

**Dave Johnson**  
**Sermon: “The Paraclete”**  
**June 12, 2011**

Today we celebrate Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples and the birth of the Christian Church. Luke’s account of Pentecost is certainly riveting, as he tells us that while the disciples were gathered together that:

“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. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:2-4).

The Book of Acts is filled with accounts of the mighty movement of the Holy Spirit in the life of the early church, and throughout Christian history the Holy Spirit has continued to move powerfully in the lives of believers. Sometimes there are indeed supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit—like healing and speaking in tongues. Perhaps you have witnessed these things; I know I have.

When I was sixteen I went to a healing service that was held at our church. I had a sports injury and thought some prayer could help. After the sermon those of us who wanted prayer for healing came forward. We were lined up as the preacher prayed over each of us, one at a time, moving down the line. Each one who received prayer fell backwards as they were what some people call “slain in the Spirit.” When the minister got to me and began praying I didn’t feel anything so after beginning to feel conspicuous, I “faked it” and fell backwards anyway. After a few minutes I got up and drove home, feeling guilty but also cynical too. Years later I was at a similar gathering, but when I was prayed over that time I genuinely felt touched by the Holy Spirit and immediately fell backwards.

But in today’s sermon rather than focusing on the supernatural aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church I am going to focus on the day to day work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Sometimes this day to day work of the Holy Spirit is outward and dramatic, but often it tends to be inward and gentle as the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.

The Bible is clear that the Holy Spirit is active throughout our lives as believers. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of the fact that we are sinners desperately in need of a savior (Acts 2:37). It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to repent, to turn back to God and confess “Jesus is Lord” (I Corinthians 12:3). It is the Holy Spirit who is at work in us “both to will and to work for (God’s) good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). It is the Holy Spirit who calls and equips all of us to serve in the church (I Corinthians 12:1-31 and Ephesians 4:7-13) and it is the Holy Spirit who bears the “fruit of the Spirit” (love, joy, peace, patience, etc.) in our lives.

In today's gospel lesson from John 20 we see that Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter evening and proclaimed peace to them (Paul Walker preached a great sermon on this a few weeks ago). John also tells us that Jesus "breathed on them" and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

When Jesus did this he fulfilled a promise he had made to them at the Last Supper:

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... 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 14:16-17 and 26).

In this passage John uses a special word to refer to the Holy Spirit, *paraclete*. The word *paraclete* is loaded with meaning, and is rendered differently in English translations of the Bible. In the *New Revised Standard Version* (your pew Bible) *paraclete* is translated as "Advocate;" in the *King James Version* (the version Jesus used ☺) it is translated as "Comforter;" in the *New International Version* it is translated as "Counselor;" and in *The Message* it is translated as "Friend."

Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, Friend... each of these translations of *paraclete* sheds light on how the Holy Spirit works in our day to day lives as believers.

The Holy Spirit is our *Advocate*. God is on our side. God is for us, not against us (Romans 8:31). Jesus promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would remind the disciples of what he had taught, and as our advocate the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to remind us of things we tend to forget, like the fact that God is for us not against us, that we are loved and forgiven by God.

In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy's moving Pulitzer Prize winning novel, a father tells his son, "Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever... You might want to think about that." The son replies, "You forget some things, don't you?" The father answers, "Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget" (p. 12).

That's so true. Indeed we forget what we want to remember and we remember what we want to forget. We tend to forget that God is on our side and remember our failures and sins. Sometimes other people "help" with that ☺. In his song, *These Days* (1973) Jackson Browne sings: "Don't confront me with my failures... I had not forgotten them." The good news is that even if we remember our failures and sins, God does not. The Bible tells us that "by a single offering (Jesus Christ) has perfected for all time those who are sanctified," and that "the Holy Spirit also testifies to us... '(God) will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more'" (Hebrews 10:14-15; and 17).

If you follow baseball you may have heard that this past week the Texas Rangers drafted a player from Georgia named Jonathan Taylor. Jonathan Taylor is paralyzed. He was injured in a

collision during a game with fellow outfielder Zach Cone. And yet after the Rangers drafted Cone, they drafted Taylor too. They wanted Taylor on their team.

The good news is that God is for us, not against us, that in spite of being paralyzed by our weaknesses and neuroses and sin God still drafts us onto his team. We tend to forget that sometimes; but the Holy Spirit reminds us, because the Holy Spirit is our Advocate.

The Holy Spirit is also our *Comforter*. At the risk of sounding bleak, one thing I have learned in years of pastoral ministry is that in one way or another everybody hurts. The rock band R.E.M. got it exactly right in their song *Everybody Hurts* (1992): “Everybody hurts sometimes... Everybody hurts... You are not alone.”

