

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide

**John 14:15-21; Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; I Peter 3:13-22**

**John 14:15-21** is Jesus' continuation of his Farewell Discourse. Earlier, he had particularized his relationship with his followers by telling them that it was he who was "the way, the truth and the life". Now, in verses 15-21, he shares with them God's promise of the Holy Spirit to those who follow the Jesus way! John 14:15-21 reinforces the idea that Jesus and the Christian community are inextricably bound together through love that is acted out in action, just as Jesus is bound to the Father by love (vss. 18-21). This is the essence of Jesus' countercultural community.

Jesus begins this section by telling his little believing community, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth" (vss. 16-17a).

As Jesus prepares his followers in this Farewell Discourse for his crucifixion and consequent removal from them, this crisis evokes several strategic questions. If Jesus is indeed "the way, the truth, and the life" to God (as his disciples believed), then what happens when that incarnation of "the way" ends? What happens when Jesus dies? Does that mean that this revelation of God dies with Jesus? Does that bring Jesus' work to an end? And does that then end Jesus' countercultural community? Was Jesus' revelation of God only available to those who experienced that revelation firsthand? Does, therefore, the death of Jesus mean the end of Jesus' community and God's redemptive work on the earth? Or has God made another provision?

Jesus says to his followers, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth" (vss. 16-17a). God has made another provision, and it is the "Advocate". The actual Greek word used here which is translated "advocate" is the word "paracletos" or "paraclete". The word "paraclete" was a technical legal term in Roman (and therefore, Jewish) jurisprudence.

What was a "paraclete"? In the Roman law system, a defendant didn't hire an attorney to argue his case. Instead, each person was expected to defend himself; he was, in essence, his own lawyer. That is why, throughout the book of Acts, one sees Paul repeatedly defending himself before the Sanhedrin, before the Roman governor and Jewish king and even, by implication, before Caesar. That is also why Acts presents both Stephen and Peter presenting their own defenses when before Jewish courts.

But how would an ordinary person know the law well enough to present an adequate defense? He would hire a "paracletos". A paracletos was a professional expert on Roman law. Once hired to support the defense of an accused person, the paracletos would brief him before the trial, and would attend the trial. He would sit next to the defendant, and as the defendant would make his case, the paracletos would whisper advice into his ear so that the defendant might present the best possible case for his innocence.

What Jesus is saying in this passage is that God would provide for the Christian community and for each individual Christian a "paracletos" who would stand next to us in the time of trial to be our "advocate", "comforter", "counselor" and "helper" (these are the English words used to

translate the Greek “paracletos” throughout the Gospel of John – cf. 14:16-17; 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:5-11; 16:12-15). That paraclete is the Holy Spirit.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus presents two insights about the Holy Spirit. First, he tells his followers that God’s revelation of “the way, the truth and the life” incarnated in Jesus and lived out in Jesus’ countercultural community doesn’t end with Jesus’ death. God has given to the Christian community the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit continues the presence of Jesus in our midst. The Spirit takes over the work Jesus was doing, especially through Jesus’ people. And the Spirit will stand by us and empower us, so that we can most effectively stand before “governors and kings” and confront the systems (as did Jesus) to bring about change.

Second, Jesus specifically states that God will give us “another Paraclete” (vs. 16). That implies that there is a “first” Paraclete – and that, of course, is Jesus. It is he who has stood up to the systems and called them to accountability and responsibility over the past three years. And now, as Jesus removes bodily from the scene, he expects the same action from his people. We, too, are to be engaged in public life – just as Jesus was. We, too, are to call the systems to responsibility in their work so that they are everything that God had called them to be. And in order to enable us to do that, Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit – “another Paraclete” – to empower us and give us both the wisdom and the courage to work for substantive change.

It is in the light of this Spirit-filled commission to the church that Jesus says to his little community, “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” (14:27).

It is crucial to remember that the word Jesus actually used here that is translated “peace” was the word “shalom”. It is shalom that Jesus is giving to the Church – to us as a community and to each of us who make up that community. Shalom, of course, means far more than the English word “peace” (see the study on “shalom” on this website). “Shalom” is the primary word used throughout the Hebrew Bible to describe human society and its systems as God intends them to be. It therefore means humanity living as God intended us to live – acting justly toward one another at every level and in every relationship in life, to equitably share wealth so that all poverty is eliminated, and for all to be at one with each other, with the environment and with God. It is this vision of society at one with each other and with God, and manifested through all the political, economic and religious systems that Jesus is wishing through his Christian community upon the entire world. It is such “shalom” that truly gives us “peace” – even in the midst of the worst terrorism, warfare and oppression. “Shalom I leave you; my shalom I give to you”!

