

Para – what?

So what do you call a set of professional football or baseball shoes? “Paracletes” (pair o’ cleats). ☹️ Sorry; it’s going to be that kind of sermon!

Paraclete is actually an English transliteration of the Greek word *parakletos*. It appears only five times in the entire New Testament, four of those in the Gospel of John. All four appear to be a synonym for the Holy Spirit. A very particular, peculiar way of talking about the Holy Spirit.

The Greek prefix *para* means “alongside of.” *Kletos* means “called.” Together *parakletos* means “called alongside of.” An appropriate term for the Holy Spirit, wouldn’t you say?

I found some other English words having the prefix *para*, that seem remarkably pertinent to the Holy Spirit. Paranormal. Paradox. Parable. Paralegal. Parachute. Paradise. And then there is simply the word “para.” Someone who works alongside of both teachers and students in a classroom. How many of you have ever had a job as a para? Did you know that that is holy, spirit-filled work?

Usually when the Bible refers to the Holy Spirit, it’s in inanimate terms. (Like we heard this morning, in the story from the Book of Acts.) Wind. Fire. But when the Gospel of John talks about the Paraclete, it’s in much more animate, personal terms. Almost as if the Paraclete were another way of talking about Jesus. Except Jesus is dead. Isn’t he? Maybe not.

In this morning’s passage we learn some things about the Paraclete that are worth remembering. I’m going to talk about six of them.

First, Jesus says having the Paraclete come is “to your advantage.” So much so, that it was worth Jesus’ going away. Worth Jesus being crucified. Then resurrected. Then taken back up into heaven. What can be worth more than having Jesus alive and physically with us? I mean, I wish he was!

But then, the disciples only had Jesus with them for three years. His mother Mary only had him for thirty-three years. And that was pretty spotty. After all, he was “on the road” a lot.

But what if it were possible for Jesus to be with us 24/7? Not just here, in church on Sundays. But at home. Morning, noon, and night. And not just at home, but at work. When we’re on the road. In a plane, train, or automobile. Even overseas, which Lois and I will be in two weeks. What if he were a constant companion, always “alongside” us, from this day forward, to the end of our lives, and beyond? I’d definitely call that to our advantage. A huge advantage. Thanks for the offer, Jesus! I accept.

Second, one of the possible English translations for *parakletos* is “Advocate,” with a capital A. (In fact, that’s what the NRSV uses; I just asked Judy to substitute the word “Paraclete” in its place.) What is an advocate? It is someone who advocates for us, who speaks on our behalf. Who looks out for our well-being. Who protects our rights. Kind of like an attorney.

Imagine having our own personal attorney with us with us everywhere we go. Suppose someone accuses you of something. We can simply say to them, “I’m going to have you talk to my attorney.” We get into an accident, or a bind of some kind. We’re not sure what to do, so we just turn to our attorney and ask, “So what do I do now?” And being our advocate, the Holy Spirit will tell us. Someone asks us a difficult or challenging question. “Let me check with my attorney, and get back to you.” Wouldn’t it be awesome to have that 24/7?! Best of all, it’s completely free! No expensive retainer fees. (Sorry, Karl Swartz and Terry Unruh; I just put you out of a job. You wanna sue me for lost wages? Talk to my attorney! ☺)

Third, another possible English translation of *parakletos* is “Comforter.” Imagine Jesus talking to his disciples on the night of his arrest. He’s telling them everything that’s going to happen to him. He’s leaving. For good. In fact, not just leaving; he’s going to be crucified. They’re understandably distraught. Devastated. Overwhelmed with grief. They can’t hear anything else he is saying, let alone understand it. “Don’t worry. Don’t let your hearts be troubled. I’m soon going to send the Comforter to you. It will all be okay.”

Imagine we’re overwhelmed by the death of a loved one. Anne Daum. Fiona Okene. Darrel Doerksen. Edith Graber. But then our mysterious Comforter comes, and tells us it’s going to be okay. Not just today, but every day hereafter. And one day, we’ll see our loved one again. Suddenly, we’re not quite so distraught.

Fourth, Jesus says in 16:13 that the Paraclete will guide us. Imagine that we are lost—geographically, physically, mentally, emotionally. We don’t know where to go. We can’t see our way out. That’s exactly how I felt two and a half years ago, when I was hospitalized with major depression. I didn’t think I would ever get better. But in retrospect, I can see that the Paraclete was with me. Because I did get better. I did find my way out. With the Holy Spirit’s help. It’s like the GPS voice that says “recalculating” whenever we make the wrong turn. Helping us get back on track.

Fifth, and somewhat similar to guide, the Paraclete is like a great reminder, someone who is also there alongside us, ready to remind us of everything we have forgotten. Which for me is a lot. Granted, it’s not the Paraclete’s job to remind us where we put our car keys, or wallet, or glasses. But it sure can’t hurt to ask. Who knows how the Spirit works?

In John 14:25-26, (which comes before today’s passage) Jesus said to his disciples, “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 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.” It’s as if Jesus knew that we would forget some of what he taught us. The Paraclete is like our own personal tutor, or note-taker, or virtual Google, or Siri, or Alexa. “Spirit, what did Jesus say to do when someone strikes me on the cheek? Oh yeah, turn the other cheek toward him as well.” We’re all familiar with the rather cliché question “What would Jesus do?” The Paraclete answers us.

Sixth, and finally, two times in today’s passage, Jesus refers to the Paraclete as the “Spirit of truth.” Granted, this may not always be good news at the time. There are some truths that we don’t want to hear. If another person is honest and up-front about a way in which I have hurt them, for example. The Paraclete will literally help me listen to them, so that I can apologize, and we can be reconciled.

And not only is it sometimes very hard to hear the truth. It can be very hard to speak the truth. Like when someone else has done something or said something to hurt us. It takes a lot of courage to come right out and tell them. The Paraclete gives us that courage.

Our world desperately needs truth-tellers. Those who are able to say what needs to be said in a courageous, clear way. Like after yet another school shooting. Or after the Israeli Defense Forces kill another forty or fifty Palestinian men, women, and children, when they were merely exercising their basic human right to protest the unjust conditions in Gaza. Whose responsibility is it to stand up and advocate for them? Well maybe it's ours. Even if it's not the popular thing to do. And the thing about the Paraclete is, it will keep bugging us until we do. Thanks be to God.

Jesus with us 24/7. Our own personal attorney. Our comforter. Our GPS. Guiding us. Reminding us what Jesus taught, what Jesus would do. Reminding us, helping us to be truth-tellers, and listeners.

Come, Paraclete. Or in the words of our opening hymn [HWB 26], "Holy Spirit, come with power, breathe into our aching night. We expect you this glad hour, waiting for your strength and light,"

Amen.