

Homily for May 26, 2019 Easter 6 Morning Prayer
Acts 16:9–15; Revelation 21:10, 21:22–22:5;
John 14:23–29
Phil Hovey

In the name of God the Holy Spirit, The Advocate who stands with us.

Today's Gospel reading is from The Gospel According to John. It is the second of three consecutive readings in our lectionary from John's version of the Last Supper. In the five chapters where we find these readings (Ch 13:1 to Ch 17:26) John tells the moving story of Jesus sharing this Last Supper with his disciples, his dear companions, and his preparing them for his departure. Scholars refer to his speeches here as the "Farewell Discourses."

Last week we heard the giving of the new commandment: just as I have loved you, you should love one another.

Next week we would have heard part of Jesus' poignant prayer to the Father: As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they (the disciples) also be in us, so that the world may know you have sent me.

Today we hear words of comfort, words of sustenance; Jesus is reassuring his disciples that they will not be abandoned: But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

As I read these chapters I was touched by the anxiety expressed by the disciples as they fear being without their leader, being left alone to carry on. Are they thinking "What if I forget what He taught me?" "What if I am not smart enough to face those who challenge me?" "What if I can't live up to the responsibilities of our mission?" "What if . . ."

But Jesus calms their anxieties, he soothes their fears. We heard today: 14:26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them (your hearts) be afraid.

Did you hear that word “Advocate”? John very carefully chose that term “Advocate” and connected it with The Holy Spirit. And, he is the only Gospel writer to do so.

The Greek word John actually wrote is “Paraclete.” It’s a legal term that means “one who stands beside” in other words, a Defense Lawyer, a Helper, a Comforter, a Sustainer. John is trying to tell us, the readers and hearers, that he felt the disciples were not only grief stricken at Jesus’ news but scared, if not terrified, at being left without their teacher and “life coach.”

I tried to imagine the anxiety and the fear the disciples must have felt when they realized they would have to go it alone without the safety net of their teacher. And, I found I can connect with them in their moments of deep doubt and worry.

I’ve had my share of “first-time-solo” fears. I’m sure my stories can’t compare to what the disciples were experiencing at that moment, BUT, for me, they were times of stomach-churning fear . . . fear of working without the safety net of my teacher or trainer. But then, I also realized I had my “Paracletes” too; my Advocate, my Sustainer.

Can you think of your first-time-solo angst’s? Did you have a “Paraclete,” an Advocate, to stand beside you and sustain you?

One of my first-time-solo terrors was in high school. I sang a lead part in *The Mikado*, an operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan. Away from the comfort of the rehearsal hall I had to go on stage in front of all those people . . . and . . . What if I forget my spoken lines? What if I forget my singing part What if forget that bit of stage business I was assured would bring a laugh?

But my Paracletes, my Advocates, my sustainers, were there: the music director who carefully rehearsed me was standing right in front of me in the orchestra pit ready to cue me and sing silently with me. And the stage director who ran my lines with me was standing just off stage in the wings ready to whisper a line prompt. Their presence was comforting and let me focus on my performance.

I remember when, in the Coast Guard, I stood my very first bridge watch at night as a newly qualified Quartermaster-of-the-watch. My job was to take the ship’s position fixes as we sailed in the congested waters of Narragansett bay.

That night there were lights everywhere on the shore—traffic lights,—store sign lights,—cars light, —house lights. I couldn't tell which were the navigational lights I needed to take the fix and mark our position. I couldn't figure out where the ship was. My mind was a-whirl with fears, sweat beading on my forehead—What if we ran aground!

But . . . my Paraclete, my Advocate, was there, in the person of Officer-of-the-Con, Chief Boatswain's Mate Tyler. He assured me he knew exactly where we were because he had sailed these waters for years. He told me to relax, remember my training, and keep trying to get a proper fix. I did . . . eventually . . . Whew!

More recently I was part of the GHRM Education Team. I remember presenting my first Bible class with John Williams.

My first-time-solo fears: Could I speak intelligently about a subject I was just learning? What if I totally misunderstood the scripture I was trying to teach. And all of this in front of my mentor, the very learned John Williams. I don't doubt my face was blanch white! But I had my Paraclete, my Sustainer. He was sitting right there in front of me, none other than John Williams himself, encouraging me to keep going.

Those are a couple of my stories, how about yours?

I might ask Seuli about her first professional recital as a soloist. Or I could ask Bob about his first time teaching in front of a chemistry class.

How about you?

I really like this idea of thinking "Advocate," "Paraclete"— my defense lawyer, my comforter, my helper, when I picture the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised will always stand beside me to sustain me. This idea shapes the very words I use when I pray the Trinity: Instead of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit; I say God the Creator, God the Redeemer, God the Sustainer, that is, the Paraclete, the Advocate, the comforter, the helper, the one who sustains me by always standing by my side before the court of the world.

Amen