



## Getting Theological: Paraclete

John 14:8-17, 25-27

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Last Sunday we marveled at the glory of Christ's ascension. As Christ was preparing to depart, we saw how the disciples inquired as to what Christ's departure meant for the glory of the kingdom of Israel. We acknowledged in Christ's response that Christ's presence, his teachings, his healings, his crucifixion, his resurrection, and his ascension were not intended to bring glory or identity to the kingdom of Israel, but instead to God.

Christ's parting words as he ascended were that the Spirit would come to provide power *so that* we may be witnesses to God in our local community, in our greater region, and to the ends of the earth. As Christ ascended, the disciples were left with a transitional week to prepare themselves to receive the gift of the Spirit, that as the faithful, we might fulfill Christ's call to be such witnesses. Today we gather on this Pentecost Sunday, remembering, celebrating, and receiving once more the gift of the Spirit that has been sent so that we may be empowered as Christ promised. Are you ready? Are you ready to receive the Spirit?

Wait ... are we ready for what? I mean, really – what does this mean?

What happens to us when we the Spirit? Will we begin speaking in tongues? ... What does it mean to be empowered as witnesses for Christ? Will we run out into the streets and begin speaking in foreign languages to non-English speakers in our community? ... How will we know when the Spirit arrives? Will we feel the gust of the air that comes like a mighty rushing wind? ... What difference does the Holy Spirit make in our lives?

Usually on Pentecost Sunday, we read the Scriptural text from Acts 2, which describes the day of Pentecost when the first disciples received the gift of the Spirit. The text invites us to marvel and awe at the entrance of the Spirit, claiming, "Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." As the morning continues on, Peter takes the pulpit and preaches, saying, "Indeed, [these disciples] are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning!" The Spirit was intoxicating, and the community thought they were tipsy from their actions and attitude – perhaps the Spirit had just removed their inhibitions.

While this accounting in Acts 2 is powerful, and it shows the effects of the presence of the Spirit, it leaves up for interpretation the *purpose* of the Spirit. Some see the effects of the Spirit and claim that the Spirit was gifted to simply grow the church. Some say that all that matters is the sheer volume of people who proclaim Christ's name, working toward the day when all will proclaim the name of Christ.

Looking in Acts 2, we can see the church did grow as a result of the gifted Spirit – indeed, Acts 2, verse 41 says the church grew by some 3,000 people on that first Pentecost day. You can still find churches today that post online every Sunday how many “new” people joined the church. There’s a clear interpretation that the purpose of the Spirit is to help the church grow bigger.

Others might say that, according to Acts 2, the purpose of the Spirit was to ensure we can reach *more* people – not necessarily about size, but about breadth. This group highlights that the disciples were gifted with various tongues. How can we reach the ends of the earth as witnesses if we can’t speak the language of the tribes and people who are scattered across the globe. There are some who still claim that the Spirit was gifted for the purpose of speaking in tongues and as a result, highlight how many international converts we have from various religions to Christianity. There’s a clear interpretation that the purpose of the Spirit is to help the church to be more expansive.

Still, others offer that the Spirit was gifted so that we might proclaim God’s Word. Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, quotes a Hebrew text from Joel, which claims that the gift of the Spirit would be offered so that all of God’s sons and daughters would prophesy, have visions, and see dreams. Today, we find there are different schools of thought on how God’s Word is proclaimed because of this purpose of the Spirit. Even in things like sermon writing, some claim that if you’re truly filled with the Spirit, you don’t need a manuscript when preaching because the Spirit will give you God’s words to speak. (I guess I’m not a very Spirit filled preacher.) There’s a clear interpretation that the purpose of the Spirit is to give us the words to speak the Word of God to the world.

I don’t mean to suggest that the Spirit’s presence doesn’t aid the church in its reach, in growing its size, or in offering us the capability to speak God’s Word. But these interpretations depend on us deciding why the Spirit was sent based on the affects witnessed after the Spirit was received. I wonder if we might better discern the purpose by hearing Christ describe the Spirit before the Spirit was sent, and then applying Christ’s words to the affects we see in Acts 2. Beyond Christ saying, “the Spirit is coming to empower you to be witnesses,” which we read in Acts 1 last week, we also have this text in John 14 where Christ is explaining the Spirit to the disciples – explaining what is the Spirit, and offering a bit more directly words of purpose for the gift of the Spirit that is being sent.

