

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 17, 2020

John 14:15-21

Pastor Tracey Breashears Schultz, Bishop's Associate for Leadership

Most all of us have people in our lives with whom we check in. It's a way we care for another and express our gratitude for each other. I'm talking about the friend you meet for dinner who asks you to call when you get home so they know you're safe. I'm thinking about the parents who ask their children to call or text to say good night when they are staying the night with friends.

My husband and I have been married for ten years, and eight of those years, we have had a somewhat long-distance relationship. We live in Houston, but most of his work is in San Antonio. When he leaves Houston, he can get back to San Antonio in about three hours, and if I haven't heard from him by then, I begin to worry because we have a pact, and that is that he will call or text when he gets there. I told him I like knowing he isn't "off on the side of the road or in a ditch somewhere," so often he will text me the message "No ditches. XO."

I heard an interview recently of a woman who had been orphaned at the age of six when her parents were killed in a terrorist attack in South Sudan during the country's civil war. She lived in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. She often went without food or fresh water. She did go to school, but it consisted of a shady spot under a tree where she would write her lessons with a stick in the dirt. She saw many of her friends die. When she was asked about her childhood, she did not

mention these hardships at first. What she said was her biggest struggle was the loneliness - not having someone to check in with, not having someone concerned about where she was or if she'd made it home. There was no one worried she had fallen in a ditch, and she had, essentially, fallen in a ditch.¹

In today's lesson from John's gospel, we hear what is called Jesus' Farewell Discourse. It takes place just after the washing of the disciples' feet, and it goes on for four chapters. In it, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to leave them for now. He tells them not to worry. He tells them he will be back, and in the meantime, he says, they know what to do – keep his commandments. (Or, as *The Message* translates it, “If you love me, show it by doing what I've told you.”) He then goes on to tell them that in his absence, they will have the Spirit, whom he calls “another Advocate.” The Spirit will keep them connected to Jesus and to each other. The Spirit will make sure nobody falls in a ditch. The Spirit will be the one they check in with and who will check in with them if they don't.

The third person of the Trinity, the Spirit, gets the spotlight on Pentecost Sunday, but besides that day on the church calendar, we tend not to talk about the person or work of the Spirit very often. The Spirit is associated, in some traditions, with praying or speaking in tongues or with being slain in the Spirit, and if these aren't your traditions, they can seem scary or unfamiliar. Today, we hear Jesus use

¹ The Daily (Podacast). “One Meat Plant. One Thousand Workers.” May 4, 2020.

a name for the Spirit that may be really comforting and helpful. What does it mean, do you think, that Jesus, knowing he was returning to the Father, promised his followers an Advocate?

Merriam-Webster defines this as one who pleads the cause of another. At its root (from Middle English), is the word intercession. When we pray for another person, we advocate for them. The ELCA has a ministry of Advocacy² in which they, on behalf of our church, ask for just policies in the biblical areas of: peacemaking, hospitality to strangers, care for creation, and concern for people living in poverty and struggling with hunger and disease. They are interceding in the public arena for those whose voices might go unheard or for those who might be pushed to the side or marginalized if someone did not intercede for them. That's the work of the Spirit.

In these days, we have opportunity to advocate for others, and we often hear and see people witnessing to this. Whenever we go out in public, we are asked to wear a mask. "I wear a mask to protect you. You wear a mask to protect me." We are advocating for the health and well-being of one another. We are making sure I can contact my loved ones and tell them I haven't fallen in a ditch, and you can do the same. When we ask the most vulnerable and those with underlying health

2

https://www.elca.org/Advocacy?gclid=Cj0KCQjwncT1BRDhARIsAOQF9LnazFmoASNNZVZ3p1dzcO2kH2MXT3LlvgT_8b2pqyO0mMPc0CA0bt4aAvb4EALw_wcB

conditions to stay home, we are not meaning to isolate them or push them aside. Rather, we are advocating for their well-being. We are saying: the world is dangerous right now, and we want to keep you safe. In Harris County, where I live, the mayor and county judge have taken steps so testing sites are accessible to those in underserved communities. These are people who might be forgotten if it weren't for someone advocating for them. Again, that's the work of the Spirit.

We all need someone to plead our case. Jesus promised we would never be without an Advocate. He told he would not leave us orphaned. This is such good news! The truth is, though, that in our broken world, many people are seemingly stranded on the side of the road somewhere, left in the proverbial ditch, with nobody to call on for help. Jesus told his followers that Spirit would be in them, would dwell in *us*. We have it deep within us to advocate for others, and when we do, we show others the abundant life Jesus intends for everyone. Isn't it incredible, that imperfect as we are, the Spirit uses us to bring about life and resurrection for others? Isn't it a gift that while the Spirit advocates for us, we can do the same for others? I wonder who, because of you and the Spirit within you, will be able to send a message home: "No ditches. XO."