos* consistently denotes the Holy Spirit sent to the disciples after Jesus return to the Father. In 1 John *parakletos* denotes Jesus himself as an advocate for believers, not surprising since Jesus described the Holy Spirit as another *parakletos*, implying that he also was a *parakletos*.

Like so many key words found in our modern bible translations it is helpful to go back to the ancient Greek to find the root of the meaning. Once found we can then examine the context in which the word is used. By doing this we are better able to understand more fully the intent of the writer.

When we hear the term *Advocate* as it is used in the NRSV translation you heard this morning, it might conjure up an image of an attorney representing someone in a court of law, or a legal guardian representing someone who has lost the ability to speak for themselves. However, in the Hellenistic understanding an advocate was more of a friend or patron, less a professional, who would speak for the accused.

When we look at the context of how John uses the term *parakletos* we find associated functions to be the comforter of the disciples after Jesus died, the teacher of them, testifying on behalf of Jesus, a guide for the disciples into truth and telling them of things to come.

So the *parakletos* could be translated comforter (as it is in the King James version), teacher, advocate, counselor, helper and guide. But none of these on their own is satisfactory and so we can use the Anglicized version *paraclete*, but even that on its own is mostly unhelpful. There is a richness to the term that seems diminished by the word itself.

In the intimate gathering in the upper room Jesus built the bridge of hope for them to cross toward an understanding that God would not forsake them nor abandon them. They were to cross into a new relationship with God the Father and Jesus the Son, who would come in the form of the Holy Spirit to resume the same kind of close relationship they had before he died. This relationship was going to last forever.

So we return to that little word “in.” Jesus promised that in the days after his resurrection, they would see him and their hearts and eyes would be opened to him in this new relationship. In this new relationship they would know that Jesus was of the Father, Jesus is in the Father and that they are in Jesus as he is now in them. Their experience in this new relationship would deepen their understanding of Jesus as their faith deepened through lives lived truthfully to the commandments. – not apart from but internal, combined with.

When we love Jesus and live lives adhering to his commandments we deepen our experience of Jesus living in us. In our prayer life, in our worshipping life, in our solitude and quiet time, in our family life and in our lives with friends. In these relationships we will find the *Paraclete* at work in us.

When we gather together, the power of the *Paraclete* being in us, and our experience of God and Jesus in us through the Holy Spirit, helps us deepen our spiritual lives and amplifies the power of the Holy Spirit amongst us.

The extraordinary promises of Jesus to his disciples are the promises of Jesus to us today. These promises are fundamental to our communitarian church and why we are not an individualistic faith like Buddhism. These promises are why we come together in community to share in God’s love and to love and support each other as we journey in life. In our own hearts, and in the gathering of all our hearts, the *Paraclete*, Jesus in the Holy Spirit is with us forever.

We don’t have to be superhuman or super Christians to benefit from this wonderful promise of Jesus. We just have to believe and have faith in the promise that we will never be alone and separated from God. Our baptism into the faith is an important expression of Jesus’ promise to the community of faith. Baptism is such an important sacrament of the

church, the outward and visible sign of God's inward and spiritual grace in sealing in us the Holy Spirit, so that we can be the beneficiaries of Jesus' promise.

Jesus took great care to prepare his disciples for the time when he would not be physically with them. We too can take great care to prepare those close to us for the time when we too will not be with them. The disciples heard Jesus and were open to his promise. May we also hear these reassuring words and feel the comfort of them this day and always.