

Called Alongside

John 14:15-31

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us listen, now, to the Word of God from John's Gospel, chapter 14, verses 15 through 31 (excerpts): Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive; the world cannot receive because it neither sees him, nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. On that day, you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father. And I will love them and reveal myself to them. Those who love me will keep my word. My Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. But the Advocate, 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. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid."

The Word of the Lord. Let us pray. And now, by the power of your Holy Spirit, through the Word that you have spoken to us in your Gospel, Lord Jesus Christ, may you come and now speak to us. May we hear that you walk with us, that you love us, and that you send us out to do your ministry and mission in this world. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus said, "I will ask the Father and he will give you another... advocate." That one will be with you forever. Another "advocate?" Do we really need another advocate? No. I don't think that's enough, actually. I think there is much more that God wants to give to us in the Holy Spirit. Wouldn't you like something greater than advocacy for your life? No, we should not, and shall not reduce the Holy Spirit to only a forensic metaphor. And while the nature of the Holy Spirit surely includes this dimension of advocacy, there is much more about the Spirit to know. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus; and I see much more in the character of the life of Jesus than advocacy.

Now let me make this as clear as I can make it: the term in Greek, *paracletos*, means a lot more than "advocate." So, in a sense, I'm challenging the New Revised Standard Version's word here— not because I believe that it is wrong, but that it is too small. The heart of John's teaching about Jesus and the Holy Spirit is focused in this one word: *paraclete*— and it literally means "the one who comes alongside;" the one who is "called alongside." "Called alongside" is the name that John gives both Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In his first letter, John says: "If anyone does sin, we have a *paraclete* with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins." John calls Jesus, the *paraclete*. The *paraclete* laid down his life for us. The *paraclete* paid the price for our sins. John calls Jesus the *paraclete* who is with the Father. The Father has called Jesus alongside himself— the very man who walked on the dusty earth, alongside the disciples, is now standing at the right hand of the Father.

But Jesus says about himself: "The Father will give you another *paraclete*, the Spirit of truth." John understands that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are *paracletes* from God. They are called alongside us, to help us to live life as God would like us to live it. It is also the character of people who follow Jesus and the Spirit— as the one who comes alongside— to become a people who come alongside one another.

From the beginning of creation, God has revealed himself as the One who comes alongside of humanity. God, the Father, called the Son to come alongside us— to walk together. And then God teaches us, through the Son and through the Spirit, to come alongside one another. Looking back into the creation narrative in Genesis, the sound of God comes down into the garden, in the cool of the day, to walk with Adam and Eve. The image projected is of God, man, and woman walking together in creation, as God teaches them how to

live and to care for the garden—the creation. As Creator and Father, God is the primal paraclete of Scripture. He came alongside people of faith throughout Scripture to walk with them. It is God's very nature to come alongside of us and to help us to live.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is called Immanuel, "God with us," from the prophet Isaiah. As Immanuel, Jesus was the first one named the paraclete. Jesus walked alongside of his disciples as they traveled together. The first paraclete, Jesus, said to his beloved disciples, that he would ask the Father, and "another" paraclete would be given: the Spirit of truth. He would be among them; he would be in them.

My dad became a production machinist at Lockheed during WWII. He wanted his four sons to learn the production machine business that he had learned at Lockheed, so he started his own business, the Icenogle Machine Shop. The purpose was to make a living, but also to prepare his four sons to understand and practice a trade that would get them through life. If I ever have to fall back on something else, I can be a machinist, thanks to my dad. He came alongside each of us, to teach us how to run the production machinery. He called us alongside of himself to watch him as he ran the machines. Then he stood beside us at each machine and showed us what to do. He told us what to do (and what not to do); he stood with us as we tried it, as we experimented. And he stood off to the side a little further as he watched us get better at it; and then, occasionally, checked-in with us to make sure we were doing O.K.

I will never forget the time that I failed to adequately seat a large chunk of steel into the lathe chuck, to tighten it down properly. And when I engaged the one-inch carbide cutting tool into that large hunk of steel, it literally caught the steel and flipped it right out of the chuck—right past my dad's head, standing right next to me. He said, trying to be humorous, but looking a little pale: "Working alongside of you can be dangerous!" I think others have discovered that along the way, as well.