In the story Philip, who is not one of the 12 disciples, has come to Jesus and has asked for Jesus to show all who are disciples the Father. They want to see God. ... If Jesus is the Son of God, surely Jesus can show them the Father, right?

Jesus responds, naming their blindness to the truth. “Have you been with me all this time,” Jesus asks, “and not known me? ... If you have seen me, you *have* seen the Father.” Next week we’ll pick up a bit more on the complications of this three-in-one overlap we call the trinity, but here, Jesus continues, saying, “The words I say to you are the words of the Father. The actions I have done, they are of the Father. If you believe in me, you believe in the Father. You can ask for things in *my* name, and they will be done to glorify the Father.” Jesus says, you have seen the Father, because you have seen me.

The question Phillip asks is a question the disciples want answered before Jesus leaves. If you’re leaving us, they beg, help us to see the Father before you go. That’s all we want from Jesus, is for Jesus

to direct them to God. ... Much like the question we heard the disciples ask last week, “When will the kingdom of Israel be glorified?,” the disciples are worried about Jesus’ departure and what it means for them as they prepare to face the absence of Christ.

Jesus picks up on their fear, and so he continues, beginning in verse 15, saying, “I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate, to be with you forever.”

We’ve got to spend some time with this before we move on. The Greek wording here is that God will send ἄλλος παράκλητος (allos parakletos). Our text in the New Revised Standard Version translates this word *parakletos* – or *paraclete* – as “advocate.” You can pick up 10 different versions of the Bible and find 10 different words used in this verse. *Paraclete* is translated as “comforter,” “advocate,” “counselor,” and “helper,” among others. It is a word that throughout Christianity has been synonymous with the Holy Spirit. Christ is offering that upon his departure, he will ask, and God will send the Spirit – the *paraclete* – to be with us forever.

Yet, we can’t move forward too quickly. See, in his naming of the Spirit to come, Christ doesn’t just offer that *the paraclete* will be sent, Christ says, *allos parakletos* – that *another paraclete* will be sent. *Another* advocate will be sent. *Another* counselor will be sent. The gifted empowerment to come in the Spirit is not something new, it’s something re-imagined. The Spirit to come is not the first of its kind, it’s *another* iteration of what God has been doing in the world.

In offering that *another paraclete* is being sent, Jesus seems to be indicating that he too was a paraclete – an advocate who intercedes on our behalf before God.

This sounds a bit odd; this isn’t the common text that we read on Pentecost Sunday because it’s somewhat anticlimactic. We like the idea that the Spirit is something new – something bold – something grand and unexpected. Such a new thing gives us great reason to celebrate. Yet, Christ says, what’s coming is nothing new, it’s just another version of what you’ve already had in your midst.

If we start digging a bit deeper into the Biblical text, we find that the Spirit and Christ are given many of the same descriptors. First off, just consider the varying translations of the word *paraclete*. Counselor – Remember Isaiah? “He will be called, wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father?” Jesus has been called Counselor. ... And what about Comforter? Christ himself proclaimed, “All who are weary, come to me and I will give you rest.” Jesus is the Comforter. ... Also, Christ has just finished saying he speaks to the Father on our behalf, which is the same promise we find in Romans 8, wherein Paul offers that *the Spirit* intercedes for us when we do not know what words to pray. Jesus and Spirit are intercessors. ...

The connections are everywhere. Just a few verses earlier in John 14:6, Christ says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” and then in verse 17, Christ refers to the coming *paraclete* as “the Spirit of truth.” Jesus makes the connection that the one to come is the *pneuma* of truth. That’s the Greek word for Spirit. *Pneuma*, in Greek, means wind, or breath ... Jesus is offering that the one to come is the breath of truth ... the Spirit is to be the breath of Christ that lives in us, breathing God’s truth into our lives.

