

[Readings: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; Psalm 66; 1 Peter 3:15-18; John 14:15-21]

The following story is used as an illustration, and NOT as a statement of a present reality. The story goes that a pastor who had been at his parish several years announced that the bishop was planning to transfer him soon to another parish. After the initial gasp in the congregation, some women and children began sobbing, and a few men wiped tears from their eyes. "Now, now," the pastor said, consoling his people, "I'm sure the next pastor the bishop sends here will be even better than I was." Someone shouted from the back of the church, "That's what they said the last time, and then we got YOU!"

You and I are now at the same place where Jesus and His Apostles are in today's Gospel. Between Jesus' departure from this earth and His return in glory at the Second Coming. What does this pastor, Jesus, say to his people when he is still with them but will be leaving them shortly? Jesus chooses His words and His advice carefully. What's the first thing He says in today's excerpt from His farewell speech? "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." What were HIS commandments? Love God. Love others. Love yourself. So simple to say. So difficult to live out.

I heard recently on a family-oriented situation comedy, "The Middle," after a disastrous vacation to Disney World, the narrator says, "Why can't my family be perfect like all those other perfect families? Then I realized, there IS no 'perfect family.' We give the best of what we have to each other and we give the worst. We learn to say, 'I'm sorry,' and 'I forgive you.'" The Church is the same way.

Why aren't we getting it? We lament about how so many people are choosing the Culture of Death over the Culture of Life. They still don't get the message that Jesus came to bring. You and I are not selling the product convincingly enough to attract people to the Gospel, to the Church, to St. Martin's. Why is this? Do we believe what we profess? And do we put it into action so powerfully that others see our faith and want to imitate it?

I have found over the years that the Number One Reason people who are welcomed, baptized and received into the Catholic Church at the Great Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday evening is simple. They say, "I want what you have." They have seen our Catholic faith in action, our relationship with Jesus Christ, and they want to share in that themselves. Do we need a helper, an advocate, like those Apostles upon whom the Holy Spirit has not yet descended? Jesus uses a curious word here.

Some scholars translate the word as "Advocate." In Latin, it means, "to speak for someone, to plea on one's behalf." Literally, in Greek, it means, "to call alongside."

When do you and I call someone to be alongside us? When we are running a relay. When we are playing "Tag." When we want someone to accompany us. To walk alongside us

when we go to the doctor for The News or to the hospital for The Procedure. To the funeral home to make arrangements, or as in the case of a husband and wife, to walk alongside each other down the aisle on their wedding day and on their entire married lives together.

Alisa Hope Wagner once said, "The Holy Spirit is like the wind. It can be gentle enough to stroke a leaf but hard enough to bend a tree."

How is the Holy Spirit working in your lives right now? Is it a gentle breeze or a powerful force? The Apostles and the disciples are fruitful in their ministry because they have someone alongside of them, in addition to the Holy Spirit. They have each other. We have each other here at St. Martin de Porres Parish.

As your pastor I can tell you that although our numbers slowly are getting smaller, I have seen great spiritual progress in so many of you. We are becoming that "leaner, meaner church" that Pope Benedict XVI once spoke about. Not "meaner" in the sense of being mean, but "meaner" in the sense of becoming spiritually stronger, more fit. Now we need to figure out how to be an evangelical Church, as Pope Francis is challenging us to be. How to be what the new catch words are: intentional, joyful, missionary disciples. That's your new job title and your new mission: you and I are to become intentional – we freely choose to and want to do it; joyful – we are happy to do it; missionary – we are called to get out of bed, get off the couch, get off the pews and work; disciples – students, learners, realizing that we still have so much to learn and to do.

At the time of Jesus, a "paraclete" was a legal assistant, a courtroom advocate. Jesus is telling us that the Holy Spirit is OUR legal assistant Who speaks up for us when we are falsely accused, judged or wrongly condemned.

When I was in grade school and the good Dominican Sisters talked about "the Paraclete," my creative imagination conjured up those two little pieces of metal that you put on the heels of your shoes in order to make a clicking sound while you tap-danced. Because they were, a "pair a cleats." So, every time Sister would mention The Paraclete, I expected her to break out in a tap dance: "Five, six, seven, eight!..."

Jesus calls that Spirit, the Paraclete, the "Spirit of Truth." God always knows the truth about us, despite what people think of us and the wrong things they say about us. Jesus does promise to be with us. He says, "I will not abandon you. I will not leave you orphaned. I am with you." We have that "Advocate," that "Paraclete," that legal assistant Whom we can call to be alongside us.

St. Peter gives us a word of encouragement in today's Second Reading: "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a

reason for your hope.” Be ready and be prepared to defend your Catholic faith. I think that’s what makes us different from this world. We have light and truth and hope. The world has only darkness and lies and despair. The choice seems so easy, doesn’t it? The Evil One makes the darkness and the lies very attractive and tempting. But they are still lies.

And when we debate with those who would challenge our beliefs, St. Peter says to “do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear.” We don’t resort to personal attacks. We don’t call names or use labels. We debate the issue objectively. We discuss the issue with charity. Don’t ever be ashamed of defending the truth.

If someone were to ask you "What is the Holy Spirit?", what would be an answer you could give them that would open the reality of the Spirit for them? What (or who) is the Holy Spirit for you?

The Letter of Peter says, "It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil." Where in your life have you had to change your behavior, make a difficult choice, or renounce something you desired because of your faith in God? To what good did these sacrifices lead?

The world may have some pretty convincing attorneys and legal advocates on its side. In fact, two local celebrity lawyers are battling between themselves in court! But we have God on our side. We are baptized and most of us are confirmed and strengthened by the Eucharist. We don’t have to wait any longer nor do we need to be afraid. Case closed. Court dismissed. ALLELUIA! And AMEN!