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John 14:15-21

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the night in which he was betrayed, in his farewell discourse with his disciples, Jesus set aside any sorrow or fear he had every right to feel for himself, and, instead, spent his final hours of freedom comforting his disciples.

I will not leave you desolate
[Jesus says]; I will come to
you.(John 14:18, RSV)

Or, as the more literal translation
puts it:

I will not leave you
orphaned...(John 14:18, NRS)

To feel desolate is dreadful. To feel abandoned in this world is awful. It is a strange thing about our town, and probably all towns, that we can be surrounded by multitudes, and yet feel lonesome. There might be people in every direction we see, yet none of those people are mother, nor father to us. None of them love us with that kind of a love, and so we are sometimes left feeling like orphans.

My wife Carol, for example, still remembers certain childhood times when she felt abandoned. Her family would visit the cousins in Pennsylvania, and her older sister and her two cousins, who were also older than her, would all run away and hide from her. She says, "Boy, did that feel wretched! They would tease me and I would cry – and then they would tease me even more for being a crybaby!" Ahh! Shame on 'em.

Memories of such childhood feelings can rise up in us whenever we find ourselves all alone, as if there is nary a soul in the world to count on. Maybe someone very dear to us is suddenly gone from our presence. When Carol's mother died back in 1986, her poor father seemed completely lost. He would visit Carol's sister who was in college not too far away – he'd just show up because he was so lonely. Six months later he married again. Being alone was just too hard on him.

Maybe we have just found out that we have cancer or some other illness or we need major surgery. Maybe we have lost our job or our home, our spouse or child or our way of life. In so many ways and for so many reasons feelings of desolation and abandonment can rise up in us, and when it happens it is a terrible thing.

But such loneliness is not the will of Jesus for you. When there was little time nor freedom left to say anything in this world, Jesus wanted to say at least this much to his disciples:

I will not leave you desolate.
I will not leave you alone.
Be, then, a scout for
encouragement in this world.
I will not leave you alone, so
search for that one who will
give you a word of
encouragement in my name.
And when your time comes,
be thou the one to give
comfort to someone else, for
I desire that none of my

disciples should be left lonesome
in this world.

This morning's Gospel reading sets the stage for two festival liturgies soon upon us. This week we celebrate Ascension Thursday. As we have done in past years, so we will do this year too: We mean to celebrate Ascension Thursday as a joint service at nearby Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, 316 East 88th Street, between Second and First Avenues. The service is at 7 p.m., and the custom is that I am the preacher for that liturgy.

The connection between Ascension and this morning's divine promise that we shall not be left desolate is that Ascension celebrates the departure of our Lord Jesus for the sake of his great ministry of intercession on our behalf before the Father. This morning's Gospel promises us, then, that though Jesus is off to the right hand of the Father, you and I shall not be left abandoned in our life.

The other great festival is Pentecost Sunday, not this coming Sunday, but the Sunday after that. Pentecost Sunday celebrates the fulfillment of the promise Jesus makes in this morning's Gospel Reading. That is, Pentecost Sunday celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on earth, so that you and I need never feel lost nor desolate in life, as Jesus promises in today's Gospel.

As I turn to developing this morning's divine promise, I am finding myself in a grammatical mood. There are two words in this morning's Gospel that help explain why you and I are not left orphans in life. Those words are "another Paraclete."

¹⁶I shall ask the Father, and he
will give you another Paraclete to

be with you for ever...(John
14:16, NJB)

Each of these words is interesting and full of hope. Let me begin with that second word — the Greek word "Paraclete." Afterwards, I will turn to the word "another" — "*another* Paraclete."

Most times when I am choosing the English translation for our Bible readings, I use a translation from the tradition of the *King James Version* — sometimes the old *King James* itself, often the *Revised Standard Version*, and sometimes the even more modern *New Revised Standard Version*. But this time I have chosen a modern Roman Catholic translation called *The New Jerusalem Bible*. Next to the *King James Version*, it is my favorite translation.

