

Indispensable Wit(h)nesses: You Need The Paraclete
John 14:12-31
13th Sunday After Pentecost
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Dr. Rick Jensen
First Christian Church
Omaha, Nebraska

Despite having been adopted, I've never liked the word "orphan." My parents never used it and I never identified with Oliver Twist.

But no matter how many times I hear Jesus tell his disciples "*I will not leave you orphaned,*" I find the words comforting. It says to me that no matter if our Jonathan turns into Judas, or if any of our other "Indispensable Wit(h)nesses" abandon us, God will still be there. It's why I like to quote this text at funerals, because I believe the grieving find it comforting too!

Yet, when you give it half a thought, Jesus' promise ought to strike us as odd, since Jesus' tells his disciples this as he bids them farewell. He doesn't say, "I'm running down to the store and will be back in a sec." He's telling them he's about to die! He's preparing them for life without him, but he still says, "*I will not leave you orphaned!*" How can he do this?

By telling them he is sending them the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "I will come to you." Not as the person they knew before, walking down Judea's dusty roads, healing folks, feeding hungry crowds, raising the dead, but as the Holy Spirit, of all things!

Now, if we were all Pentecostals or Charismatics, we'd immediately raise our "Hallelujahs!" and "Praise the Lords!" But let's be honest. When it comes to matters of the Holy Spirit, we old-line, Protestants just don't do that.

Maybe it's because those of us in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) focus all our energy and attention on Jesus. "*I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and accept him as my Lord and Savior,*" we declare in our Confession of Faith. Hear Jesus' name? We at least give God a passing nod. But the Holy Spirit? Sorry Charlie!

Maybe it's because of our radical materialism. Not that "shop-till-you-drop" kind of materialism, but the idea that if we can't touch it, taste it, smell it or see it, it can't be real or be believed.

Maybe it's because, the Holy Spirit sounds terribly spooky! I grew up hearing the name "Holy ***Ghost***" not Holy Spirit, so I always thought this 3rd person of the Trinity (God the Father and God the Son being the first two) is a character to dress up as for Halloween! Besides, the Holy Spirit sounds like something utterly uncontrollable, like a spirited child or a spirited horse! The Bible talks of the Holy Spirit as "fire," "wind," "water," "descending dove!" Try to seize control of those things! We are understandably wary!

But along comes Jesus, giving a Moses-on-Mt. Nebo-like, Farewell Address saying, “*I will not leave you orphaned,*” and then pleading the case of the Holy Spirit. How can he do this? Why would he do this?

He can do this because for him the Holy Spirit was as real as wind and fire. And the word in today’s text referred to as the Holy Spirit, Paraclete, is easily as concrete. It’s often translated in the scriptures as Comforter, Advocate, Counselor, or Helper! But a story suggests something even more specific:

“The Karre language of equatorial Africa proved to be difficult for the translators of the New Testament, especially when it came to the word “*Paraclete.*” How could they describe the Holy Spirit?

“One day the translators came across a group of porters going off into the bush carrying bundles on their heads. They noticed that in the line of porters there was always one who didn’t carry anything, and they assumed he was the boss, there to make sure the others did their work. However, they discovered he wasn’t the boss; he had a special job. He was there should anyone fall over with exhaustion; he would come and pick up the man’s load and carry it for him. This porter was known in the Karre language as “the one who falls down beside us.””

The translators had their word for *Paraclete*,¹ Holy Spirit!

As Jesus tells his disciples he's coming as the Paraclete, he's telling them he will be as one who falls down beside them, as one who will advocate their case, cover their blind side and help them fight their battles in the hostile world of 1st century Christianity. Jesus sends his Spirit to be a comforter to a community whose values and ideals are under siege.

And, though the Spirit Jesus sends is often called "Comforter," it isn't to be confused with the comforter on our bed or an electric blanket.

Five years ago our family had the privilege of viewing the Bayeux Tapestry in Normandy, France. The tapestry, which is quite extensive, was commissioned in the 11th century to portray the events of the 1066 Norman invasion of England. One of the panels shows Bishop Odo poking the troops in their posterior with his spear. The Latin transcription reads in English, "Here Bishop Odo, holding his staff, comforts the troops."

The promise Jesus makes to his disciples, while announcing his forthcoming death, is that the Paraclete will always be present to protect them. But the Paraclete as comforter is also a prodder, calling disciples of every generation to help God usher in the new age of God's peace and justice for all. The Holy Spirit never leaves us alone. But the Holy Spirit also never leaves us alone until our kingdom work on earth is done.

No-nonsense journalist Morton Kondracke, who often appears with *The McLaughlin Group*, understands this. His wife had Parkinson's. In an interview, Kondracke describes how they first discovered the disease:

She had beautiful handwriting, and she was writing a check and couldn't form the letter "k" correctly. Later she had a tremor in the little finger of her right hand, and then her foot would sort of wobble on the brakes when she was driving. She had been a counselor at the neurology center in Bethesda, Maryland, helping families with patients with chronic neurological diseases.

She was given Symmetrel, which is a Parkinson's medicine, by a doctor, and he didn't tell her what it was. But she called me up at work one day, totally distraught in a way I'd never heard Milly before. She said, "you have to come home right away. Something terrible has happened." And I thought that one of the kids had been in an auto accident or something, so I raced home.

There she was standing in the bedroom with this bottle in her hand. She said, "This is a Parkinson's medicine. It can't be Parkinson's. I've seen Parkinson's. It's a terrible disease. I won't be able to talk. I won't be able to walk. I won't be able to swallow. I won't be able to eat. You'll have to take me to the bathroom. I'll be totally dependent. You won't love me any more. You'll leave me."

I had to convince her that I was not going to bug out, though 50% of men with wives who have chronic illnesses split. She couldn't be sure I wasn't one of the wrong 50% in the beginning, but after a certain point she realized I was there for the duration.

You just ask God's help everyday, multiple times a day. I couldn't do this without God's help. I pray for help and strength and Milly's deliverance all the time.²

Like Mort Kondracke, the Holy Spirit is One Who never abandons us or stops advocating for us in a world grown increasingly indifferent to the values we believe in as church. *"I will not leave you orphaned,"* Jesus says.

Well, as I said at the top, I've never really thought of myself as an orphan. But I think I get Jesus' point. In my most insecure moments, moments we've all had, I try to remember I wasn't left orphaned. I try to remember that when nothing more than a helpless infant, I had two adopted parents take me in and share God's grace, long before I had thoughts or words to comprehend what grace is. Unbeknownst to them and to me for the longest time, my parents were signs of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit.

Funny isn't it? We church are meant to be the Paraclete: the Spirit's persistent, comforting presence too. We're to be living reminders of Jesus' words, *"I will not leave you orphaned."* This is our mission. This is our job.

¹ Ian Coffey, "Deep Impact," *Keswick '99* (OM Publishing), 1999 as found in PreachingToday.com

² "Journalist Mort Kondracke Serves Spouse With Parkinson's," *PreachingToday.com*