

Sermon – Advocate and Companion  
Scripture: Acts 1:1-14, John 14:25-29  
Sunday, June 1, 2014  
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Our first scripture reading is Acts 1:1-14. The story of Jesus' ascension marks the end of Jesus' post resurrection appearances to his disciples and the prelude to the sending of the Spirit, thereby marking a transition point from Easter to Pentecost. The mention of Samaria and the ends of the earth hints this witness will go far beyond traditional borders and limits. Hear now, the word of God.

*1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*

Our second scripture reading is John 14:25-29. Three days following the Ascension and one week prior to Pentecost we continue the reading of the teachings in John's gospel about God's spirit. Jesus names the spirit as "Advocate," from the Greek word *parakletos*. Jesus reassures disciples of all times and places with the promise of the "Paraclete" – a companion, advocate, and counselor. In the absence of Jesus' physical presence followers of Christ receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in which *they live and move and have their being*. This spirit empowers those with whom the spirit dwells to speak the truth and to live Christ's love. Hear now God's word.

*25 "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 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. 27 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. 28 You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29 And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.*

The title of the sermon: Advocate and Companion

*Text: 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. John 14:26*

Let us pray. Holy Advocate and Loving Companion, make us ever more aware of your empowering presence in each of our lives that we may live and move and have our being in you. As we reflect on the gift of your spirit, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

As we journey through life, each one of us, no doubt, needs an advocate and companion ...someone who encourages us when we are feeling unsure of ourselves and reminds us of who we are; someone who speaks up for us when we can't find our own words and empowers us to do what we know is right even when we don't feel like it...and someone who is strong enough to be with us when we are angry and hurt and sad.

This past Memorial Day weekend Peter and I joined my sister and her husband in helping my mom divide and discard the belongings from the home near Chicago she shared with my father the past two decades. Following my father's death last October, she decided to sell this home and live full time in Florida. It was a productive and poignant time to be together with family and an opportunity to share stories and memories. It was uplifting to read the cards, church bulletins and sermons he had saved through the years. I was particularly touched when I discovered a letter my dad wrote on my behalf during a difficult time on the path to ordination. It reminded me once again what an incredible advocate my father has been for me and the pain he absorbed during times when he could not step in and protect me from the inevitable loss and disappointment that are a part of growing up.

One of those times was during my third semester of seminary when an unexpected illness forced me to drop my classes and fly home. Devastated and feeling particularly vulnerable and alone, I remember the day a book arrived in the mail from one of my favorite Professors and Dean at Hope College where I attended undergraduate school...from Dr. Lars Granberg. I was deeply touched by his thoughtfulness and immediately poured myself into the pages longing for some answers, for a word of comfort and healing.

The book was written by the late Henri Nouwen, a beloved and respected Roman Catholic Priest from the Netherlands, who visited Westminster as the keynote speaker for an Adult Education Bay Weekend some years back perhaps while teaching at Yale Divinity School. In his book entitled Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life, rather than present pat answers, I was invited to listen to my heart, stay with my questions and look for the answers with which I struggled from within myself. Over the years, the writings of Nouwen have provided spiritual guidance to me and this book, in particular, changed the direction of my spiritual journey.

I would like to share some of Nouwen's reflections about what it means to live a life in the spirit of Christ because I believe they offer insight into Jesus' teaching on *the Advocate, the Holy Spirit ...*The premise of the book Reaching Out is that one must first reach within and so the title of the first movement of the spiritual life is *reaching out to our innermost self*.

Nouwen invites us to enter into our loneliness and embrace it. Loneliness is perhaps the most universal of human experiences. We come into the world alone and we depart alone. Each one of us knows loneliness and many of us go to great extents to avoid it. We fill our time and space with people and things and things to do, in order to bypass the inevitable. Yet, when the books are read, the people are visited, the children are asleep and the TV is turned off, we are each alone with ourselves. Even best friends, kindred spirits and life partners cannot take away our loneliness.

The imagery that Nouwen chooses to depict our journey into loneliness is that of a desert! Not unlike the Israelites who spent forty years in the desert before entering the Promised Land or Jesus who spent forty days in the desert before reaching out in his ministry, each one of our spiritual journeys begins in the desert. In Nouwen's words:

*To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter the dessert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. This requires not only courage but also a strong faith. As hard as it is to believe that the dry desolate desert can yield endless varieties of flowers, (and it does) it is equally hard to imagine that our loneliness is hiding unknown beauty. The movement from loneliness to solitude is the movement from restlessness and fear to rest and openness.*

On this journey, an effective spiritual guide, instead of giving us pat answers, offers us a safe place to stay alone and take the risk of entering into our own experience, encouraging us to discover a living well by reaching deep enough under the surface of our complaints and boredom to discover the joy in our tears and the peace that is possible when we face our fears.

In that living water, in the oasis in the desert, we meet the spirit of the living God in whom we live and move and have our being, our Advocate and Companion, and solitude begins to grow out of our loneliness. No longer pulled apart by the noise of the world, we can be nourished in the silence of God and able to view the world from a quiet, inner center. This solitude can be experienced in the midst of a very active and productive life. In fact, an active and productive life reflects this inner solitude.

This week we lost an award winning author, civil rights activist and literary icon. Maya Angelou leaves behind a body of work filled with wisdom and insight. Her last tweet, posted on May 23 is a fitting, serene final message:

*Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of God*

Those who have the courage to enter that quietude, and who discover the voice of God find an inner joy and sense of well-being, even when things are difficult, in times of illness, loss and uncertainty. This sense of well-being, of an inner strength in the midst of life's challenges and disappointments, grows out of a connectedness with God. not unlike a tree planted by streams of water.

The metaphor of a tree, especially in a desert, for a life lived in the Spirit of Christ emphasizes the importance of being grounded and connected to the living water. Without strong and deep roots, a tree cannot stand tall or bear fruit. Neither can a tree's branches reach out to provide shade and a home for the birds in the air.

There was a large, oak tree in the front yard of our Clayton home, bent over, almost touching the ivy on the ground. There was something very powerful about this old, majestic tree bowing before its Maker. It was a reminder to all of us who seek to live and move and have our being in God of the importance of quietude, worship and prayer in our lives...of staying connected to the One who is our Advocate and Companion on this journey. The Spirit of Truth, who is a gift from the father, abides in our hearts and empowers us to be advocates and companions and partners in Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.