

A Community That Remembers
A Sermon on John 14:15-31
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 26, 2019

Introduction

Timothy McVeigh bombed the Murrah Building on April 19, 1995. Those of us who lived in the Oklahoma City area then can never forget that day. The day began with a profound sense of confusion. What is happening? Initial reports were that it was a natural gas explosion. Then there was shock at seeing so many children die. How could this have happened in the Heartland? Then people in the community pitched in to help however they could. We built a museum and a memorial with 168 empty chairs to remember those who were killed. You still see the bumper stickers that were everywhere: We Remember. Remembering the bombing shaped who we are as a city.

Today's text is about a disaster in John's community. Jesus promises to comfort the community by sending them a Paraclete who will help them remember all the things that he said and all the things that he told them.

First Move: The Paraclete Comforts the Community

John's community considered itself to be a small, oppressed minority. It was oppressed by the Romans and by the Judean religious leaders.

John's community was a minority within a minority. There were only two million Jews in the Roman Empire in the first century. They were a conquered people. Rome had conquered Judea and Galilee about 50 years before the birth of Jesus. Rome installed its puppets in Jerusalem to rule the Judeans. Rome selected the high priests in the Temple. The political and religious leaders in Jerusalem were Jewish, but they served at the pleasure of Rome.

Most scholars believe that John's community was Jewish and that it had been kicked out of the synagogue just before the Gospel of John was written. We see this most clearly in the story of the blind beggar in John 9. The blind beggar's parents were afraid to speak to the Jewish religious leaders "because they were afraid of the Judeans, for already the Judeans had decided that if anyone might acknowledge [Jesus] [as] Christ, they would be put out of the synagogue."

There was another crisis in John's community. John, the Beloved Disciple, apparently died just before the Gospel of John was written. Most scholars believe that the Gospel of John was written by one of his disciples.

The early believers cherished the apostles, the eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry. The apostles built the early church. They spread the word throughout Asia, Greece, Rome and North Africa. They were a link to Jesus and taught early Christians about Jesus' words and deeds.

It was hard on the early believers when the eyewitnesses to Christ began to die. According to legend, the last of the apostles to die was John, the Beloved Disciple.

So John's community suffered two blows about the same time: the Beloved Disciple died and they were had been kicked out of the synagogue.

Our Scripture today is intended to help John's community deal with that double loss. It is intended to comfort them and assure them that Jesus will be present with them through the Paraclete.

The Greek word παράκλητος is transliterated in English as the Paraclete. Some English Bibles translate Paraclete as Advocate, Counselor or Comforter. It means all those things in Greek. It can also mean mediator, intercessor, helper or encourager, depending on the context. I will refer to the παράκλητος as the Paraclete so that we can keep the different meanings in mind without settling on just one meaning.

Παράκλητος literally means "one who is called to the side of." It is someone who will be with John's community. It will be right by their side.

When will the Paraclete be present? Jesus says, "When you follow my commandment to love one another, if you keep this commandment, I will ask the father to give you another Paraclete that he may be with you in the age." After Jesus washed the Disciples feet in John's version of the Last Supper, he commanded them to love one another. Not to love their neighbor, which we see in the other gospels, but to love one another, the other members of the community. This sounds tribal or insular, but the survival of John's community was at stake. They needed to bond with each, to form an identity, in order to survive.

The promise of presence is made to the community, not to isolated individuals. All the pronouns are second person plural. The gift is to you, plural. Love one another, build up the community.

The Paraclete is synonymous with the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John. John uses Paraclete interchangeably with the Spirit of Truth and the Holy Spirit. John seems to think of the Paraclete more as a person than as a force, but he never identifies a single person as the Paraclete.

Jesus says he will ask the father to give you another Paraclete. That means Jesus was the first Paraclete. Jesus was present with his disciples and showed them how to love one another.

Jesus says that the Paraclete will be with them in the age. That is the new age. The present age is evil. In the new age, the kingdom of God, everyone will live as God intends us to live. Life in all its fullness, right here on earth. Jesus says you will experience the new age, the kingdom of God, right now if you love one another.

John is probably speaking through Jesus directly to his own community. He tries to comfort his community. They feel abandoned at the loss of the Beloved Disciple. “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.” You are not alone. Don’t worry about the Second Coming. Jesus will be present with you right now through the Paraclete.

Jesus goes even farther. “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my father will love him, and we will come to him and we will make a place to abide with him.” The Paraclete will help the community love Jesus and keep his word to love one another.

This chapter of John, Chapter 14, begins with the famous words that we hear at funerals: “In my Father’s house there are many rooms. I am going to prepare a room for you.” Jesus now says that if the disciples love one another, God will come to them right now and make a place to abide with them, here on earth.

Second Move: The Paraclete Teaches the Community

This is in the early stages of the development of Christian faith. John’s understanding of the Paraclete is a little broader than the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is about the power and presence of God. The Paraclete also has another task.

