

Advocates and Advocating
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
May 30, 2021
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Several years ago my friends, Fay and Wes, traveled to Prague and Budapest. As part of the trip they took the train between these two cities. In preparation they purchased their train tickets before leaving home. The tickets were printed in Czech.

When the time came, they boarded the train, found their compartment and settled in for the ride. It was a few hours later when the Conductor came around to check tickets. And it was then that they discovered they did not have two tickets, but instead only one. Thankfully the Conductor took pity on them and let them go.

However, they soon learned that there were new Conductors in each country they passed through - a new Conductor got on in Slovakia. This time the Conductor didn't have the same sense of pity. But they figured out what worked...Wes bribed the guy not to kick them off the train...no shared language, but everyone understands a bribe.

Yet they knew they couldn't count on either pity or bribes for the entire trip and Fay started to panic because not only did they have just one ticket, but they were out of Euros. They went to the dining car in hopes of exchanging Czech Marks for Euros.

There they were grateful to encounter a waiter who asked if they were American. He told them he had been an exchange student in Chicago during high school and enjoyed his year in the U.S. They told him their current situation. He said he wasn't supposed to exchange money, but he did it for them as he was kind and didn't want to see them kicked off the train.

Their new friend also acted as interpreter for them when the Hungarian Conductor got on and finally they were able to purchase a second ticket (adapted from Fay Barnes Blevins' Facebook post, May 23, 2021).

Sometimes what you need is someone to be on your side. An advocate can make all the difference in the world.

Having just passed the day of Pentecost, it seems fitting that we would spend a little more time with the Spirit today. And in today's text, from the Gospel of John, as Jesus was preparing his disciples for life without him, we are introduced to the Spirit - not as the sound of a violent wind and the appearance of fire, but as an advocate.

So, what is an advocate? What do you think of when you hear that word?

An advocate is one who looks out for the best interest of another.

An advocate is one who speaks on behalf of or in favor of someone or something.

An advocate is one who gives access or shares information.

An advocate is one who comes alongside another and does not leave them alone.

Here the disciples were preparing for their friend, their teacher, their companion to leave. How powerful the idea of an advocate coming alongside them must have been. And it is no less powerful for us today. After all, we sometimes feel alone in this world.

Even as we admire and claim and follow Jesus, we sometimes feel disconnected from him across time and space...Even as we feel God's presence and believe in a divine force, we sometimes struggle to name and claim exactly how we understand God...Even as we wonder about the concept of the Trinity, as we struggle to figure out the Holy Spirit, as we vacillate between embracing what the church has traditionally called the "three persons of the Trinity" while also being unsure about our own position...no matter how we name or understand it, there is a gift in the assurance that we have an advocate, that the divine presence is with us, that we are not alone.

And that is the promise that Jesus left with his disciples. And he stated this promise in such strong language as to even say, "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

Now, I am human just as the disciples were and so I can imagine that they may have thought he was crazy...how could it ever be to their advantage for him to go away? How could anyone or anything replace him?

And yet, it seems that no matter what we do or do not understand about the Spirit, Jesus was certain that while as a human being he could only be in one place at one time, the Spirit was the presence of God with us at all times and places. And, yes, that is an amazing gift.

But there's something else here as well. Remember, in these verses we are told that the Spirit is referred to as the Spirit of truth. Also remember that John, the gospel writer, tells us that Jesus is the truth (John 14:6).

So, the Spirit that is with us is not only the spirit of Jesus, but the one who reminds us of and points us toward the ways of Jesus, the truth that was lived out in the life of Jesus. And that is an important part of this advocate that we claim.

Because before we begin thinking that we can rest on our laurels and just have an advocate who is working and moving on *our* behalf, we must remember who Jesus is. Because if Jesus is truth...then his ways are truth, and as his followers we must become like him.

So, if we are given the gift of having an advocate, of having one who comes alongside us and who reminds us of the heart and ways of Jesus, then, friends, we are also given the responsibility to advocate on behalf of others.

And we know this. Just Tuesday night in our Sacred Conversation on Race, as we talked about what we as a community of faith are called to in the face of racial injustice in our world, someone named that we are called to be advocates for those who experience injustice.

We are called to recognize our power and privilege and to use it on behalf of others.

We are called to speak in the places where we have a voice and to speak not of self-interest, but for the good of others.

We are called to use our resources - money and time, education and access - to create the world of God's intention, a world of equity, a world where none are left behind.

Friends, if we think that the advocate of whom John's Jesus speaks is only about giving us comfort and making us feel safe, then we aren't listening. If we think that this is a gift given to us because we deserve it more than someone else, then we aren't paying attention.

Rather, if we look honestly at the life and teachings and ways of Jesus, we are reminded that everything he did was done on behalf of others, out of the love he knew from God, and with a willingness to sacrifice for others, especially for those considered the least.

If those were his ways, then the Advocate comes to remind us that they are to be ours as well.

Yes, we can take comfort in the presence of the Advocate, in the reminder that we have a God who is for us, in the reality that we are never left alone...but we can not stop there. If we are to take seriously the claim of God with us, then we have a responsibility to be that presence for others. If we are to name the gift of an Advocate, then we must respond when we are called to advocate for others. If we are to use the name of Jesus, then we must walk and live in his ways.

Having an advocate is a gift...and it is a responsibility. May we not only receive God's presence, but may we share it with others...may we commit to come alongside others that they may know the justice, love and compassion of our ever-present God. Amen.