“Comfort”

Date: 31 May 2020
Text: John 14: 16 – 20; 15:26, 27 Acts 2: 1 - 6
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Typically on Pentecost preachers talk about the Spirit’s role in mission, in enlivening our faith, helping us to remember and teach the Gospel, in providing spiritual gifts for use in Christ’s service. Pentecost is also the official birthday of the church…the day the church got to work. So Pentecost is when we get enthused about how the Holy Spirit helps us to ***do*** things. But today I want to take a different path. I want us to think about how the Holy Spirit helps us ***be***.

The night before his death, when the Sacrament of the Last Supper was instituted, Jesus taught his disciples about the future gift of the Holy Spirit. He described many wonderful things the Spirit would do for the Church. But one aspect can slip by our notice. It is how the Holy Spirit brings comfort to the people of God. The fourteenth chapter of John opens with the words “Do not let your hearts be troubled”. The chapter goes on to provide a series of comforts. First, and most famously, we have Jesus’ promise that he was going to Heaven to prepare a place for us. To know there is life after death and a place with God for eternity is indeed comforting. Philip next asks Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied”. The request speaks of the anxiousness of the uncertainty of faith. Jesus’ answer was also a comforting one: you have that proof right here. If you have seen me you have seen the Father. Next he assured them that God responds to prayer. Comforting.

Then in verse 16 we read, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you a ‘p*araclete*”. Paraclete is a Greek word that is only found in the New Testament in John’s Gospel and John’s letters. The word is a bit challenging for translating into English. Most literally, paraclete means “one called alongside to help”. In that you have a simple definition of the role of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who comes alongside us to help. Different English translations have taken that long phrase and simplified it down to different words. But even in the choice of those words we get different shades of understanding about the Holy Spirit. In our pew Bibles (NRSV), it is translated as “advocate”. An advocate is one who speaks on behalf of another. Imagine: we have part of the Trinitarian God – the Holy Spirit – whose role it is to work within the Trinity on our behalf. That’s comforting. The New International Version translates this as “the Counsellor”. It’s an image of the Holy Spirit coming alongside us with God’s encouragement and assurance. That’s comforting. In Eugene Peterson’s translation The Message he calls the Spirit “the Friend”. Friends bring all sorts of comfort don’t they? The Good News version translates it as “Helper”. To have helpers in life is comforting. The King James version takes the word we’ve been talking about and translates it this way: “I will send you the Comforter”. We often think of the Spirit as our helper for doing things: mission, growing in faith, equipping us for service. But thinking about the Holy Spirit as advocate, a counsellor, a friend, helper, a comforter we see that one aspect of the Holy Spirit’s work is to be God’s agent of mercy. The Holy Spirit helps our spirit be well.

This morning we read the Pentecostal story, recounting the event of the coming of the Spirit. But it is what happens subsequently that is important, for it is the stories that follow in Acts that demonstrate what the Spirit can do in our lives and how it can be a comfort in our lives. On that day of Pentecost the apostles went out and preached the Gospel. Three thousand converts that day created the Church. Imagine how the disciples felt in the days after Jesus commissioned them to go into all the world and make disciples of all people. A daunting, seemingly impossible task. But a few weeks later they saw how possible it really was, with three thousand new converts in one day – on the day that God gave them "the one called alongside to help". It must have been so comforting to know that they were not on their own with this daunting job.

Reading on through Acts, we find the apostles now able to go out and preach the Gospel with conviction. Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Jewish Council for trial. Yet, even in the face of possible punishment before the highest of authorities, we read that Peter "filled with the Holy Spirit" defended the Gospel with boldness. Comforting to know that you have God's help in such an anxious moment. Again, later, some of the apostles were arrested and flogged. The deacon Stephen was stoned to death because of his profession of faith. Saul (later known as the Christian Paul) started to persecute Christians on behalf of the Jewish Council. Yet, despite all this, we read in Acts 9: "Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the honour of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, the Church was increased in numbers" (9:31). Despite the harsh realities they faced, the trials, the suffering and persecution, they had comfort. It was in knowing God's help through the Holy Spirit that they found comfort. It was in knowing God's presence through the Holy Spirit that they found comfort.

Centuries later Henry David Thoreau wrote "most men lead lives of quiet desperation" (he meant women too). Famous words. Thoreau did explain what he meant by this line. It was his sense that so many people felt weighed down and trapped in their life circumstances and that they believed they had no opportunity to change them. This, he said, led to resignation: that what is will always be. But because it is not what people want, the consequence he said are feelings of quiet desperation. I think there is a truth to this in the age of coronavirus. I think most of us feel trapped in life circumstances right now, many living with a fear of infection and all constrained by imposed isolation rules. I know I've had my moments of quiet desperation, for sure. So what is Pentecost's reminder to us in these days? Pentecost is the day that reminds us that Jesus kept his promise and has sent us a comforter. That the Holy Spirit is God's agent for comfort.

Part of what has made these days so disorienting for us is that most of us—me included—tend to live life day by day on life's veneer. We can live life on its fine looking surface: going to work, playing with the kids, doing what is fun, knowing the paycheck is going into the bank monthly. The pandemic has stopped the usual life on the veneer for us, and it is prompting may people to look at their life below the veneer. Reading the Calgary Herald daily I regularly see articles that talk about and prompt deeper life reflection in these days. Encouraging us to cherish and nurture our life's relationships. To grow in our appreciation of life and grow in thankfulness in response. To take up new hobbies and develop new habits. To have greater compassion for another. What these reflections and reminders are encouraging us to do it to reflect on the life we live on our

life’s veneer. It is good encouragement because I suspect if we don’t do that kind of spiritual work we may find that life of quiet desperation continue for us.

Jesus promised his followers, “I will send you a comforter.” The paraclete, as it says in Greek. One who can be our counsellor, our helper, a supportive friend, our advocate before God, a comforter. The one “called alongside to help.” One roll of the Holy Spirit is to help us do the spiritual work that I think many of us need to do in these days, so we can manage how we feel as we endure these trying times, and prepare ourselves to fuller, more meaningful and renewed lives on a new and improved veneer.

We need simply to remember this, lean into the Spirit, to await upon it. Our advocate, counselor, helper, friend, comforter. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15.13).