

A couple of weeks ago at our formation class, a question came up. “Why don’t Episcopalians hear much about the Holy Spirit?” I found it to be not only quite astute, but perfectly timed. You see, we’re in the last days of the Easter season when the fog of mystery begins to lift and open onto the season of Ordinary time. In two weeks, we will celebrate Pentecost. These are, indeed, perfect moments for us to experience the Holy Spirit.

This morning we do hear about the Holy Spirit. Specifically, Jesus responds to another insightful question asked by another disciple, this one named Judas. Just before our Gospel reading, Judas has asked, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?” And Jesus *responds* but doesn’t really answer Judas’ question at all.

Judas most likely wants to know something about the boundaries between the fledgling house churches that, on one front, were being evicted from the synagogue and, on another, were surrounded by Roman temples. That was the entire world that the disciples knew. So why, Judas wants to know, *why* did Jesus choose this group of people over other Jews or the Romans?

Now Jesus, John’s Jesus in particular, frequently teaches by opening the disciples to a larger perspective that they must ponder—a glimpse into a more inclusive reality. Without dismissing or disputing the worldview that has framed Judas’ question, Jesus subtly undermines it, making any conversation about “us and them” irrelevant. There is something more important than divvying the world up into who’s in and who’s out.

Jesus implies that, in time, he will be revealed to *all* who love him and who keep his mandate to love as he loves us. He will be revealed to *all* in the coming of the Holy Spirit. Remember, John’s Jesus came into the world not to condemn, but to save all those who have not chosen to reject or blind themselves to God’s love. The peace, the *shalom*, murdered at the crucifixion will be the *shalom* that Jesus leaves behind. That *shalom* will be all the more present and alive in the grace-filled indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Despite his going away, Jesus comes to us, drawing us into the love of Abba God and the Son.

In union with Jesus Christ and God, the Holy Spirit teaches all we need to put God’s love into action. But the Holy Spirit never acts as an independent force; we know her to be a gift of Christ and the breath of God, and she directs us back to the Word at every turn. Often, she does so in unexpected ways or

with unexpected results, but her insights and her teaching take us into deeper and fuller understandings of God as revealed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit's ability to shake up our familiar worlds and hurl us into new perspectives happens time and time again in scripture, in post-biblical history and even now. She is so dynamic that even giving her a name proves elusive, which may be adding to the perception that we don't hear about her.

In John's original Greek manuscripts, Jesus named her the "Paraclete," a word that was translated in the King James Bible as "comforter." And for 300 years that was the standard in the English-speaking part of Christianity. That translation sounds reassuring because the Spirit truly can be comforting to God's people. That word also served the translators of the King James Bible who had a vested interest in toning down those aspects of scripture that challenge empirical authority. But "comforting" is not the only activity of the Spirit.

When the Revised Version of our Holy Scripture came out in 1881, the translators rendered the word "paraclete" to "counselor." Again, the translation is encouraging because we still do experience the Spirit alongside us in deeply personal support. The Holy Spirit has served countless Christians and churches as a guide to making personal and collective life changes. The name "counselor" also leaves a little room for challenging extractive, fear-based earthly powers. But counseling is not the only activity of the Spirit.

In 1989, in the New Revised Standard Version, the version that we heard today, scholars translated the word "paraclete" into "advocate." That's yet another valid translation of the Greek that also incorporates the ancient Greek culture in which an advocate was a person called into court as a favorable witness for the defense. And when we are weak or in trouble, from time to time, the Spirit does still speak and act in our defense. But, once again, acting in our defense is not all that the Spirit does.

In 2007, in yet one more effort to capture the essence of the role of the Holy Spirit, a group of scholars called "Priests for Equality" published a version of scripture called the Inclusive Bible. They and many others have decided to just transliterate the Greek word, returning to the word Paraclete. So in one sense, we have come full circle, right back to where we first started. But in another sense, we have made profound inroads.

Let me show you what I mean. There is Sanskrit phrase for an approach to prayer and contemplation that comes from the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism. The phrase, "neti, neti," means "not this, not that." As a spiritual

practice, neti-neti contemplations help the practitioner to see that they are not limited by any of the aspects of themselves that we normally identify with: we have personalities, but we are not limited by them. We have feelings and emotions, but aren't limited by them. Do you see?

We have appearances, perspectives, gender and sexual orientation, but we are not limited by them. That is to say, these do not define all that we are. We have relationships, memories and social roles, but we are not limited by them. We are much larger than any of these qualities or roles *alone*. We transcend all of them. Each time we transcend a dimension of our being that we previously identified with, our sense of self, our awareness of who we are, expands.

In Christian terms, what is left when we release our identification all these aspects of who we are, is a state of unknowing in which we can experience what is called *kataphatic* prayer—prayer without images, words or sensations. “Not this, not that.” We can enter a *cloud of unknowing* and simply let the mind rest in the awareness of God in God's unnamable existence, content to love God for what God is in Godself.

Now, I'm not sure which word is less familiar, “neti-neti” or “kataphatic,” but in pointing to the word “paraclete”—a word that comprises and outshines hundreds of others—these unfamiliar words may be the most appropriate.

Think about all the words we use that are both true and yet somewhat limiting for the Paraclete: Breath of Creation; Inspirer of Holy Scripture; Comforter, Counselor, Advocate; Convicter of Sin; the Holy Seal; Guide; Indweller of God's Children; Intercessor; Revealer and Spirit of Truth; Giver of Life; Teacher; Witness.

All of these are true and Scripturally sound names, and all of these names are partial. But maybe after centuries of trying to capture the Holy Spirit in a name—maybe we are starting to relax our impulse to limit the Holy Spirit by a specific identification. What remains is simply to be wordlessly present to God's mystical reality.

Making ourselves present without expectations, judgments or limitations allows us to experience the Paraclete who is utterly *one* with us and also totally beyond us—the loving presence of Jesus Christ *after* the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

Being present in states of unknowing gives the Paraclete our consent to continue moving us out past our comfortable limitations and yet to comfort us in dark and difficult times. Our presence in states of unknowing signals our willingness for the Paraclete to speak the language of silence to our heart of

hearts, while reminding us of Jesus' words and teachings in new contexts. Opening ourselves to unknowing allows the Paraclete to act as our advocate and also the judge who sees us as our best selves.

Now, if all that is just too much to take in, trust this: Jesus, in John's gospel, promised that the One who is coming will come bearing many gifts. Jesus promised that the Paraclete would teach us what we need to be taught and remind us of what Jesus has said and done for us. The reality of that promise is far more important than the accuracy or the precision of the words we use to describe the experience.

The Paraclete comes to help, not to hinder; to mend hearts, not to rend them; to intercede rather than to interrogate. She certainly engages us outside these walls, but here in this sanctuary, gathered as God's people, we create a fertile field for the Paraclete to take root and blossom. When we come together to worship, the Paraclete moves freely between us and among us, like a fierce wind or a continuous breath, knitting us together through the hymns we sing, the prayers we pray, the breaths we breathe.

Pay attention to her. Listen to each other. Be awake and alert to the ways God moves in your life and in the lives of those you love. Have the courage to follow out the Paraclete beyond self-imposed limitations. Go where she beckons. That's how God will change the world.