**Acts 17:22-31** is Paul’s address made during his mission trip to Athens. The text tells us that “Paul stood in front of the Areopagus”. It is uncertain, however, whether Luke is referring to a speech given by Paul *on* the Areios Pagos (the hill in Athens where public debate would occur) or *to* a specific group of people, the Areopagus. The Areios Pagos was a hill next to the Acropolis where the Council of Athens met. Because they met there, the Council became known as the Areopagus (i.e., “those who meet on the Areios Pagos”). The text gives us no clue,

therefore, whether this is an address to the leaders of Athens or whether this is an address given to anyone who will listen on that legislative hill (where public speeches were delivered).

Paul's speech is a magnificent demonstration of culturally-adaptive preaching. Paul knows that his listeners know little or nothing either about Yahweh or about the Jewish religion. So he speaks to them in their own language, using their unique way of thinking, referring to their gods, and quoting their own poets. But how did Paul learn so much about the Greek culture and Athenian priorities as is exhibited in this speech? The text tells us that, when Paul was brought to Athens by his guides, he sent them back to Silas and Timothy in Beroea with "instructions to join him as soon as possible". How long that wait was on Paul's part, we do not know. But it was long enough that Paul occupied himself by visiting the local synagogue (vs. 17), sight-seeing in the city and learning the Athenian culture (vs. 23) and by spending time in the marketplace discussing philosophy with the "Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" there (vss. 18-20). Paul quickly perceived that "the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (vs. 21), so he took full advantage of their inquiring nature to learn as much as he could about their culture. And once he felt he understood them sufficiently to communicate meaningfully to them, Paul took his next step. And that was to speak either to the leaders of Athens (the Council of the Areopagus) or to a crowd he gathered around himself in the courtyard of the Areopagus. But how would Paul preach Christ to them? His speech is instructive about how to present the faith to a people foreign to it.

He begins, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (vss. 22-23).

Paul begins by complementing the Athenians, reminding them how "religious" they are. The Athenians took pride in their reflective and philosophical spirit which particularly took religious form. By acknowledging that reality, Paul indicates that he both understands and respects their culture, rather than comparing it unfavorably to Jewish culture.

Paul then notes their altar "to an unknown god". In order to guarantee that no god got ignored in the Greek pantheon and thus aroused to anger, the Athenians made sure they had "covered all their bases" by dedicating an altar "to an unknown god". But as a philosophical people, Athenians also didn't like unresolved thinking and actions. Therefore, Paul uses their cultural biases to tell them that what he is about to do is to introduce them to their "unknown god". Thus, he affirms their desire to be fully inclusive and at the same time addresses their dilemma of godly unfinished business. This indicates a keen understanding, not only of the Athenian culture, but of the Athenian psyche, as well. Paul had obviously taken the time to learn about the people he was trying to reach, and by that learning to discern how to share the gospel with them in a way that they could most effectively hear it.

So Paul begins to tell the Athenians about their "unknown god". "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the

whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us” (vss. 24-27).

There are two remarkable elements in what Paul shares with the Athenians about “the unknown god”. The first is found in what he says. The second is found in what he does not say.

What Paul says to the Athenians is that this “unknown god” is not some minor deity, but is the God behind all gods, the “ground of their being” (as philosophers, they would like that). This God is the creator God, who created the “heaven and earth”, “the world and everything in it”. Likewise, this “unknown god” is not only the creator of nature but is also the creator of history. “From one ancestor he made all nations”, he assigned them their portion of the world to inhabit, “he allotted the times of their existence” and “the boundaries” of their eventual rule.

This God is therefore an unbelievably powerful god, Paul proclaims. The Athenian’s “unknown god” is both the creator of the universe and the creator of history. And as such a creator, he inevitably is their creator as well. Therefore, he doesn’t need the praise and adoration of humans; only the minor gods need that. This God doesn’t need them. Instead, they need this God – for not to know him is to be separated from the very ground and creator of their being!

