

COMPANION, COMFORTER, TEACHER; JOHN 14:23-29; EASTER VI, MAY 1, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I was talking with a member of the congregation recently whose spouse has spent considerable time in the health care system. She told me how challenging it is – insurance forms, medications, testing, hospital stays and doctors, many doctors.

She concluded her description of the health care gauntlet and said, “You have to be your own advocate.”

“Absolutely!” I said, thinking of our own experiences as a family and the episodes of frustration that big, complicated systems subject their beneficiaries to that many of you have shared with me.

In today’s lesson Jesus makes a statement that is about as good as good news in the Bible gets – he says to his worried, frightened disciples whom he has just told he is about to leave, that he is going to send them an “Advocate” – translated elsewhere as “Counselor,” “Comforter,” “Companion.” Jesus promises us an “Advocate” for life.

For Americans, especially of the male species, this may be a hard pill to swallow. We are rugged individualists. We ‘do what we have to do’ to ‘get things done’ – on our own, thank you very much.

We pull ourselves up by our bootstraps; we cut down Christmas trees in the wilderness and haul them back to our log cabins behind our horse. We even used to smoke Marlboro cigarettes until the Surgeon General told us it wasn’t good for our health.

But the truth is, life is difficult – and meeting it with our best, every step of the way is impossible. Not to mention, Jesus makes life *more difficult*. He asks us to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, take the shirt off our back and give it to the one with no shirt.

He says things like, “Moses said do not commit murder, but I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment.” Is he serious? Have you ever felt like responding judgmentally to someone at a church board meeting or the Thanksgiving dinner table?

Jesus already knows we can’t get through life alone, nor does he expect us to love others as he has loved us – without some external help.

His promise of the Spirit is, therefore, very specific: “The Companion, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

He’s tells the despairing disciples he is going to be with them, at their side, in life’s difficult moments, even though he will not be with them in the flesh.

The same Spirit that possessed and inspired him to preach in his hometown synagogue, that seized him to drive the money changers out of the temple, that compelled him to stand up courageously to the authorities, the same Spirit that supported him in his last hours of agony on the cross and thrust him from the tomb at his resurrection – *that same Spirit* is what he bestows upon his disciples.

The demands of any religion are too tough for anyone to do alone; I heard last week of a Zen master who collapsed under the pressure of teaching so many students; Orthodox rabbinical students are notoriously sequestered all their waking hours to study and memorize Torah and the arguments of the Talmud, and often break under the pressure;
an old friend who burned out in a high steeple church, now leads a retreat center in Atlanta for clergy who crash and burn.

And that's the professionals. Consider the *members* of any given church – who struggle to balance the demands of work and home, raise children, earn and save enough for college educations and a decent retirement, who strive to take care of themselves with exercise and diet; and many with aging dependent parents. Then add feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner and working for justice.

Is there even time to worry about the Spirit? Can't we just do the best we can, shovel the walk, cut the grass, pay the bills and get to church when we can?

This is precisely the deluge of life Jesus knew would overtake his followers as it almost overtook him. The whole pattern of his ministry was to engage and retreat; to preach and heal and then to go to a quiet place to pray; not to veg out, but to open his heart and mind to the comfort and guidance of Yahweh, then listen.

A congregation can get lost meeting all of the demands placed upon it as well – running a Sunday School, choir rehearsals, board and committee meetings, keeping the building in repair and paying the bills. When a prominent church consultant was asked why so many churches turn inward, lethargic and shrink he didn't mention an institutional problem or need for clergy training, he said, neglect of the third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit.

For some folks talk of the Holy Spirit is slippery and illusive. But when Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, he was not giving us a riddle to figure out, or shrouding the life of faith in mystery; he was providing comfort, guidance and assurance.

The Spirit will do these things for you he said. It will remind you of all that I have said – and teach you what you need to know – when you need to know it; like a personal trainer for the soul. How do we access the Spirit? What book do we read or course do we take? Little children, I can hear him saying, "Open your eyes and see."

Even Jesus had to periodically retreat to a quiet place to reconnect with the Spirit, with his mission. When we stop long enough and quiet the din around us then God can speak. We are so busy, as I said last week, we don't have time to even formulate the deep questions lurking beneath the surface of our busy lives let alone listen for God's response.

