

Sermon – 6th Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Scripture Texts: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:7-18; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *The Holy Spirit is our advocate and guide, who is working in all people and all places, and who comes to us with words of comfort and recognition and assurance. We are called to resist the voices of accusation and inadequacy, and to instead abide with Christ through the ministration of the Spirit.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Holy Spirit as Doula (*and happy Mother's Day!*)
 - a. Mother's Day is complicated for many people
 - i. I'm not generally inclined to a big celebration of it in church because I am very aware of how this day can bring pain for those with broken relationships with their moms, or for those who want to be mothers but haven't been able to do so, or for those who have lost children.
 - ii. But, this year Walmart gave us a donation of candles, so I hope the mom's will take one as a token of appreciation!
 - iii. Moreover, in looking at our gospel this week, I've found myself thinking a lot about childbirth.
 - b. The power of childbirth
 - i. My experience of supporting Heather as our kids were born – she was incredible and so powerful.
 - ii. I can understand why she has so valued the opportunity to support friends – and we have come to value the role of a doula. If you're not familiar, a doula is a support person who comes alongside a mother in labor, coaching her, counselling her, helping to advocate for her to busy medical professionals, providing snacks or massages and suggesting new positions, empowering her throughout labor and reminding her of the purpose behind the pain.
 - iii. As we learned more about doulas, Heather had a great insight, connecting their work to the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - c. Connection to the work of the Spirit
 - i. Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit in today's Gospel – both a follow up to last week's promises from Jesus *and* a look ahead to the ascension (on Thursday of this week) and to Pentecost (in two weeks).
 - ii. Jesus promises to send another "Advocate." The Greek word is Παράκλητον (parakleton), which is a great word! (No, not parakeet – this is not God the bird!)
 - iii. Parakleton is a compound word coming from para=alongside + kalein=to call. So, this is "one called alongside." It is sometimes translated as "comforter", which explains the cute little comic in the bulletin today. More commonly and

properly, it is translated as “advocate”, for the Greek word could refer to legal counsel.

- iv. In this word, and throughout Scripture, we see the Spirit as the one who comes alongside us, advocating for us, supporting us, counselling us, empowering us, sustaining us when we are weak. As the Spirit of truth, it reminds us of the truth of God’s love and grace when we are discouraged. (The parallels to the work of a doula become pretty obvious!)

d. Spirit as feminine?

- i. On this mother’s day, I think it’s also worth saying a word about gender with regard to the Spirit. If you have studied other languages, you might know that many of them assign genders to words. Interestingly, the word for the Spirit in Hebrew is feminine (while paraketon is masculine, the most common word used for the Spirit in Greek is neutral).
- ii. Of course, God is not gendered. God is bigger than gender, and the creation story insists that both male and female were created in the image of God – so that we cannot have the full image with just one gender. Indeed, I would argue that men, women, and trans folks all give us unique and essential glimpses into the reality of God! Still, the historical fact is that the majority of Christian imagery for God has relied on masculine imagery.
- iii. So, there is value of using other language for God (like our current Eucharistic prayer, which calls God “redeemer and mother” in addition to “God and father”); referring to the Spirit as She and Her is helpful for many people.

2. Listening for the Spirit

- a. The voices and noises that make it hard for us to see and hear the Spirit at work:
 - i. Busyness and distractions
 - ii. Insecurities and Accusations
 - iii. Fears and doubts
 - iv. These all get in the way of hearing from God, and we need help to counter their power.
- b. Our need for an advocate
 - i. As your priest, I try to provide that for you. I try to tell you regularly how much I love you, how grateful I am for you, how I see you seeking to be like Jesus. Even more, I tell you about God’s love for you! But, the reality is that I fall short all too often! And, my words will never be enough.
 - ii. Any and every human will fall short at times, and sometimes God seems so far away.
 - iii. Example: My experience of doubts and fears in the wake of a friendship falling apart. God ended up feeling fearful and demanding and distant, all at once. I had to learn to trust that this is not how God speaks to us! Instead, God speaks to us through the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, the Holy Doula.
- c. God’s perfect love, communicated through the Spirit
 - i. Sometimes the Spirit is seen in dramatic, undeniable ways; I wish that were more common!
 - ii. More often, the Spirit seems to work in ways that we do not expect! That’s one of the delightful things about *The Holy Ghost* collection of comics from which the comic in our bulletin comes.

- iii. Sometimes it is a “still, small voice;” sometimes it comes through music, or community, or nature. Sometimes it comes in the absurd and the comic. There is always value in prayer and memorizing Scripture, but the Spirit refuses to be boxed in!
- iv. If we would be who God calls us to be, we must listen for that voice, and trust in it. It is not predictable or controllable – but it is recognizable! It is the voice that speaks with love and hope and affirmation, that empowers and guides and advocates for you, that draws you deeper into the heart of God and shapes you to look more like Jesus.
- v. Amid all the other noise and all the voices that accuse or scare or unnerve us, may we have the grace to hear the voice of the Spirit, and to abide in God’s love.

Amen.