Kids in school hurt because there are bullies at school, and because sometimes there is a lot of anger and fear in their homes. Students hurt because they get used and then dumped by a boyfriend or girlfriend or rejected by a college they wanted to attend or a fraternity or sorority they tried to join. Single adults hurt because they are lonely and married people hurt because often spouses are not kind to each other. People hurt as they are marginalized at work or resented by their kids. It goes on and on. In response to this hurt many people turn to various forms of addiction in order to self-medicate, in order to try and take the edge off of the hurt.

And yet the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit is our Comforter, and that God cares about every single hurt in our lives, every single one. And in the midst of these hurts the Holy Spirit does not give us a motivational speech or tell us that “pain is weakness leaving the body”; instead, the Holy Spirit gives us comfort and reminds us that God cares about us.

I recently heard an anecdote about a lady who had cancer and was losing her hair. One day she awoke to see that she had three hairs left on her head, so she decided to braid it. Later she saw two heads on her head, so she decided to part them in the middle. When she eventually had only one hair left, she decided to wear it in a pony tail. It is in that kind of hurt, even in the midst of trying to make the best of it, that the Holy Spirit reminds us that God knows the number of hairs on our head, especially when that number is decreasing, and gives us comfort.

In fact, even when cancer has run its course and there are no hairs left, even when we find ourselves on death’s doorstep, the Holy Spirit is there to comfort us. We read in Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they *comfort* me” (KJV). I have often been at the bedsides of the dying, and at times have felt a tangible sense of the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit. It is very real.

The Holy Spirit is also our *Counselor*. In our lives we often find ourselves in a “What do I do?” season. Life is filled with decisions, right? Sometimes these decisions are minor—we may be at a 7-11 trying to decide which flavor of Skittles to buy—do I go with Fruit Skittles or Tropical or Wild Berry or Sour? What do I do? ☺.

Often these decisions carry much more weight. We may be at an impasse in a relationship or at a crossroads in our career. We may be facing tough decisions about finances or medical treatment or educating our kids. “What do I do?” In these times we need much more than “Quotable Quotes” from *Reader’s Digest* or input from a newspaper advice column, we need counsel from God.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit is our Counselor. Sometimes counsel from the Holy Spirit comes as a thought or insight out of the blue. Sometimes it comes through a conversation with a friend or a song or sermon or film. Sometimes the answer to “What do I do?” is to not to anything, but to wait for God to act on your behalf. It is hard to articulate, but when you receive that counsel from God, you just know that you know, and there is a sense of relief.

The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, Comforter, and Counselor.

The Holy Spirit is also our *Friend*. Carole King’s classic song, *You’ve Got a Friend* (1971) begins like this:

When you're down and troubled  
And you need some loving care  
And nothin', nothin' is goin' right  
Close your eyes and think of me  
And soon I will be there  
To brighten up even your darkest night

You just call out my name  
And you know wherever I am  
I'll come runnin' to see you again  
Winter, spring, summer or fall  
All you have to do is call  
And I'll be there  
You've got a friend

In an interview Carole King described what it was like writing that song: “it was as close to pure inspiration as I've ever experienced. The song wrote itself. It was written by something outside of myself, through me.” Perhaps the Holy Spirit inspired her to write *You’ve Got a Friend*, because it is pure gospel. In the Holy Spirit we’ve got a friend, all the time, no matter what.

Jesus was a friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34), and it is the same with the Holy Spirit. People do not stop sinning after their conversion to Christ, and the Holy Spirit, our Friend, loves us even in the midst of that sin, calls us to repent—to turn back to God—and is present with us through all of it.

The fact that we are loved by God even in the midst of our sin is the ultimate proof of God's love. The Bible tells us: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Sin has a way of isolating people and making people feel completely alone. Sometimes when we feel the most alone, the Holy Spirit reminds us that we are actually not alone at all, and reminds us that we are still loved, and that we've got a Friend—and as Carole King sang, "Ain't it good to know you've got a friend."

So what about you today?

If you tend to forget what you want to remember and remember what you want to forget, the good news is that the Holy Spirit is your Advocate, to remind you that Jesus' death on the cross is proof that you are loved by God, to remind you that God has drafted you onto his team, and that God is for you, not against you.

If you are hurting today, the good news is that the Holy Spirit is your Comforter, to remind you that God cares for every detail in your life, that he even knows the number of hairs on your head. The Holy Spirit comforts us with God's presence even in the valley of the shadow of death.

If you are in a "What do I do?" season of life, the good news is that the Holy Spirit is your Counselor, to give you wisdom about what to do or whether to do nothing but wait for God to act.

If you are lonely, the good news is that the Holy Spirit is your Friend, no matter what, even in the midst of your sin. The Holy Spirit convicts and also ministers forgiveness and grace anew.

So on this Pentecost Sunday be encouraged. The gospel is true. Jesus has died and is risen, and Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit, the *Paraclete*, just as he promised. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts as our Advocate, Comforter, Counselor, and Friend.

No matter what we go through in life, the Holy Spirit is present to minister God's grace to us, and to assure us that God will finish the work he has begun in our lives.

Amen.