As we hear Christ's words about the coming of *another paraclete*, as we're told that the Spirit to come is to have much the same function as Christ, himself, the purpose of the Spirit starts to take form.

We pick back up in verse 25, as Christ offers, "I have said these things to you while I was still with you. But the Advocate, the Spirit (... the one to come ...), whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Here, Jesus confirms the suspicion we had already begun to form. The Spirit is coming to pick up where Christ left off. ... See, Jesus had three years of earthly ministry to teach, to witness to God's love, to preach God's desires for humanity. Jesus had three years of earthly ministry to be a witness to God's healing in the world, to exemplify God's grace in the world, and to break down the human barriers that keep humanity from realizing God's desire for creation. And then Christ departed ...

But God's work does not end with Christ's departure. We're told that God's work does not end here – God's work does not end with the crucifixion and resurrection – God's work does not find its end in Christ's ascension. Instead, Christ, in his departure, will intercede to have God send *another paraclete*, so that after the ascension, after Christ has departed, the work of God will continue because of the believers who will be empowered by the gift of the Spirit, this *other paraclete*.

This is good stuff, right? Christ says, I'm leaving, but don't worry, because the power I brought, the purpose I served, the work I did in my time, it's not over. Only, in this next iteration, the power is being gifted to you to do the same work!

But, hold on Pastor Thomas ... we are not Jesus. We cannot do the work that Jesus did.

Come on now – we can't tell people to know the truth regarding the state of our nation, and then ignore the truth when it's printed in our own Biblical text.

Scan back up; look back at John 14, verse 12. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

This is the gift of the Spirit – this is the promise of *another paraclete*. Here is the purpose of the Spirit – so that the work of God, the work done by Christ, the Word exemplified in Christ, the grace extended through Christ, the mercy offered out of Christ, the love witnessed because of Christ – that all these things may not cease to be, but that we might be empowered to continue these works, and to do even greater works. The purpose of the Spirit is so that we might be empowered to continue God's great work on earth.

Now – take this purpose and reimpose it on Acts 2 – on the visuals of the disciples speaking in tongues, and the proclaiming of God's Word, and the growing of the church. What we find when we take this purpose and overlay it on top of that first Pentecost morning, is that everything that was happening was about the glorification of God, and the correcting of the brokenness of humanity – because this is the work of God.

See, I believe we think too highly of ourselves, and we believe that everything God does is for us. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus because it promises *us* new life. We celebrate the healing miracles of Jesus because they promise *us* the gift of healing. We celebrate Pentecost because it reminds *us* that *we* are empowered, and that the Spirit comes to grow *our* church, and help *us* to proclaim God's Word in the world.

But everything Christ did was pointing us back to God. Everything Christ did was redirecting us back to know God's truth. Everything Christ did was to fix the brokenness of humanity that kept us from knowing God fully. Everything Christ did was to fix the brokenness of humanity that kept us from living in truth and love with one another. And as he prepared to depart, he promises us that *another paraclete* was coming. Another power was coming. Another advocate was coming. And this counselor, this helper, this *paraclete* was coming to empower us to do the very work of Christ – of God – in the world. When we say, “we believe we are called to be the hands and the feet of Christ in the world,” this is what we mean. We are empowered by the Spirit to be Christ in the world – to do as Christ did in the world – to live as Christ lived in the world – to love as Christ loved the world.

And this is an awesome expectation, that we don't have to fear doing on our own, for the paraclete has come to empower us, that we get to be part of fixing the brokenness of humanity that keeps God from being fully known, and that keeps humanity from living in truth and love with one another. This is Pentecost, this is the *Paraclete*, this is the power of God, poured out like a mighty rushing wind, the breath of truth, divested into humanity that we might be God's grace, and mercy, and love for a world that so desperately needs them all.

Receive the breath of truth in the gift of the Spirit, and may it lead you to do even greater works in the world for God's glory, that all may know they are beloved by the Creator, and redeemed by the Son, and born anew by the Spirit. And may God receive the glory of all the Spirit empowers us to do. Thanks be to God. Amen.