He called us to be with him in the business. He came alongside of us to help us learn it. He believed he was called alongside of his sons to train them in the trade that he understood and practiced. I believe it is the very nature of God to "come alongside of us"... and to call the Son to walk alongside of us... and the Spirit to walk with us, and help us to walk with each other in life. There is a paraclete nature to the entire purpose and mission of God. God's paracletic nature is 'being called alongside;' and it is complex and it is comprehensive.

There is intimacy and partnership implied in this paracletic nature of God. God wants to share life with us, and calls us to share life with each other. Jesus called his disciples "friends." We do not bear the burden of life alone; the Spirit helps us, and he empowers us to help each other. The Spirit helps us to love each other and to carry each other's burdens.

There is movement and direction implied in the paracletic nature of God. The Spirit helps us to walk together in the same direction. The Spirit walks with us and shows us where to go. And we must be willing to move when the Spirit moves, if we are to know where the Spirit is leading.

There is teaching and training implied in the paracletic nature of God. The Spirit teaches us the truth. The Spirit teaches us about Jesus, who is the Truth. As we walk alongside Jesus, we learn to imitate Christ; we learn to live his life. The Spirit reminds us of everything that Jesus ever said, that we have read or heard. The Spirit is our teacher, our coach, our tutor, and our mentor. The Spirit helps us keep Jesus' commands.

And yes, there is advocacy implied in that paracletic nature of God. There is part of the character of God which is like a lawyer (now, that may be scary to some of us). Maybe that is one of the reasons why some pastors... lawyers... professionals... doctors... sometimes even act like God. They 'return the favor.' At times, the Spirit will defend us if we are attacked for doing the right thing. But sometimes the Spirit will prosecute us if we are caught doing the wrong thing. The Spirit convinces us to do the righteousness of Jesus, but also convicts us when we have sinned... participated in evil... and become a Devil's advocate. The Spirit is the conciliator between us and God. The Spirit is the reconciler between conflicted people. The Spirit is not at peace with us if we are not at peace with one another. The Spirit confronts us with our dark sides, and implores us to deal with our deviance and our deviousness.

There is counsel and help in this paracletic nature of God. The Spirit is our advisor and our counselor. The Spirit intercedes for us with God when we are in trouble, and helps us to carry out the ministry and mission of Jesus to help others out of trouble. The Spirit gives us power to act when we are weak, and helps us empower others when they have run to the end of their strength. The Spirit urges us to clean up our moral life and exhorts us to excellence in ethics.

There is comfort and encouragement in the paracletic nature of God. The Spirit brings us consolation in our grief and leads us to cheer up others when they are in despair. There is invitation and welcome in this paracletic nature of God. God does not want us to be alone. God comes to us in Christ, and invites us to walk with him. And if we respond positively to that invitation, Christ, as the Spirit, keeps walking with us forever.

There is adoption and family in the paracletic nature of God. The Spirit makes sure that there are no orphans. The Spirit helps us to name God the way Jesus did—and he called him, “Abba,” “Daddy.” The Spirit calls us together to be a family of God—brothers and sisters with Jesus—to come together, and to stay together, in spite of our differences. The Spirit helps us to be a community: a “communion of saints.” The Spirit works to make a home for us with the Father and the Son—to make room, forever, in their mansion.

There is responsibility and there is empowerment in the paracletic nature of God. The Spirit gives us the desire and ability to keep the commandments of God and the teachings of Jesus. It is the paracletic nature of God’s Spirit to give us a kind of peace that transcends any peace that the world talks about, or understands.

But, most of all, in summation of the paracletic nature of God, the Spirit helps us to experience the presence of Jesus. Jesus makes “the Kingdom of God near.” He comes close to us, so that we might come close to him. Jesus is the presence of the Kingdom, and he is the presence of God. He comes alongside of us to be our friend, and gives us the gift of his Spirit to deepen our intimacy with him, and with one another. Jesus is present with us in the Holy Spirit so we might have the freedom and the courage to be present with each other during good times or tough times.

