

6th Sunday of Easter ~ April 27, 2008
The Healing Spirit of God

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Isaiah 41: 17 – 20

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Holy One will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together; that all may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Holy One has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.

John 14: 15 – 21

If you love me and obey the command I give you, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Advocate, another Helper to be with you always – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you. I won't leave you orphaned; I will come back to you. A little while now and the world will see me no more; but you'll see me: because I live, you will live as well. On that day you'll know that I abide in God, and you abide in me, and I abide in you. Those who obey the commandments are the ones who love me, and those who love me will be loved by God. I, too, will love them and will reveal myself to them.

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Some years ago, a tourist was exploring a market street in Damascus, Syria. He watched as a bicyclist balanced a crate of oranges on his handlebars. Suddenly, a porter appeared, so bent with a burden that he didn't realize he was walking right into the path of the bicycle. Smack! And immediately after the collision, the oranges went rolling down the street, the burden was dropped, and a war of words broke out between the two men as a crowd gathered to watch the fray. Then the bicyclist moved toward the porter with a clenched fist. Just then, a tatted little man slipped out from the crowd. He took the raised fist in his hands and kissed it. The cursing stopped. The two men relaxed. The crowd murmured approvingly. People began picking up the oranges. And the little man, who helped the healing to happen, melted back into the crowd. (*Lectionary Homiletics*, May 202, p.6)

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus promises us that we will always have an advocate, a comforter, a counselor, the very Spirit of God who will kiss our hurts, our anger, our disappointments, our struggles, and with that kiss, will heal us. When unintentionally we collide with others or find ourselves in unforeseen conflict; when we don't know what hit us but know that we are in a mess; when the oranges of life go rolling down the street and we know that we need someone to help us, it is then that Jesus promises to come to us right at the point of our greatest need. Like the tatted little man who took the raised fist

in his hands and kissed it, so the sweet Spirit who comes from God – a Spirit of truth, a Spirit of love, a Spirit who helps us pick up the pieces, will heal us and get us back on the road once more.

Jesus promises: “I will not leave you orphaned; I will come back to you. I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Advocate, another Helper to be with you always.” And he speaks these words to his disciples just hours before his own death. These verses are part of what is known as Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John. The scene is the Passover, the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples in an upper room. Jesus knows that his own death is imminent. He has lived out God’s love by making God known to the world. He has challenged the political and religious leaders of his day. He has offended them to the extent that they are ready to crucify him. And now, as Jesus anticipates his own death, he also anticipates how it will affect his followers. They will feel orphaned, abandoned, perhaps angry, definitely full of fear. He predicts this as he offers these farewell words to them, words that contain a promise that he will never leave his disciples orphaned. He promises a Helper, a powerful Friend, who is none other than the Spirit of God.

The Greek word for this Helper, Advocate, Comforter, Spirit is *paraclete*. Now Jesus himself has been the *paraclete* for his followers and friends. Think about the many layers of meaning of this word. *Paraclete* can mean an attorney – one who pleads another’s cause. Jesus was constantly pleading the cause of the oppressed to those who had power and authority over them. Jesus was this Advocate for all of humanity as he bridged the gap between us and God. *Paraclete* can also mean comforter. Jesus has been the Word, the encouraging Word of God. He brought comfort to those who mourn and to those who were mistreated. *Paraclete* can also mean Counselor. Jesus has been the Way, the Truth, the Life. He came not to condemn but to save the world. *Paraclete* can also mean Healer. Jesus has been the Great Physician, healing body, mind and spirit and bringing wholeness and life to those whom society deemed unworthy. Yes, Jesus was God’s *paraclete* during his ministry on earth.

And now, Jesus, aware of what the future holds, promises the disciples that after his death and resurrection and ascension, the future will be possible because God will send another *paraclete*, the Holy Spirit, and this Spirit of God will do what Jesus did in his earthly ministry. The Spirit does not come to displace Jesus or Jesus teachings. No, the Spirit comes to magnify Jesus Christ and to continually teach us and show us the way.

It is the fulfillment of our text from Isaiah! “When we are poor and needy and thirsty, when there is no water and our tongues are parched and dry, God will make our wilderness a pool of water and springs of water will arise in the dry land so that we will know and understand that God had done this for us.”

And so we trust that God’s spirit will be there to kiss our hurts, to soothe our pain, to transform our lives with love. Whenever we feel orphaned, the Spirit will abide in us and we will abide in the Spirit. It might be at a time of estrangement from a friend or loved one; it might be the death of a life partner or a beloved child or a close friend; it might be

loosing a job or battling a life threatening illness; it might be an “empty nest” or moving a parent to a long term care facility. Each of us can name times in our own life when we’ve felt orphaned. It is then that Jesus promises us that the Spirit of God will comfort, counsel, heal and advocate for us.

