

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, May 14, 2023 (Mother's Day)
10am

Text: John 14:15-21 (NRSVUE)

Theme: New Life through the Spirit

[prayer]

Today's Scripture lesson holds a special place in the lectionary. The words we just heard read are words of preparation. We are being prepared for the next two Sundays in the church calendar: Ascension Sunday and Pentecost Sunday. Ascension Sunday marks the end of Eastertide. It recalls when the resurrected Jesus passed on his earthly ministry to his disciples and then ascended into heaven. But Jesus' ascent was followed by a descent: the descent of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost Sunday celebrates that descent and the subsequent birth of Christ's Church, which is now his body on the earth in these latter days.

These preparatory words in John 14 are part of a section of the Gospel of John called the Farewell Discourse. Jesus shared this message with his disciples not long before he was crucified. He was anxious to prepare them for their new lives after his death, resurrection, and ascension. Up until this point, the disciples had been witnesses and participants in Jesus' ministry only. But soon they would become his heirs, caretakers of his mission. The ministry that Jesus began would pass to them and it would be their responsibility to ensure it continued.

As these words were spoken for the benefit of the Twelve, they have been spoken for our benefit, too. They remind us that our relationship with God and our neighbors is at the core of our mission: To make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world. These words also remind us that our mission is animated by Love – the Love that is embodied in Jesus. This Love is not a feeling; it is an action. And what empowers that action in us is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

John 14 includes the first appearance of the word *paraklētos* – the Paraclete. Paraclete is the Greek name for the Holy Spirit. It means "one who has been called to our side." That is a long name, so English translations of the Bible have chosen

to condense it into different words: Comforter (KJV), Counselor (NIV), Advocate (NRSV).

I like the word Advocate for the Holy Spirit because, of all the names we give her, it captures perhaps the most holistic picture of what the Holy Spirit does. Advocate is a legal term; another name for a lawyer is an advocate. The name describes what a lawyer does: Advocate for – recommend and support – the best interests of their clients.

Jesus says to the disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned” (v. 18). As Jesus he prepares to leave, he promises to send them another Advocate who will support their well-being. Their first Advocate was Jesus himself. His ministry was a ministry of advocacy. This advocacy looked like hospitality and inclusion – think of the meals Jesus shared with sinners and outcasts. It looked like relief and liberation – think of the people Jesus healed and the message he preached. It even looked like protest and calling out sin – think of Jesus overturning the moneychangers’ tables in the Temple. This record of Jesus’ ministry is ultimately a record of him coming alongside the poor and the oppressed, advocating and acting in love for the vulnerable.

When Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (v. 15), he is speaking of his commandments to love God and neighbor. And we love God best by loving our neighbors.

This ministry of Love is not easy. Sometimes our neighbor can be difficult to love; other times, we misunderstand the best way to love our neighbor and we end up hurting more than helping. Imagine how overwhelmed and scared the Twelve must have felt as Jesus revealed that he was giving his mission on earth to them to safeguard and continue. But Jesus anticipates their fear, which is why he promises they will not be abandoned. *We have not been abandoned!* Jesus says that if we are loving God by loving our neighbor, the Holy Spirit will be present to guide and empower our Love. Together we have received the gift of “the one who has been called to our side.” The Spirit is our companion in the ministry of Love. She has been given to us to guide and equip us in our formation as disciples of Jesus. Even now, she instructs us in the way to go.

Our egg-emerging creatures this week and next are birds. The most common image for the Spirit is a bird, specifically the dove. This is biblical; when Jesus was baptized, John the Baptist declared, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove” (John 1:32). The dove is a beautiful and peaceful metaphor for the Spirit, signifying the assurance of our identity as God’s beloved children. But the dove is perhaps too tame of a bird to represent the Holy Spirit’s advocacy in our lives. Which is why I submit a different bird to ponder: The humble crow.