Luke gives a powerful story of Jesus’ paracletic presence after the resurrection. Two of his disciples are walking quickly out of Jerusalem on the way to the village of Emmaus, just seven miles outside of Jerusalem. Their Messiah had just been executed; they were in shock and getting out of harms way. And while they were walking and talking together, discussing life with Jesus, the Risen Christ came near and walked alongside of them, talking with them. They did not recognize him. But when they reached Emmaus, and they asked Jesus to stay with them a little while longer, something happened as he was at the table with them. He took bread and he blessed it; he broke it and he gave it to them. And immediately, their eyes were opened; they knew him. And he vanished from their sight. It was as if Luke was saying Jesus morphed from a visible body to the invisible Spirit at the Table. The real presence of Jesus is in his Spirit at this Table. His Spirit calls us to come together to be with the Risen Christ here today.

As Calvin discerned, when we accept Jesus’ invitation to be called alongside of him at this [Communion] Table, we experience his real presence. The first Paraclete [Jesus] is here to save us and to serve us. The second Paraclete [the Holy Spirit] is here to gather us, feed us, and give us a sense of being family—to give us the power to go out from here to do the ministry and mission of Jesus. As James Dunn said in his magnificent book, *Jesus and the Spirit*, “The Paraclete is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent... The personality of Jesus has become the personality of the Spirit... The Spirit gives an immediate and direct continuity for us between Jesus and the Spirit.” The Holy Spirit makes visible among us what is invisible to our eyes. As the Spirit is called alongside us to bring us to the Table, so the Spirit calls us alongside of each other—alongside those people who have not yet come to the Table.

Luke tells another resurrection story in Acts. On another road, south out of Jerusalem, heading toward Gaza, the Spirit sent the deacon Philip to run up alongside the moving chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch invited Philip to climb aboard and they rode together alongside one another, as Phillip talked to the eunuch about who Jesus was, from the Bible. It is the nature of God, in the Son and the Spirit, to

come to us when we hunger for God; to be present with us in the journey as we seek God with our whole being. Jesus and the Spirit are not about the kind of power that rules over us and tries to control and manipulate or intimidate us. But it is about the power of coming alongside, as one who loves us, to help us to live well.

There is a sentence in Martin Luther King's last speech, "I have been to the mountaintop" that I think accents this understanding of the work of the Spirit: to be with us and to help us take risks. He says: "Either we go up together or we go down together. So let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness." He said this the day before he was killed. He said this while he was coming alongside the sanitation workers of Memphis to help them toward economic justice. He said this when he knew his life might be cut short. He said this as the Spirit of God was in him. And he said this as Jesus walked with him in his life. And he said this as he walked alongside the poor African-Americans of the South. The Paraclete—the Spirit of Christ—leads us into a kind of 'dangerous unselfishness,' where we put our lives on the line for one another because Jesus has put his life on the line for us.

A few years ago, I sat with a man of faith in Jesus, who was wrestling with a hard question in his life. His daughter's kidneys were shutting down and he was a match to be a donor for her. The doctor had been concerned about his own health, but he decided to take the risk of his own health and to give one of his kidneys to his daughter. He was there in surgery, right beside her, while they transplanted his healthy kidney into her body. The Paraclete is called to walk alongside of us, as we come together, to worship together, to study together, to pray together, to work together, to serve together, to take ventures together, and to risk our lives together. And even if we have to, to lay down our lives together.

Here at the Table of Jesus today, let us resolve to live in the power of the Spirit: to come alongside one another, and to practice a kind of dangerous unselfishness. We do not do this by our own desire or even by our own power. We act by the desire and power of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit—for he is with us. The Spirit of Jesus lives among us. The Spirit of the crucified Christ is in us. Let us allow the Spirit to guide us to risk our lives in the way that Jesus risked his life for us.

Let us pray. O Lord Jesus Christ, now by the power of your Spirit, may you live among us and lead us and help us to serve you, in Spirit and in truth. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.