Earlier, I noted that there are two remarkable elements in what Paul shares with the Athenians about “the unknown god”. The first is found in what he says, and we have just examined that. But the second is found in what he does not say. What he does not say is anything about Jesus! There is little in this speech that is the traditional Gospel message that Paul normally proclaimed, and even less about Jesus. In fact, up to this point Jesus has not been mentioned at all, and he will not be mentioned until the very final sentence of his address, and then he will not be mentioned by name. When dealing with a culture that has no authentic understanding of Jesus, the question is how to introduce Him in a way that will engender a positive response from that culture’s people.

So Paul doesn’t introduce Jesus at this point. Instead, he does another remarkable thing. He doesn’t support his argument by using Scripture; after all, the Hebrew Bible would likely be unknown to any of these listeners, and would certainly not be held in respect. Instead, what Paul does is quote Athenian poets. First, he quotes Epimenides (c. 600 BCE), “In him, we live and move and have our being” (vs. 28a). Then he quotes Aratus (c. 315-240 BCE), “For we are his offspring”. Of course, Epimenides and Aratus are referring to Zeus, the head of the Greek gods. But Paul didn’t let that stand in his way. He uses their words to refer to this “unknown god” who is creator of nature, history, the Greek city-states and each Greek. And, apparently, those listening to Paul accept his interpretation of their poets.

This extreme act of cultural sensitivity by Paul suggests two points to us. The first is that Paul obviously felt it was important enough to be receptive and open to Greek culture that he had taken the time to study and now use their poets. This was remarkable for a Jew. The Jewish hierarchy – and particularly the Pharisees (Paul came out of the Pharisee tradition and officially remained a Pharisee for the remainder of his Christian life) – saw any other culture as defiled and unworthy even of respect. The only culture that had remained faithful to Yahweh was that

nation that had remained obedient to the Mosaic Law, the Pharisees believed. But both by quoting Athenian poets and by his cultural sensitivity displayed throughout the entirety of this speech, Paul demonstrated how far beyond the cultural xenophobia of Phariseeism Jesus had brought him. It is a lesson to all Christians living in the real world, as well.

The second point worth noting is that the statement, ‘In him, we live and move and have our being’ is not a statement from a Hebrew prophet or a writer of scripture, but from a Greek poet who didn’t even believe in Yahweh or Jesus! And yet we use it repeatedly within our Christian worship and theology. It is a reminder to us that there is no such thing as a pure or unsullied theology, but through any reflection upon the Christian faith march many traditions of thought – pagan as well as Christian!

Now, as Paul brings his address to a close, he introduces Jesus (but even here, not by name). Paul concludes his speech with these words. “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (vss. 29-31).

Paul tells the Athenians that because they were unaware of whom this “unknown god” was, this God took that reality into consideration. But now Paul has revealed to them the reality about this living God. So now they will be held accountable as to how they will choose to respond to the “unknown god”. How, then, can they respond so that they might be embraced by God and not judged for their actions? They will be embraced by God if they embrace the “man whom God has appointed”. Thus, Paul now introduces Jesus to them.

It is at this point that Paul makes his first (and only) serious cultural gaffe – and it is such a gaffe that he quickly brings his speech to a hasty end. When one looks at this final paragraph of Paul’s address to the Athenians, it is quite clear that he didn’t mean to end it at this point. Instead, he had now set up the line of logic and had built the trusting and culturally-sensitive relationship with the crowd that would now allow him to proceed to tell about Jesus (likely similar to the way he does in Acts 13:13-41; 24:1-21), eventually coming to his crucifixion and atoning work, and then calling upon them to respond to this “unknown god” through responding to a redeeming Jesus. But he never got the chance to present his full argument, because he most decisively now “puts his foot in his mouth”!

Immediately after introducing Jesus (even if not by name), Paul then says, “and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (vs. 31b). This was a major philosophical blunder on Paul’s part. The concept of resurrection from the dead had been accepted by many Jews since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (cf. Acts 23:6-8; Dan. 12:2), so to introduce Jesus as having been raised from the dead by God would not be an unthinkable idea to Jews (the real offense to the Jews regarding Jesus’ resurrection was not the idea of the resurrection of someone from the dead but the idea that this particular person had been raised by God). Likewise, there were some pagan mystery religions that taught resurrection. But thinking Greeks shunned the mystery religions as barbaric and they wouldn’t have been aware of Jewish beliefs about resurrection.