Crows are not peaceful or majestic birds. Though they are some of the smartest birds around, they are also noisy irritants. My family’s property is home to many magpies, close cousins of the crow. They gather on the roof and the fence and the lawn, hopping about animatedly and generally making a ruckus. One magpie couple has built an impressive-looking twig “condo” in the tree outside the kitchen window. Every year they come back and hatch another clutch of eggs.

One summer we discovered an injured baby magpie under a pine tree at the end of our driveway. It had been caught and wounded by a predator. We called our local veterinarian, asking what we should do. They told us the nestling probably would not survive. So, we made a little makeshift shelter to keep it protected from the elements and then waited to see what would happen. The vet was right; by the next morning, the baby bird had died. But what has stuck with me since is the memory of its mother perched on the fence across the road. She kept noisy watch over her baby until the very end, hopping along the fence like a sentry guard, cawing harshly at anyone or anything that came close.

The Holy Spirit is just as fierce an advocate for our wellbeing. She will not abandon us in our formation as disciples. This is good news because our formation is not always comfortable. The new life that Jesus offers through the Spirit inevitably involves some growing pains. The Holy Spirit may comfort, console, and rescue, but she also convicts us of our sin. She challenges our understanding of faith and discipleship. She exhorts us to be lovers of compassion and doers of justice. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is many things, but above all she is concerned with the perfection of our faith. She is a tenacious Advocate for our continuous growth as followers of Jesus.

If we want to follow Jesus, then we must submit ourselves to the growing pains that Love demands. This is the truth that the Spirit reveals: God is Love, and this

Love abides in Jesus, and Jesus abides in us – in this community, gathered here in his name, inheritors of his mission. The Spirit instructs us that our love must look like Jesus' love – an active love, a love that advocates for our neighbor.

Recently I was reminded of the history of Mother's Day. This history has largely been buried under commercialism. Mother's Day can be painful for people for lots of reasons, and this commercialism can leave people feeling forgotten or excluded. So, in the spirit of encouragement, I commend to you instead the original purpose of this day. In the 1860s, a Methodist woman named Ann Reeves Jarvis began organizing women's clubs to serve suffering mothers and children in her native West Virginia. These clubs advocated for better working conditions, sanitation, and nutrition for the poor. When the Civil War began, the clubs started a field hospital to tend to the wounded.

Harriet Olson, General Secretary of United Women in Faith, said this about Ann Jarvis:

"[She] was convinced that mothers, women, but especially mothers, had to work for peace because they could see the ravages of war in their husbands and in their sons, in a way that was so focused and so clear that their voices would be powerful. And that's what's at the genesis of the current Mother's Day."¹

In 1908, Ann Jarvis' daughter, Anna Jarvis, organized the first official Mother's Day celebration at Andrews Methodist Episcopal Church in Grafton, WV. Mother's Day was originally envisioned as a means of celebrating the power of women to organize and advocate for compassion and justice. This is the Spirit of truth – the Spirit of Motherhood! – at work, advocating for and making a way for new life on the margins. The Spirit continues to empower the original intent of the Mother's Day ministry across our global connection, especially through child and maternal health programs overseas. Just this week United Methodist News published an inspiring story about the Child and Maternal Health Program in the Kivu Conference in eastern Congo.² The program is funded by our church's mission agency and supports more than 100 HIV-positive women and their children with food, counseling, transportation to medical appointments, and microcredit loans.

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/methodist-history-the-founding-mothers-of-mothers-day>

² <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/church-gives-hope-to-people-living-with-hiv-in-congo>

Thanks be to God for the beloved workers who are advocating for these women and children and sharing the love of Jesus! Thanks be to God for the new life that has been made available to our sisters in Christ in Kivu!

Today, friends, let us rejoice that we have the Holy Spirit as our Advocate. She challenges us and empowers us to grow as advocates of God's love in the world. As we prepare our hearts for prayer, let us bless her presence among us and pray to continue growing as advocates of new life in our world.

Amen.