

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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You Are Not Alone
John 14:15-21

So, what has the Holy Spirit done for you lately?

Hmmmm??

I see a lot of puzzled expressions. In the United Church of Christ we are not known for talking about the Holy Spirit very much. We dust the Spirit off every Pentecost and then back it away again for next year right next to the nativity set.

If we were in the Pentecostal tradition, the Spirit is an integral part of people's lives, filling them up during worship through divine healing, prophecy or speaking in tongues, and a reliable guide and presence to lean on in times of trouble or worry or decision. Our Pentecostal brothers and sisters in faith feel moved by the Spirit, actively invite the Spirit into worship and their lives. They count on this last divine gift that Jesus gave the disciples as he got ready to depart.

On the other end of the Christian spectrum, our Quaker brothers and sisters also count on the guidance of the Spirit. Quaker services are often silent until someone feels so moved by the Spirit he or she must speak and share thoughts about faith, a decision the church is faced with, or a decision in their own lives. Quakers wait for the Spirit to unite them in consensus before making a decision, a way of church leadership that makes our UCC democratic method seem downright speedy.

So why are we so shy about the Spirit? Do we even know what we believe about the Holy Spirit? Is the Spirit just the lesser known part of the Trinity: the two guys and a bird.

Today's scripture is from Jesus Farewell Speech to the disciples in the book of John. This speech actually happened before Jesus died but these passages from John are usually read during the Easter season. That is because Jesus is talking about what will happen after he is gone. The disciples are understandably worried about this. They will be left on their own, bereft, abandoned. Alone.

What are they going to do?

Last week the disciples were hiding out in an upper room afraid to go outside.

Two weeks ago they had given up all together and went fishing.

So this week we get these words from Jesus saying, ok guys, this is what's going to happen. I'm not leaving you alone. You have each other of course. But given that it looks like you are going to need a little more help than that, I'm going to do something else as well. I'm going to talk to God and we'll send you a something to help out.

Jesus says "I will not leave you orphaned." In Jesus' day, when a rabbi or other leader died in the Greek world, the disciples were said to be orphaned.

But Jesus says no. I will not leave you orphaned. I will ask God and God will provide you will a Friend, an advocate. The Greek word used in the text is paraclete. God will send us a paraclete. Well, what is that?

“In the Roman law system, a defendant didn’t hire an attorney to argue his case. Instead, each person was expected to defend himself; he was, in essence, his own lawyer. That is why, throughout the book of Acts, one sees Paul repeatedly defending himself before the Sanhedrin, before the Roman governor and Jewish king and even, by implication, before Caesar.

“But how would an ordinary person know the law well enough to present an adequate defense? He would hire a “paracletos.” A paracletos was a professional expert on Roman law. Once hired to support the defense of an accused person, the paracletos would brief him before the trial, and would attend the trial. He would sit next to the defendant, and as the defendant would make his case, the paracletos would whisper advice into his ear so that the defendant might present the best possible case for his innocence.www.piut.org.

That paraclete is the Holy Spirit. The part of God, the member of the Trinity, that is always with us.

It means we are never alone. We are always surrounded by the presence of God, and even the Holy Spirit resides within us.

I used to knit with a group back in Michigan and we knew each other well enough that over time we talked about more serious subjects beyond our projects. One afternoon we talked about death—those who had died in our lives and what death is all about.

One woman in the group said, “well, we all die alone.” And many of us nodded, understanding that yes, indeed, that is a journey we all have to take by ourselves into the mystery beyond life on this earth.

And then I added, “yes, but no one really dies alone.” Everyone nodded and agreed. The conversation moved on but about 20 minutes later one woman said to me, “wait a minute, when you said no one really dies alone, did you mean God?” She had assumed I meant that there were always nurses, care givers, hospice folks and others around. But no, I had in fact meant God, Jesus, the Spirit, the Divine.

For I believe with absolute certainty that we are never alone, abandoned, even as we take our last dying breath. The divine is always present, when we die and all the days before. Jesus said so.

But it doesn’t always feel like that. We can feel alone, dreadfully, terribly, painfully alone.

Each of us has felt dreadfully alone at some point in our lives. Sometimes for long stretches. Alone in the nighttime shadows of the 3-4am sleeplessness when worries loom so large.

Alone in the aftermath of a divorce, raw from the hurt, perhaps parenting alone for the first time.

Alone after the death of a spouse—our partner, wife, husband--gone after so many years together.

Alone as a loved one slips into Alzheimer’s and our own mother, whom we have counted on to always know us and love us, no longer even knows our face.

Alone after a pastor leaves a our church and the congregation is left in transition and with lots of questions.

Alone. Orphaned.

But Jesus promises us that this is not the case. "I will talk to God, and God will provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth."

Even when we feel most alone, when mourning, in loss, dying, etc., we are not alone. This can be a great comfort to us. But think also what meant to early Christians persecuted for their belief. Think what it means to folks struggling with impossible situations of violence or despair.