From the end of last year through the first of April, Holy Trinity experienced the loss of many beloved members and friends. It was as if the wave of death kept pounding upon the life of this community. Today’s lesson reminds us that the Spirit of God was and is there for those who grieve and know great loss; and the Spirit was also there for those who made the journey from this life to the next. It would be as if the Spirit not only kissed the hands but took the hands of Kay Ingalls and Leo Toleos; Roy Saunders and Dottie Savory; Kevin Russell and Kenneth Craig; Carl Wallace and Myrle Hawkes; Vi Davis and Donald Saunders; Al Whidden and Ruth Mitchell. And for them, the healing was the ultimate healing that God gives us at death, the gift of eternal life.

Ah, yes, this Advocate, this Comforter, this Sweet Spirit is always there for us personally, and it is also present for the greater community, the church universal, the life of the world. Did we not see that Spirit at work last week as Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States and made significant appearances in Washington, D.C. and New York City? A man who had been caricatured as intolerant, severe and cerebral appeared, instead, as respectful, attentive and pastoral. His reaching out to the victims of sexual abuse and his repeated mentioning of the abuse crisis that he called “evil” brought hope and healing to a number of disenchanting Roman Catholics. Through him, the Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, kissed the hands and lives of those who were angry and troubled, abused and hurt, and made hope and healing possible. Similarly, his prayers for peace at Ground Zero and his reaching out and clasping the hands of survivors and relatives of those who died there on September 11, 2001 brought comfort to those who mourn.

And it was as if he was summoning the Spirit of God to heal the whole world and bring blessed peace when he prayed “God of peace, bring your peace to our violent world, peace in the hearts of all men and women and peace among the nations of the earth. Turn to your way of love those whose hearts and minds are consumed with hatred.” By praying these words, Pope Benedict affirmed that the Spirit of God is love and when it abides in us and we abide in it, then, indeed, peace will be possible, even in our war-torn, weary world.

What can we do to let God know that we want to abide in this Spirit, this Advocate, this Comforter, this Healer? How and when can we let God know that we trust Jesus’ words that we will not be orphaned? Prayer is surely a way to communicate with the One who is this source of love. Flora Slosson Wuellner in her book *Prayer, Stress and Our Inner Wounds* offers some meaningful thoughts on prayer. (pp. 24 -25) She suggests that you remember three things when you pray.

First, you do not need to beg or plead with God. Prayer is a response to the love already forever given to you. God is far more ready to hear and to give than you are to speak or to receive. God loves you even when you cannot feel love for God. God hears you even when you cannot speak. God meets you even when you are not worthy to be met. God holds you in the healing hands even when you lie down helplessly on them.

Second, remember that this is a living relationship with God and not a set of prayer rules to follow. Your ways of praying will change, evolve, expand, and flow in new ways over time. Making a prison out of any one way of praying or letting anyone else impose a method of praying that doesn't seem right or natural or helpful will only distract you from your intimate relationship with God.

And finally, be gentle with yourself. Sometimes you will have wandering thoughts, distractions during prayer. Don't fight them or force them down. Perhaps they are signals of deep wounded areas within that need healing. Smile at them as you would at a little child or animal at play, and return to the center while they play at the edges of your consciousness.

And remember, you won't always feel deep love for God or deep longing for prayer. There are seasons of prayer just as there are seasons during the year. As with a committed friendship, there will be times when you feel much emotional concentration on the other and times when you feel parched and blank and dry. This does not weaken or invalidate prayer. Some of the most powerful times of prayer are the times when with humor and honesty you admit to God that at the moment you feel dry, bored, not in the mood, and yet, nevertheless, you are willing to be reached and nurtured.

I do believe that through prayer amazing changes can and will happen in life because when we take the time to abide in God, to talk and to listen to God, to bring our brokenness to God, it is then that we will realize Jesus' promise and recognize the presence of the Spirit within us. And that Spirit will take our clenched fist and kiss it and offer us the gift of healing love.

And so, let us be in a time of prayer, spending these next few minutes inviting God to be that healing presence and power in our lives. The hymns that we sing can be offered as prayers themselves. And those who would like the laying on of hands, either for your self or for another whom you know and love, may come to the rail where Carol and I will invite the Holy Spirit to fill you with grace that you might know the healing power of God's love.