

A Easter 6 5.14.23

John 14:15-21

Focus Statement: Jesus sits with us.

Last week I told you about a time where I filled a space with words because saying something, anything, was and is my job. This week I want to tell you about a time I didn't have any words, and despite me that ended up being the right way to be.

I worked for a Lutheran Bible camp during college. One summer for our Thursday evening worship, we worshiped in the Taizé style, which is short, two-to-three-line songs, sung over and over and over again, until the repetition becomes meditative. We ended with a time of silence with campers invited to stay in silent prayer for as long or as short as they wished and leave in silence when they were ready. Some kids would stay in prayer for only a few minutes, others would stay for much longer. Taizé is a very simple and meaningful form of worship, and every week, without fail, whether the kid stayed in prayer for a minute or for twenty, they listed it as among their most powerful experiences of the week. I made it my practice at these services to be the last one to leave, so that no kid would ever feel alone or awkward, and if someone was having a hard time or needing someone to talk to I was available. One night the group dwindled to me and one other staff member. I worked at the off-site program and counselors rotated in every week, so this wasn't a staff member I knew particularly well. When it was just her and I all of a sudden, she stood up and walked quickly out of the space. Sensing something was up I followed her. Speaking to no one, she walked around the edge of the room where the rest of the camp had gathered, through the kitchen, and out to the back porch, where she sat on an upturned bucket, head in her hands. Unsure what she needed, I overturned another bucket across the porch from her, and just

sat there. She didn't acknowledge me, and I didn't say anything to her. We just sat in what was for me an uncomfortable silence. For a long time. Like at least fifteen minutes. Her with her head in her hands on a bucket, me increasingly wondering if I should break the silence, or leave her alone, or make some movement or sound to clarify my continued presence. But I couldn't decide which, if any, of those things to do, so I just sat in silence as well.

Until suddenly she began to speak. On and on she spoke, about grief and fear and loneliness. About trying to figure out who she was and what she was doing. About feeling unsure in her own skin and questioning her faith and dealing with anxiety, and so many things that were weighing heavy on her heart and mind. When she had talked herself out, we sat in silence for another moment, and then she said, "How did you know?" "How did I know what?" I asked. "How did you know I just needed you to sit there." I think I came clean and admitted that I didn't know, and I'd honestly spent the last however long trying and failing to think of what to say, without coming up with anything. I know I said this, "I didn't know, but God did."

I didn't know, but God did. God did, and so God, I think, had to have kept me silent. I've since gained a comfort with silence, but certainly at that time I was more apt to fill a space than I was to let it rest. But in that moment, not by choice or by wisdom but merely from my own overwhelmed uneasiness, I just sat there. And just sitting there turned out to have been the exact right thing to do. Just sitting there turned out to be what created the space for her to feel safe to share. The associate pastor at my internship congregation referred to

this model of ministry as “pastor as furniture.” It is the practice not of speaking, touching, or even necessarily acknowledging, but simply being present with another person.

This week I was reading a commentary by Luther Seminary professor Karoline Lewis who spoke of this same practice of presence as “the very essence of Johannine Spirit.” In our Gospel text this week, Jesus promised to send “another Advocate, to be with you forever.” The word translated as “advocate” is the Greek *parakletos*, a word so thick with meaning that just about every English translation renders it differently. The NRSV, which we read, has Advocate, the King James Version has Comforter, the New International Version Counselor, the Message has Friend. Other translations use Helper and Companion. Some translations don’t even try to translate, leaving it simply as the transliteration Paraclete. *Parakletos* is from the verb *parakaleo*, which means to exhort and encourage, to comfort and console, to call upon for help, to appeal, and to make appeal on one’s behalf. Dr. Lewis defines Paraclete as “the one who comes alongside [us]... Our advocate. Our aide. Our intercessor. Our guide. Our companion. The one to whom we can say, ‘Just sit with me.’”

It is powerful that this promise comes at this point in the Farewell Discourse, because you can tell by the questions, the disciples are starting to tell that things are getting away from them. Jesus has told them he’s going away and they know where he’s going, but Thomas pointed out, they don’t. Jesus said you know me so you know the Father, and Philip was like, “wait, hey, show us the Father.” And Jesus didn’t really answer that question either. But what Jesus did do, what Jesus does, instead of fall on trite phrases or simple cliches is offer the promise of continued presence.

Dear people of God, sometimes there are no words. When grief feels insurmountable and heartbreak indescribable. When fear and anger and the powers of sin and death and hurt are real and present, sometimes the only thing there is to do but sit right now in the middle of it and not claim that there are simple explanations or easy answers, because sometimes there aren't, but to promise to be present.

There are no words, and Jesus didn't make up any. He didn't wash away the disciples' fears, tell them to look tough, and pretend it wasn't going to be hard. Instead, he promised them another Advocate who would not just be with them, but would abide with them, and would be in them.

I mentioned last week that this text is looking ahead to Jesus' resurrection, but it's looking ahead further than that. This text is leaning also to and through Pentecost and into the assurance that Christ will come again in the fulfillment of all promise. A different commentary I read described time and space as collapsing in this promise, Jesus' presence stretching from "In the beginning was the Word" through Jesus' ministry, his death, resurrection, and ascension, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, through the growth of the church all the way to and through us and on and on long after we are gone until Christ has come again. That expansiveness, dear people of God, is just a taste of what is included in this promise that Jesus will not leave us orphaned but has sent us another Advocate to be with us.

Jesus is with us, dear people of God, and, we get to be present with each other. This Spirit of Truth who is with us is also in us, inviting us to come alongside each other. Dr. Lewis wrote: "I truly believe that when Jesus said, 'I am sending another Advocate,' ... he wanted his disciples to see that same 'just sit with me' in each other. That reclining around the table, their feet washed and bread shared, they would look at each other, and say to one another, 'Thomas, you are my paraclete. Andrew, you are my paraclete. Nathaniel, you are my paraclete.'" So I want to close this morning with an invitation. I want to invite you to consider two things this morning. First, I want you to consider, who has come alongside you in this journey of life. Who has been paraclete/advocate/comforter/guide for you? Who has come alongside you, holding space for you to be whatever you need to be?

And depending on what's going on in your life right now, that might well be enough. If all you're doing is hanging on, leave it there. Reflect on who are the people who are being Christ's presence with you and cling to that. Pro tip, if life is real tough right now and you can't think of a single person, look around this room. We're a little group, so certainly, hopefully, someone has been that for you, or could be, or would be willing to be.

Reflecting on who has been paraclete may well be enough. But if you're in a solid place right now. If you have the time and space in your heart and your spirit, then this text gives us this challenge, who can you come alongside in this season. What places or situations need someone to sit in the middle of it and simply be a sign of Christ's presence. This may be a one-on-one thing, a friend who needs a phone call or an invitation or a casserole. It may be wider. Calling a political leader is a way of being present. Taking part in a protest is

a way of being present. Advocating for an issue is a way of being present. Co-op's graduation is on Friday, celebrating alongside those who have completed their programs and are transforming their lives is a way to be present.

Dear people of God, in this text Jesus promises to never leave us and to always be with us. These are not empty words; they are anchored in the resurrection and continue to be lived out in the gathered community. Thanks be to God. Amen.