You are not alone. The paraclete/Friend/Companion/Advocate/Presence will be with you. No wonder our Pentecostal and Quaker friends rely on the Spirit. What a great blessing!

While in high school I was active in Amnesty International, the global advocacy organization that seeks to free political prisoners and pressure nations to improve their human rights practices. I was captured by the message of Amnesty especially by one part of their mission--the simple act played out over and over again around the world of a note smuggled in to prisoners whose cases they were working on, a note that says, "you are not alone." That one simple gesture, that one note, means everything to one sitting alone, in the dark, hurting, desperately afraid and in despair.

To know that we are not alone can be so powerful. It can help us realize that others have gone before us. We are not the only one suffering. Whether struggling with lessening of ability as we age, or grieving a child going to prison, or clawing our way through depression, we are not alone.

The Paraclete/advocate/comforter/friend will be with us. We are not alone.

This is the great strength of the church community as well. We gather together and it is an affirmation that we as individuals are not alone. When we share a prayer of joy and concern, we have the strength of others praying with us. We gather as a group of people who have a whole range of experiences. And we can turn to each other in times of suffering.

There is a good chance that no matter what we are going through there is someone else in this community who personally knows the pain of losing a child, who personally knows the struggle of being an alcoholic, who personally knows the cost of being a whistleblower in their company, who knows breast cancer or estrangement from their family.

You are not alone. We are not alone.

But there may be times when we feel we cannot open up to those who sit next to us in the pew or our friends or even our closest loved one. We fear judgment or misunderstanding or sometimes are just so deeply hurt. There are not a lot of friends who can sit with us in our remorse over an extramarital affair. Our advocate/paraclete can and does. There are few people we feel we can share our childhood sexual abuse with. But the Holy Spirit, our advocate, is present, always.

Today's scripture affirms for us that we are not alone. There is always someone we can turn to. An advocate, a comforter, a friend, who is as close as our own breathing. A part of God's own self. Jesus says "I will not leave you orphaned." Jesus says, "I am in you and you are in me." We are not alone.

A colleague in a past lectionary group served a church in Hawaii. While reading this passage in Hawaiian, the word for paraclete translates as kokua.

“Now, "kokua" literally means "help" or "helper." But it also has a richer meaning, in the context of Kalaupapa, the settlement for persons with Hansen's Disease or as we used to refer to it, leprosy.”

When someone in Hawaii was diagnosed with Hansen’s disease they were sent into exile for life to Kalaupapa. Their exile was permanent and it meant being dropped off by boat at a settlement filled with those ill and dying of the disease which took years. It was a windy, bereft peninsula on a lonely island.

“Kokua (pronounced "ko-KOO-ah") was the name given to someone who accompanied a patient to Kalaupapa. Your kokua went with you into the settlement, and they never left. In choosing to be a kokua, you in essence gave your life for the other person, you gave up your life to companion them forever. You committed yourself to journey beside another through thick and thin, whatever life would bring. And you entirely cast your lot in with one who was an outcast forever.”

This colleague concludes, “It's an intriguing concept for the Holy Spirit, isn't it?” (Donald Schmidt, midrash.org list serv)

We are not alone. We have a kokua, a helper, an advocate, a paraclete with us. Always. And we have each as we are asked as part of a faith community to walk as kokua with one another into life’s lonely and desperate places.

The good news, folks, is that you are not alone. Ever. God cares so deeply for us that God is always present, God sends each of us the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. Jesus walked this earth to show us the way and still appears to us in both those who guide us and those who challenge us to do greater things. We are not alone. Of that I am absolutely sure.

I want to close with one more story, a story that was told on the TV show The West Wing many years ago and that still resonates with me today. Two characters are speaking together, one with a huge problem, and the other who offers to help.

“This guy's walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out.

A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, 'Hey you. Can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up, 'Father, I'm down in this hole can you help me out?' The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

Then a friend walks by, 'Hey, Joe, it's me can you help me out?' And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, 'Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.' The friend says, 'Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out.'"

We are not alone. Others have walked this way before and they know the way out of life’s most difficult, despairing moments.

We are not alone. We gather as a church community to hold onto each other, and companion each other on this journey.

We are not alone. The Holy Spirit/Helper/Advocate will be with us in any steep, deep hole we fall into. And will be beside us the day we emerge and all the days beyond.
You are not alone. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

We're born alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone."
Orson Welles

On stage I make love to twenty five thousand people; and then I go home alone.
View quotes by Janis Joplin

Epimenides (c. 600 BCE), "In him, we live and move and have our being" (vs. 28a). Then he quotes Aratus (c. 315-240 BCE), "For we are his offspring". Of course, Epimenides and Aratus are referring to Zeus, the head of the Greek gods. But Paul didn't let that stand in his way. He uses their words to refer to this "unknown god" who is creator of nature, history, the Greek city-states and each Greek. And, apparently, those listening to Paul accept his interpretation of their poets.(partners in urban transformation,

Albert Schweitzer reminds us that Jesus, too, is largely unknown, in the beautiful concluding passage to his Quest of the Historical Jesus.
He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.