The reason I favor the *New Jerusalem Bible* translation for this morning's Gospel Reading is because of that word "Paraclete." It is as if this translation has done the humble and wholesome thing: it has surrendered the nigh impossible task of representing the fullness of meaning of the original Greek word with but a single English word and has instead simply reproduced the original Greek, "Paraclete." And so we have this, one of the last promises Jesus is able to give to his disciples:

¹⁶I shall ask the Father, and he
will give you another Paraclete to
be with you for ever...(John
14:16, NJB)

The word "paraclete" means "someone called alongside to help."¹ It could be translated "advocate," as in a court of law,

¹ *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*, page 557.

where the paraclete stands beside the accused, serving as defense counsel or perhaps as an intercessor. I do not know whether this actually happens in a court of law, but if the accuser's mother could stand beside the accused and beg for mercy, then the mother would be the paraclete for the accused. Or maybe a doctor or pastor could intercede for the accused. So, those are two of the possible translations of Paraclete: Counselor or Intercessor.

Also the word could be translated "Comforter," which is the lovely word used in the *King James Version*:

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter...(John 14:16, KJV)

Altogether, a paraclete is a helper on your side. The paraclete defends, counsels, encourages, and strengthens you.

So, Jesus, in that night in which he was betrayed, does this final good thing for his disciples: He promises them that though he is soon to go away from them, he will not leave them desolate, nor will he leave them orphaned. That is, he will not leave them lonely in this world. Rather, he will send a helper to be with them: the Paraclete. They should be scouts for such a one: they should search for a counselor, a guide — someone to comfort them in the name of the Lord.

Now, let me move to my second grammatical point. Jesus promises that he will send "another" Paraclete. Scholars point out that in English, the word "another" is ambiguous. Its meaning must be specified by context. On the one meaning, "another" can mean "something different," as when, say, the salesperson can see that you are not enthusiastic about the dress she is showing you and so she says, "let's try another color." She means a different color. But also

the word can mean "the same kind," as when the waiter asks, "Would you like another cup of coffee?" He doesn't mean a different kind of coffee, but rather, a second helping.

Greek has an advantage over English here because it has different words for the two senses of "another." Guess which sense Jesus is using when he promises "another" Paraclete. He means another "of the same sort." Jesus means that heretofore, his disciples have had a Paraclete with them, and that is he himself. Now, they are to have a second helping of him. He goes away, by way of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. And yet, in a way, he does not go away, for he has prayed the Father and the Father will send you another Paraclete.

And if we should raise our eyes and look around and ask ourselves, where is this "another Paraclete," the answer, brothers and sisters, is you! Perhaps you can already sense one of Luther's exhortations: We are to be "little Christs" to one another. It is a stunning thought, yet authorized by today's Gospel Lesson.

Let me read some of Luther's exhortation to you. It comes from his treatise *The Freedom of the Christian*:

...as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.

Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things

and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men. But alas in our day this life is unknown throughout the world; it is neither preached about nor sought after; we are altogether ignorant of our own name and do not know why we are Christians or bear the name of Christians. Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christ's one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us.

So, let the old words of this morning's Gospel Lesson reverberate in our souls, and in so doing, let us be comforted and challenged:

¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, ¹⁷even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you

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know him, *for he dwells with you, and will be in you.*(John 14:15-17, RSV, my emphasis)

My theme about the Paraclete is this: If all others in this world should forsake you, there is One who will never forsake you in this earthly life and that is the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. Always there is some word of encouragement waiting for you, for, as Jesus has promised, he sends the Holy Spirit to be with you “forever.”

From time to time, life might feel as dry and dusty as the desert, and might be feeling awfully lonesome. But Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit, and therefore you are not orphaned in this world. Brothers and sisters: seek your Paraclete with confidence. Believe that there is some word of encouragement for you in this world and seek for it with confidence. If someday, you should find yourself sinking in depression or addiction or anxiety or self-destructiveness, remember that there is help available, for this world is full of little Christs for you.

And when you are stronger, when it is your time, be a little Christ to someone else. Be a Spirit-bearer. Be a Christ-bearer for someone else. Speak to them words of encouragement in the name of Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen