

6 Easter A May 17, 2020
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Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphaned." John 14:18

When I was in Middle School and High School, I played the flute in the school band, and every spring my band teacher encouraged me to participate in the annual Solo and Ensemble competition – where students in band and choir perform solos or small ensemble music pieces in front of judges who score the performance. It's sort of like *American Idol* but without all the high production, high drama, and entertaining parts. And although I am not a very gifted musician (I was always in the second row) and I got very nervous, I still participated every year.

The main reason I participated was because of Mr. Kryshak, my high school band teacher, who was always my accompanist for my flute solos. Mr. Kryshak was and still is a good teacher and accompanist. He knew I loved music and let me select pieces to perform that I wanted to play even if they might have been considered too hard or challenging for my ability level. He encouraged me to take on the challenge for the love of the piece of music and did everything he could to help me learn it, play it, and perform it. He did this by knowing the music I was playing, how well I knew it, and he played the accompanying music in a way that made me feel more confident, like I was being helped through the piece, like I wasn't all alone. You see, the reason I felt nervous to perform a flute solo wasn't because I wasn't the best flute player in the region, it was because solo means alone, and being all by myself under the scrutiny of a judge was the hardest part of competing for me.

Mr. Kryshak's accompaniment was what got me through, and even helped me earn a few second and one first place medals in the competition. His accompaniment wasn't sitting next to me, it was playing the music with me, knowing when to give me additional support, and knowing when to let me shine. He was truly in it with me, so that I was never alone, event though I was performing a solo.

This concept of an accompanist could be applied to today's Gospel reading where Jesus talked about how he wasn't going to leave his disciples all alone, he was sending them a helper, an advocate, a *paraclete*, is the word in the original Greek. This is yet another part of Jesus' long speech to his disciples before his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension in John's Gospel. It feels like the author of the Gospel wanted to have Jesus explain all those important events in one long discourse. We read this part of John's Gospel today because this is the Sunday before the observance of Jesus' ascension into heaven, which is Thursday, May 21 this year. Liturgically, today is the day we reflect on those last few days before the Risen Christ ascended into heaven.

The idea of Jesus leaving yet again can be frightening. And although he promised to come again, he didn't gloss over that there will be a time when followers of Jesus will not have the literal Risen Christ with them to follow. We'll have each other, of course, but we'll still be alone, we'll be solo, in a way, without Jesus.

That's where today's Gospel reading comes in, offering followers of Jesus, including those of us who follow Jesus today, the comforting and empowering promise we aren't going to be alone for long. Jesus is sending us the mysterious paraclete, a word often translated *helper* or *advocate*, to be with us.

It's a strange word, to be sure, one that is rare in the Gospels and proves difficult to translate. A literal attempt to translate the word is "one called alongside". It is a term that indicates not just being present, hovering around while we do what we do. The term infers a relationship, one of listening to each other and following each other. Not just you and me listening to and following each other, but listening to and following this mysterious paraclete, who we call the Holy Spirit.

That is why the concept of an accompanist might help us understand our relationship with the Holy Spirit. When we think about our religious or spiritual lives, we might think about or envision a relationship with God as who we pray to. And many of us find solace in the healing of Jesus, the hope of resurrection life he brings into the world and we eagerly await the day he will return bringing to culmination God's Kingdom here on earth. But where does the illusive Holy Spirit factor into our spirituality? We can think of the Holy Spirit as comforter, but the Holy Spirit isn't a blanket on cold night. We might think of the Holy Spirit as an advocate, but the Holy Spirit really isn't our defense attorney.

The Holy Spirit is a much more vibrant presence among us, one that makes Christ's presence and that of God known. This isn't passive, it is deeply connective. I wonder if we are guilty of imagining our relationship with God as one where God is distant and sitting on God's throne in heaven waiting for us to remember to pray to God, and when we pray or go to church, or watch church on TV, as we have to do during the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes God happy and we're all good. But that isn't really a relationship, it's more like a form of consumerism. A relationship is something that is not just give and take. A healthy relationship is one where both parties assume responsibility for the care of each other and the relationship itself. Consider this simplistic example: in my marriage, some days I work too late to start dinner, so my husband makes dinner. And vice versa. Sometimes we plan and make dinner together. It doesn't matter who does the work, as long as there is meal for our family to share, and we are grateful for the meal.

Now consider this deeper, more spiritual example. Two years ago, I ran out of prayers. When it came to talking to God, I was empty. I had suffered a loss, my cat who was more than a pet for me had died. This cat played a role in how my husband and I met. The cat was part of the family, and we were all devastated to learn he had cancer, the kind that could not be treated, and we cared for him as he got sicker and sicker and finally died. Those days I prayed continually to God, prayers of gratitude, prayers asking for help, prayers confessing how tired I was. I remember my last prayer on the day my cat died, "Dear God, we give you Porter, I'd do what he says if I were you." And that was it. I was empty. I had run out of prayers.

The next day, it was a gloomy, cloudy day here in Athens. As I drove into the church, the clouds parted, and the sun broke through the gray gloom of the day and the sunlight shown right into my car. The light reflected off a keychain with my cat's image engraved on it that friends had given me so that the image of my cat appeared on the car's visor. You can call that coincidence if it makes you comfortable, but that was exactly the thing I needed to see at that moment. And I felt a little less empty, so that I could thank God for the light. Later I realized that God had reached out to me in my sorrow, because I was not able to reach out to God. When I couldn't participate in our relationship because I was too exhausted, God picked up the slack because to God, the most important thing is our relationship, a real honest to God relationship. It was a beautiful, humbling, empowering moment for me. I believe this was the Holy Spirit making God's presence known to me.

Not unlike back when I was in high school and my band teacher accompanied me during the Solo and Ensemble competition. There are parts in a solo when the soloist is silently counting rests, and that is when the accompanist doesn't just fill in the silence with music, they have to play in a way that helps the soloist count. In order to get through the piece, both the soloist and accompanist need to listen to each other and follow each other, that is how beautiful music is made.

It is also how beautiful relationship is made. That listening to each other and following each other is just another expression of God's love. It's not a passive love, but always active, listening to us and following us as we listen and follow the Holy Spirit.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it might be easy to forget our place in that beautiful relationship. Especially because so much of how we normally worship and participate in ministry is paused for a while as we practice a new way of loving each other by refraining from being together. But even when we understand this as an expression of love, it can still feel like we've been orphaned or are alone. Perhaps hearing Jesus' promise of sending us an accompanist can be both the comfort and encouragement we need to move through this unprecedented time. Perhaps the

words of Jesus might help us remember God isn't off watching all this happening from a throne in heaven, the Holy Spirit is showing us God is present in the uncertainty of this time, carrying us when we are too overwhelmed or tired or sad to move on our own.

And when we are ready, the Holy Spirit will continue to be with us so that we can be present to our community. That might have to look different during the pandemic, but there will be ways we can show God's love to our neighborhood and the world. The Holy Spirit is right here with us, even in a pandemic, listening to us, waiting for us to listen and follow where the Holy Spirit is leading.