

“The Paraclete Strikes Again!”

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¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”
(John 14:15-21)

I cannot recall ever doing this before, but I feel like I need to start this sermon with an explanation of the title, which is, if you do not have a bulletin in front of you, “The Paraclete Strikes Again!” It all began on the lovely campus of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, where Anna Grace Claunch received her Masters in Divinity degree and I received a Doctor of Ministry degree. It was also the alma mater of Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan, with whom I was blessed to serve at First Presbyterian Church of Rocky Mount, NC. She was the one who first told me about her classroom experiences with Dr. David Bartlett, who taught New Testament at the seminary.

Dr. Bartlett’s class on this particular section of the gospel of John was one that etched itself on the hearts and minds of hundreds of students over the years. The class began by reading this passage from Chapter 14, where Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. Soon Jesus will be arrested and killed, but on this night, he makes a promise to his disciples that, though he must leave, he will continue to care for them and not leave them orphaned. “I will ask the Father,” Jesus says, “and [God] will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”

As often happens in those classes, the students studied the original Greek manuscript of the passage, where they found the word *παράκλητον* (*paraklēton*), which is translated here as “Advocate.” That Greek word, Dr. Bartlett shared, had inspired an English noun that is used rarely -- and almost exclusively by Christians theologians -- the “paraclete.” The paraclete was, and is, what we would call the Holy Spirit -- that power and presence of God that comes to us when we need it to comfort us, guide us, and defend us. Dr. Bartlett loved that word. His students came to love it, too, because whenever scripture would describe a miraculous occurrence, or whenever anything came up that involved a mysterious experience of God, Dr. Bartlett would pause and shout, “The paraclete strikes again!”

By the time the class got to the book of Acts, they could see it coming a mile away. So, for example, when they studied the stories of Peter and Paul being thrown in jail, only to have miraculous events conspire to break both of them out, they were ready, and they all joined in with their professor’s perfect timing: “The paraclete strikes again!”

I wanted to share that bit of seminary history today because I believe this is something we can all use whenever we get the sense that a coincidence is more than a coincidence...



whenever a peculiar sense of peace or well-being falls over us... whenever we get the feeling that God is close to us in just the right way at just the right time – comforting us, guiding us, protecting us.

Because this unique Greek word *paraklēton* appears only twice in the Bible, translators over the centuries have struggled to find the best English word for it. In other words, they have struggled to give this divine gift a name. That seems fitting, given that the Holy Spirit, by its very nature, refuses to be contained and blows where it will. Across the centuries, translations have used many descriptive words: Helper, Comforter, Counselor, Strengthener, Advocate... all of which help to describe the way God comes to us when we feel alone, vulnerable, and in need of help. My guess is that Dr. Bartlett didn't want to limit the Spirit to just one of these names, so he went with the all-inclusive term "Paraclete." And I think he was on to something with that.

About ten years ago or so, I was beginning to wonder if God might be calling me to a different job. There are always pros and cons in those decisions, but one of the factors in my discernment was a particular opportunity that really attracted me. The more I looked into it, the more I wanted it. So I threw my name in the hat to see what might happen. I convinced myself that it was the perfect job for me. That feeling deepened after an initial interview. I was impressed with them, and I hoped the feeling was mutual. But a few weeks later, I got a cordial email telling me that they appreciated my interest but they were pursuing other candidates.

I was really disappointed. I called my dad to talk it through. He got it – he understood the appeal of the job, and he listened as I explained why I thought I should have gotten at least a serious look. When I was finished, he just said to me, "***Has it occurred to you that God may have been looking out for you?***"

And then he told me this story. As background, you need to know that, in high school, my dad was a great football player. Now, maybe this does not come as a surprise to you, because you have known me for a few years now, and some of you could easily have thought to yourselves, "You know, given Peter's athletic frame – his strength, speed, and cat-like reflexes – I bet Peter's father was an amazing football player." Well, you are right.

But, in all seriousness, my dad was a standout on his high school team – center on the offensive line and also the place kicker. He was clearly good enough to play at the college level. The only question was where. And the place where he really wanted to go was Lenoir-Rhyne University. In the early sixties, Lenoir-Rhyne was a collegiate powerhouse. In that era, they went to the NAIA national championship game three (3) times. By 1969, their head coach, Clarence Stasavich, had accumulated more wins than any other active football coach other than "Bear" Bryant and Johnny Vaught. And my dad really wanted to play for him at Lenoir-Rhyne. He went up to the tryout with the highest of hopes. Unfortunately, it did not go as planned. "It quickly became clear," my dad said, "that I wasn't big enough or fast enough." It was one of those moments in life when a door that you really wanted to walk through suddenly closes and you are not at all sure where to go from there. Dad went home crushed and disappointed.