“The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit that the father sends in my name, that one will teach you all things and will remind you of all things which I said to you.” The Greek word that the NRSV translates as remind is ὑπομνήσκω. It means to *call to mind* and combines that with *under*. The Paraclete helps bring what Jesus said and did to mind and puts us under that. We subject ourselves to what Jesus said and did. That guides what we will say and do. We can understand Jesus better now that we have some perspective. We live on the other side of the Resurrection. We have a better understanding of how and why Jesus was glorified.

To remember is loaded with theological meaning in the Bible. God heard the groaning of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The people of Israel remember God’s mighty acts and his commandments. Paul calls us in the Philippians Hymn to have the same mind as

Christ Jesus. Memory, being mindful, brings God and the people to act in accordance with our covenant with each other.

To remember also means to remember the person. The bumper stickers, We Remember, mean that we will never forget the people who died in the bombing. A terrorist act cannot wash away our memory of them. Each of the people who died has an empty chair dedicated to them. The Paraclete helps us remember the person of Jesus. Jesus' character will continue to shape us. The Christian virtues of humility, courage, faith hope and charity, all come from our memories of Jesus.

The teaching function of the Spirit is unique to John. John believes that the Spirit, or the Paraclete, leads to rich, inner experiences of Jesus and that it leads to fellowship with our sisters and brothers in Christ.

John does not tell us how the Paraclete teaches. That is filled in later by the tradition. It becomes the church that assumes the teaching role. The church is a community of believers that gathers to remember the acts and words of Jesus and to praise God for them.

Third Move: The Paraclete Can Help Teach Disciples

Disciples of Christ need to revive the role of the Paraclete in teaching about Jesus. Our founders believed that we have no creed but Christ. They emphasized the centrality of Scripture, which tells us about the acts and words of Jesus. They believed that every person should read the Bible for themselves instead of memorizing creeds. They believed that reading the Bible would bring Christians together because they would find that it speaks a clear message with one voice.

Eugene Boring, a Disciples New Testament scholar, finds that the Disciples in the pews stopped studying the Bible by the early 20th century. Biblical illiteracy came to be the norm. People relied on their opinions, which were shaped by the culture, instead of relying on their study of the Bible. We became isolated individuals instead of a community of faith. That is part of the reason for declining church membership, not just among Disciples, but among all denominations. If Disciples are going to reclaim their heritage of the centrality of Scripture, we need to study the Bible together in church. That helps keep us together as a community. It sets the church apart from secular non-profit groups in the community with a social mission.

The last two centuries of Biblical interpretation have shown us that different people have different understandings of the Bible. A split emerged in the late 19th century between what are now known as mainline and evangelical churches, based on how they understood the Bible. Disciples of Christ and the Church of Christ are a good example. We both are part of the Stone-Campbell movement, but we split

about 120 years over how to study the Bible. Think University of Chicago and a Bible college. Disciples and mainline Christians rely on the latest archaeological finds and cultural studies to help understand the world of the New Testament. We try to reconcile religion and science—they are not incompatible, they complement each other. Churches of Christ preach about the unchanging word of God and the events in the Bible as historical facts. They are more legalistic. We also have different understandings of salvation. For evangelicals a personal relationship with Jesus guarantees you an afterlife in heaven with Jesus. For mainline Christians, the words and deeds of Jesus bring wholeness to the community and fullness to our lives here on Earth. Salvation means filling our lives with meaning.

Other perspectives have emerged, especially in the last 50 years, as we have seen theology and Biblical interpretations by people of color, women, people ruled by colonial powers, LGBT folks, all have different perspectives and hear the messages in the Bible differently.

Study of church history also has revealed that the early church could more accurately be described as early Christianities. There never was one way of being church. There were different understandings and practices in Rome, Syria, Ephesus and Alexandria.

Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn write in *Disciples: Reclaiming Our Identity, Reforming Our Practice* that Disciples need to be obedient to Scripture, obedient in the Greek sense, which means to listen to Scripture. We need to listen in community so that we can hear different voices.

That is one reason we have three different people preaching on Sundays. Mary, CeCe and I each have different backgrounds, yet our different perspectives blend together. We bring in Rabbi Abby and Rabbi Vered to preach once a year so we can hear the Jewish perspective.

When each of us has a different understanding, we have a responsibility to share that with the community. Not a different opinion. We can't respond to an opinion other than to say, OK. Different understandings. Based on facts and experience. Based on an informed reading of the Bible. That may stretch each of us as we use it to extend our own understanding of the common good.

Disciples are also committed to the unity of all Christians. That doesn't mean that we will have oneness through a common view of Biblical texts. What brings us together is our commitment to Christ. We may have different understandings of Christ, but we all have Christ as our center.

Conclusion

Memory of God's deeds and commands comforted ancient Israel. It gave them a framework for understanding reality and for keeping in covenant with God. Memory of Jesus' deeds and words comfort Christians. They help us overcome anxiety about the meaningless and randomness of life in the modern world. They bring us peace.

The Paraclete is still a good image for how the church brings us closer to Christ. It teaches us all things and brings to mind things that Jesus said. Listening in community brings us closer to our sisters and brothers in Christ. We are shaped by our memories of Christ.

Copyright Donald F. Heath, Jr. 2019