Rather, because both the primary Grecian philosophical traditions of Stoicism and Epicureanism believed the body to be essentially “earthy” and consequently evil, and the worlds of thought and imagination the means for freedom from such “earthy” constraints, the idea of resurrection from the dead was repulsive to them. It was a horrifying thought that you could be locked into your earthiness and evil, never to be liberated into pure thought and imagination. So what Paul (likely unthinkingly) prized as an indicator of God’s choice of Jesus would have been viewed by Paul’s Athenian listeners as the worst imaginable fate. They likely reacted with shock, Paul quickly perceived the faux pas he had made, and brought his speech to a rapid and unscheduled end.

So now Paul was finished, likely “kicking himself” for such an insouciant end after having so carefully constructing the most culturally sensitive of gospel witnesses. How did the Athenians respond to Paul’s address? Apparently because of his concluding gaffe, what appeared to that point to be a most receptive audience divided into three distinct groups. Some heard Paul gladly. Others wanted to inquire further. And others dismissed what he had to say.

Luke writes, “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (vss. 32-33). But is this not the spectrum of response from any audience of unbelievers? There are those who reject and even mock what they hear. There are others curious enough to want to explore further. But there are also those who know that they have heard truth, and embrace the Gospel. And that is what happened here.

“Some”, responding to this culturally compassionate address, “became believers”. Among them were “Dionysius the Areopagite” and “Damaris, and others with them”. These named people were likely two leaders of a party of people (“the others with them”) who heard Paul and who became the base for the Christian Church in Athens. Further, their names are noble names, which likely means that at least Dionysius was a member of the “Areopagus” (and which may lend credence to the argument that it was the Council to whom Paul spoke rather than whoever happened to be in the plaza). Finally, the fact that Luke names these two people is an indication that he expected that his readers would recognize those names and their consequent importance in Athenian society. We know nothing more of Damaris. But we do know what happened to Dionysius the Areopagite. Tradition tells us that he became bishop of Athens and was later martyred by the Roman emperor Domitian in his persecution of the Christian Church! Dionysius eventually became the patron saint of Athens. Thus, this was the fruit of Paul’s carefully-nuanced effort to express the gospel in a way that was culturally sensitive to the people of Athens – even though it ended with an apparent gaffe!

**Psalm 66:8-20** is a hymn of liberation. It deals with God’s providential deliverance of Israel in three periods of its life as a nation: in its origins as a nation (vss. 5-7), in its more immediate past (vss. 8-12) and in its present in the life of the psalmist (vss. 16-20). It begins, “Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise. Say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you. All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name’” (vss. 1-4).

After this introduction, the psalmist describes how God has delivered Israel at the Exodus, in their distant past. “Come and see what God has done; he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations – let the rebellious not exalt themselves” (vss. 5-6). Of course, the reference “turned the sea into dry land” deals with God’s miraculous deliverance of Israel from almost certain annihilation at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21-25). “They passed through the river on foot” is a reference to Israel’s crossing of the Jordan River at the beginning of their conquest of Canaan (Josh. 3:14-17).

But God not only liberated Israel in ancient times. He continues to do so in the more recent past. “Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard who has kept us among the living, and has not let our foot slip. For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through waters. Yet you have brought us out to a spacious place” (vss. 6-10).

We do not know which event in Israel’s then-recent past to which the Psalmist refers, because there is not internal reference to fix the date of the writing of the Psalm. But it could have been God’s miraculous rescue of Judah from almost-certain annihilation by Assyria in that empire’s unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem (Isa. 36:1-37:38; II Kings 18:13-20:19). Or, if this is a post-exilic psalm, it could have been the defeat of the Babylonian Empire by Persia and Israel’s return to the Promised Land (Daniel 5:1-31). But whatever it was, it was the occasion for Israel to interpret God’s hand of deliverance in that event.

Finally, God has acted to deliver this Psalmist. “Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. I cried aloud to him and he was extolled with my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer” (vss. 16-19). Again, we do not know what the occasion of this Psalmist’s liberation might be. But that he felt delivered by God’s action and not his own is self-evident.