I love the banners on the long driveway into the St. Columban Retreat Center that say: Be still; and know; that I; am God. Be still.

That's where it starts. The spiritual needle will not move one iota until we learn to be still.

What is remarkable to me are the congregations – lead by the Spirit – far from perfect, with shortcomings and flaws yet, the Holy Spirit enables them to overcome what many churches would not tolerate. Like the Village Church that is renting space on the third floor of First Presbyterian at Symphony Circle – one of the fastest growing churches in the region.

The space allotted to them is early attic, stuffy, and accessed by a winding staircase; it has an undersized kitchenette – inadequate for their burgeoning needs. But the room is packed Sunday mornings with twenty something married and single adults – many with small children.

This is not a church with all of the problems of the world solved; they have growing pains; space issues; but they are what I would describe as ‘alive with the Spirit’ – there is something at work guiding them, speaking through the leadership, through the willingness of the members who make time for each other because relationships are where our love for God is reflected.

Or River Rock church in Black Rock led by my friend Bob Tice. River Rock is where Dr. Myron Glick – founder of Jericho Road Ministries belongs. Talk about challenges; it is an English as second language congregation with members from six or eight African nations, languages and tribal cultures.

River Rock is a Pentecostal church so everything they do is inspired and driven by the Holy Spirit – they are like Quakers with a liturgy.

River Rock and Jericho Road have started a mission to children whose family members were lost in the genocide of the civil war in the Republic of Congo. They have raised \$100k and formed teams in the Congo and here. No neglect of the Third Person of the Trinity in those churches.

If you take the 30,000 foot perspective it is clear that the Holy Spirit is at work across the local, national and global church – it would be difficult to explain the phenom- enon of Pope Francis – a Jesuit of all things, an order long held in suspicion by the Vatican – it would be difficult to explain this humble priest who is transforming one of the most rigid, privileged and entrenched corporate cultures in the world.

Why did his predecessor abdicate the papacy – the first time in 900 years such a thing happened? How did Francis’ name even get into the pool of candidates? Where does a regular human being like him get the interior strength and moral discipline to utterly reject the opulence, comfort, services and privileges provided to the Pope?

I am not saying we have to be the Pope or a Pentecostal or evangelical to discern the leading of the Spirit. Of course you already know this; you’ve experienced it before; doors open, doors close, we meet people, strangers, we’ve been looking for; resources we need fall into our laps; what was expected to be fractious and painful is marked by harmony and satisfaction.

Yet we often don't get there without some crisis; some hitting of the bottom or a wall or facing some dreaded outcome – like the disciples huddled in the upper room asking Jesus not to leave them.

Such moments are actually gifts – they tell us the old way of doing business isn't working, they suggest perhaps we're not doing so well as we thought trying to make it on our own.

So we reach out, open up, admit we need help and pray.

There is today a disturbing trend in the Protestant church – to strip away the spiritual, to demythologize the holy, to debunk and defame the religious. I would say it resembles nothing less than a virulent form of ancient Gnosticism – the presumption that we can achieve salvation through gnosis or knowing; reason; rational control.

Like Gnosticism of the first century, modern Gnosticism threatens to engulf the church with a colorless, cerebral rejection of religion and replace it with a shallow credo loosely based on the 'teachings of Jesus.' This trend has gained credence across the failing Protestant churches.

Anything smacking of Spirit is labeled superstitious, antiquated and pre-modern. What I am describing is the struggle for the soul, the life of the church and the well-being and fulfillment of its members.

We have a stunning history of Holy Spirit projects and ministries here at Westminster – moments when we decided to risk, to put ourselves out there, to listen for another voice in addition to the voice of prudence and profit and loss.

We find ourselves again at such a moment of opportunity. Perhaps you find yourself at such a juncture as well.

No one is asking us to check our brains at the door but to trust in the Advocate, the one Jesus said is waiting to lead us in our life and mission.

If we put ourselves out there we'll be held up; if we leap, God will catch us.

Scary I know. The rich young ruler found Jesus' request more than he was willing to give up; but the woman at the well, the Centurion whose daughter was dying, the sisters of Lazarus, and

even old, erudite, always-in-control Nicodemus found new life. Amen.