Meanwhile, things had already been happening that dad knew nothing about. The previous Friday night, the offensive line coach for Davidson College had slipped into the stands at Lincolnton High. He had heard they had a center who had some potential. Just days after dad's disappointment at Lenoir-Rhyne, he called dad up to offer him a full scholarship to come to Davidson and play football. It had never occurred to my dad that

the college just down the road Davidson would be an option, but today he looks back on that phone call and he can see clearly how it changed his life forever, and set him on the path that God had laid out just for him. In other words, the paraclete had struck again!

And then there is the story of Bobby Taylor. Bobby grew up in Greensboro, just as I did. He was older than me, but our fathers were in the same golf foursome for over 40 years, and our families were close. After college, Bobby moved up here to New York City. He became a deacon in his Presbyterian church and was drawn to local mission. He was one of the founders of "Miracle House," a charity much like the Ronald McDonald House that is still in operation today. He ran happily to New York, drawn by its excitement and culture, and he clearly thrived here.

But Bobby Taylor had also been running from something. You see, Bobby was a gay man in a time and a place where it was difficult to be gay. His parents had a particularly hard time coming to grips with the news. The whole family tried their best to care for one another, understand one another, and find some kind of equilibrium, but it was really hard and painful for all of them.

And then, in 1988, Bobby got sick. The world was just beginning to learn of the AIDS virus, but Bobby Taylor's family learned quickly. They watched helplessly as his immune system crashed. He then contracted lung cancer, and then pneumonia, all related to the virus. Before, Bobby's dad had most often prayed that God would "cure" his son of his homosexuality. But in this period those prayers changed completely. At that point, he just prayed that his son would live.

And, as his prayers changed, so did his perspective. He had never really noticed before how easy it was for people to talk to Bobby; how caring he was towards others; how nurses and hospital workers were drawn to his bedside, sometimes just to hold his hand. He realized that all of those people saw something very special in Bobby, because Bobby had a gift for making people feel special. He also learned that Bobby was also a man of prayer, someone who tried every day to follow God's lead. He learned that Bobby's inspiration for founding Miracle House came as he studied the miracles of Jesus – that he envisioned a place in New York City where those kinds of miracles could still happen.

Bobby did not survive, but his life changed the world, including his father's heart. Looking back, Bobby's father Robert wrote these words:

"Bobby led a very modest life, but I truly believe God used him, that he was a vehicle of God's love... God used Bobby, God loved Bobby and Bobby was gay... Bobby was gay, but being gay was not what Bobby was about. Bobby was about enjoying the life God gave him, seeking God's will for him, and trying to use the opportunities he saw to make a difference where he could, no different than what we would all like to be about. ... Our son was very sick. I prayerfully asked God to take care of him and my family as we faced what was in front of us. God's answer to me was clear: 'This is my child and I love him. I want you to see him as I do, and I will give you time to do so as I prepare him to come live with me.'"

And that is exactly what that family did. Bobby spent the final weeks of his life in Greensboro, in the house where he grew up. In the end, a place that had been mired in struggle had become, in a way no one could really understand, a place of peace and love.

The night before his death, Bobby was talking with his father, who was seated on the edge of his bed. Out of the blue Bobby said, "Dad, we made it didn't we?"

“Yes, we did,” his dad replied. “I loved you enough to hang in there with you.”

Bobby was quiet for a moment. Then he looked his father in the eye with gentle resolve and said, “And I loved you enough not to run.”

The paraclete had struck again.

I think we sometimes wonder whether God really is active in the world. We hear the stories, we read about the miracles, and we think, “Well, maybe that happened then, but where is God now?” It is easy to forget that Jesus made a promise to the disciples – a promise that, even though he would no longer be present in bodily form, he would send them a Helper... a Comforter... a Teacher... someone to walk with us, guide us, defend us, and reshape us... so that we would never be truly alone.

And even now, if we look for it... if we listen closely for the whisper behind all the noise... if we can just open our hearts and our minds to the possibility of God’s presence... we can feel that promise drawing close to us. We might not see it coming, and sometimes we can perceive it in hindsight, by looking backwards. But as you think back on a time when a door closed on you, when something you really wanted didn’t happen, and you felt crushed, not knowing which way to turn – did it ever occur to you -- has it ever occurred to you -- that God might have been looking out for you?

Or was there a time when you felt mired in confusion and pain – when a situation was so tied up in knots that every move you tried to make just seemed to tighten the ropes around you... and then, almost out of the blue, you realize that the struggle has given way to peace... that the light has somehow conquered the darkness... that a door has opened into something better than you ever imagined possible?

If so, then you have already experienced the promise made for you – a promise that if you seek the light, you will find it... if you knock, a door will be opened for you... and when it does, you can know that, in your life, the paraclete has struck again!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**