In the light of both the nation’s deliverance in its remote past, in its near past, and in the life of this person, the Psalmist cannot help but declare: “Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me” (vs. 20).

Thus, the essence of this Psalm is the declaration, “God is awesome in his deeds among mortals” (vs. 5b). God is always intricately involved in our lives and in the world. He is always “messing” with us. Sometimes, his engagement is in terms of victory, fulfillment, miraculous interventions, liberation or salvation (vss. 6-7). Sometimes, his engagement of us is in dark times, in difficulties, times of depression and doubt (vss. 10-12). But whether it is in times of exaltation or of despair, God is among us, God is with us, and God is at work in and through us, making us into those creatures that can glorify his name and work for his kingdom. And *that* should give us hope!

**I Peter 3:13-22** focuses on how God’s people are called to deal with the “powers” that are hostile to Christianity (vss. 13-17), as well as providing the theological foundation for that

strategy (vss. 18-22). In the first section, Peter centers on the appropriate Christian response to political, economic and religious systems and their leaders who oppose Christianity. It begins with a rather profound statement that can also be easily misconstrued. “Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?” Peter asks. That could be interpreted as saying that one will be less likely to be mistreated if his behavior is good. But such an interpretation is not consistent with the remainder of this paragraph. Rather, what Peter is saying is that whatever abuse Christians may have to receive as a result of the opposition of the systems and their leaders, those external forces cannot bring defeat or bring spiritual harm to such Christians. We may be “knocked down”, but not “knocked out” (e.g., Rom. 8:31-39). This interpretation is not only consistent with the remainder of the paragraph but is also consistent with the bulk of scripture (e.g., Psalm 56:4; Luke 12:4-5).

Peter thus continues. “Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame” (vss. 14b-16).

This is really a lecture in practical politics – in understanding why systems and their leaders react as they do to the gospel, and how to act in ways that uses the vulnerabilities of those systems to make the greatest impact upon them. The leaders of all political, economic and religious systems are essentially people of fear; they live in the constant terror that they will somehow be toppled from power. Consequently, it is important to understand that all their bravado, all their persecution of the church, all their attempts to impress peasants with their power and wealth have their origins in the recognition by the “powers” that they are in reality not as powerful as they seek to convince us that they are. They live in constant fear that the people will discover that “the emperor’s new clothes” will only reveal his nakedness!

That is the key to dealing with the systems and effectively calling them to accountability for acting unjustly, for using wealth for their own aggrandizement and for controlling the thinking of the people. It is crucial in dealing with them, Peter says, not to succumb to the fear which they fear. Don’t be intimidated by them or by their effort to bamboozle you. Instead, be focused upon and articulate clearly the action you are undertaking with them and the response to which you are calling them. But do not sink to their levels of intimidation, fear-mongering or personal attack. Instead, treat them “with gentleness and reverence”. If you do so, then even if they malign, criticize or even persecute you, you will have taken the high road and they the low road – and everybody will know it! You will demonstrate that you are superior to them, not because you are better people but because you are being faithful to a God of justice, equity and concord. Thus, by your very demeanor when confronting the powers, you will put them to shame!

Peter then develops the theological rationale for such a strategy (vss. 18-22). His writing is somewhat obscure for 21<sup>st</sup> century people, because he is referring to some popular beliefs held by most Jews and Jewish-Christians of his day. But his essential argument is this. The reason why Christians should take this “high road” in confronting the systems is because Jesus took this high road. He stood his ground, not only defending himself but calling the systems to



accountability as measured against their own best standards. But he did so in a gracious and compassionate way, so that they felt stung (and even lovingly rebuked) rather than alienated.

In this way, through the very way Jesus confronted the powers, he remained in charge and they were not – even though he was on trial before them! Thus, the suffering that he embraced (even though the Powers thought they bestowed that suffering upon him as punishment) had the potential of redemption toward them. Jesus suffered for them, “the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring them to God”.

That’s why baptism is the sign and seal of the redemptive work of God through Christ, because by its very nature it symbolizes the descent into death in order to receive resurrection to life (vss. 21-22). Suffering precedes salvation; death precedes resurrection. Thus, standing against the Powers, but doing so lovingly seeking their transformation rather than their defeat is inherently redemptive. And that is the work that God calls the Church to be about!

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