

**Peace I Leave With You**  
**May 13, 2007**

I was reading an article from *The Christian Century* the other day, by a man named James C. Sommerville, and I want to read part of it to you now. The article was written because it relates to today's Gospel lesson.

The Greek word for "advocate" is *paraclete*, formed from a word that means to "call alongside." When I teach the Gospel of John, I usually tell my students that a paraclete is the one whose name you call when you are hauled into court on false charges, when the school bully is beating you up on the playground, when you wake up from a bad dream in the middle of the night. A paraclete is the one who comes to your defense, your rescue, your comfort....

Immediately upon reading this, especially the part about who you call on when waking from a bad dream, another word came to mind that might also stand in for advocate or paraclete. It's six letter letters and begins with "M," and today is the day we celebrate it. Anyone? "Mother." Maybe if the Church had simply called the Holy Spirit, "Mother," many of us would understand its work a little better.

We are back in the upper room where we were last week, when Jesus gave his disciples the new commandment to love one another. This morning Jesus is still in the midst of his "farewell discourse" to his disciples, as we simply continue on from last week. In fact, between the commandment to love one another and the first line of today's Gospel lesson, Jesus has simply taken a breath. He is just as urgently trying to convey his most important teachings to his friends, as in just a few hours time he will be arrested, convicted and nailed to a cross.

And here is Jesus' message (and I quote from the Gospel of John): "I am going away and I am coming to you." Huh? Maybe we understand a little better the meaning of this now, but around the supper table that night, I don't think this made any more sense in Aramaic than it does in English. And then Jesus tells them they should be happy about it! As if that isn't enough he goes on to say that he is leaving them his very own version of peace, a better version than the world can give them. I don't know about peace, but there must have been a lot of confusion in that room!

The bad news is that Jesus will be leaving them. Not simply getting out of Dodge, but planting himself permanently in Omaha. In less than twenty-four hours Jesus will be dead. The translation of that in the minds of those who tend to think mostly about themselves, is that they will be left alone. The glue that held them together and set the course for their future will be

gone. What are they supposed to do when they have a hard night at fishing or water begins to fill up the boat? What are they supposed to do when they become downhearted and their self-esteem becomes low? What are they supposed to do when the authorities come after them? What are they supposed to do when they face a situation and find they have forgotten how Jesus taught them to handle it? Three years of seminary is never enough for any clergyperson, and neither is it enough for Jesus' disciples. They haven't learned how to run a stewardship campaign yet.

So that's the bad news. The good news Jesus gives them is that after he goes, he's coming back. Not simply for a few days as some kind of changed flesh and blood body. But in a different and new way that has more staying power and can hang around for a while, like for ever. The Father will send the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name. The Holy Spirit: the Advocate, the Paraclete, the Comforter, the Counselor, the Sustainer, Mother. The disciples are still going to need protection when they go out into the cold, bleak world alone and Jesus knows that. He will not leave them, as we used to say, "comfortless." The Spirit will be there, comforting them, strengthening them, reminding them of all Jesus has taught them.

And the one really, really good thing Jesus will leave them by this Spirit, is peace.... *shalom*. "Shalom" I leave with you; my "shalom" 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." It is an unusual promise from a man who is about to be tortured and executed, given to a group of folks who are about to be accused of complicity and for the next couple of days will experience not a second of peace. Judas will experience so little peace that he will hang himself. Peter will experience so little peace that he will, after hearing the cock crow, break down weeping.

But on Sunday evening, all of that will stop. Jesus will come walking through the door... literally... where the disciples are huddled for fear of the authorities, feeling no peace, whatsoever, and no doubt wishing they had never met Jesus. But it is Easter and Jesus is alive. Except now there is something new for them to fret over. What's he going to do to us who ran away? Twenty lashes? An "I told you so"? "You failed the test; now go home"? No. In a moment that carries so much stress the disciples don't know if they can stand much more, Jesus gives them exactly what he had promised them just three nights before in the upper room while saying his farewell to them. He gives them that which they need most of all; that which will guide them and uphold them for the remainder of their lives on earth. "Shalom. Peace be with you.... When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" What they did with that peace that passes all understanding is more than legendary. It is the stuff of which Truth is made.

We know something of the feeling of having an Advocate, someone on your side, someone "alongside". When I was having my pre-op tests before my surgery three years ago, Alexandria Hospital sent my blood tests to the wrong laboratory. My insurance company

refused to pay for it. I received a bill from the Hospital for \$600. The insurance company told me that I shouldn't pay it either. So I didn't. I wrote letters explaining to them that the error was theirs. For months the bills continued to come. I continued to ignore them. Finally, they started to come with threatening little notes attached. So I called a friend who is a criminal trial lawyer and explained to him what was going on. The next thing I knew, I received another bill from the Hospital.... telling me I owed a \$35 co-pay for my blood tests. I don't know what my friend did and I'm not sure I want to know. What I did know was that I had an advocate and that advocate brought me much needed peace.

The peace which the Spirit of Jesus brings, however, is not the absence of conflict. On the contrary, it occurs within conflict and even suffering, and far from settling us it, rather, disturbs us. And that is nothing new. We are talking about the God here who caused Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, to leave a settled and peaceful life in Ur of the Chaldeans to run off to an unknown land to become the parents of many nations. We are talking about the God who caused Moses to give up his princely life in Egypt to become a slave and, then, to relinquish his peaceful family life as a shepherd in Midian to spend forty years wandering about with a whole nation of cantankerous people in the wilderness. We are talking about the Spirit of Jesus that took a bunch unassuming, somewhat cowardly, fisherman and sent them straight into the arms of suffering and death, while spreading his Gospel of selflessness and service.

This is not the kind of peace that comes devoid of conflict. This is **God's** peace, the kind that comes as a gift of the Spirit whether you want it or not. It's the same Spirit whom, if you let it, makes its home with you and never leaves you alone until your routine life is in shambles, and you find yourself risking everything you once valued in order to follow that pesky Spirit into places unknown and often dangerous. Believe me, I know. And you do it because once you experience that peace that rarely comes without conflict; that peace that comes from the total freedom of responding to His Spirit, however ridiculous it may seem to the rest of the world at the time; that peace that passes understanding; you cannot do anything else. If we do not find this peace in our hearts, then there is probably something ridiculous that we are being called to do and are simply refusing to do it.

Jesus did not leave his disciples to stick it out alone. They had each other, certainly, but even as clergy find out, the blind leading the blind is rarely helpful. There were other groups, of course, zealots of one kind or another who also followed charismatic leaders. But when their leaders died, **they** all folded their tents and went home. These guys, the ones who befriended Jesus, built a worldwide community to which each of us belong even two thousand years later. And most befuddling of all, they went to the most gruesome tortures and deaths quite happily. Because they knew wherever they were, in life or death, Jesus was there too by his Spirit, making his home with them. I'm not sure the Holy Spirit and I know each other quite that well yet, but I am with every earthly breath, trying to become more open to her leading (yes, she is feminine). If or when I become free enough to let her lead me to an untimely death, I will let

you know. Until then, I will settle for finding in myself some selflessness and service.

And I invite you to join me in keeping alert to the Spirit's voice calling each one of us....  
to become unsettled and disturbed, to forget all those unimportant things to which we give  
ultimate value and hold onto so tightly, calling each of us to maybe something just a tad  
ridiculous in Jesus' name, and to find that wonderful peace which passes all understanding.

The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.  
Yet let us pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God.

John 14:23-29  
May 13, 2007 – 6 Easter  
Rachelle E. Birnbaum