

Aftermath: The Promise of Presence

John 14: 15-21, 25-27

*We are comforted by the presence
of the risen Christ.*

A sermon preached by
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Mothers wear many hats, and I'm not just talking about church (where nobody wears hats any more) or the baseball field or the Kentucky Derby. Being a mother is a complicated job. I am not one, but I had one. I have observed mothers for many years, and I am married to one. So I am qualified to speak.

Mothers play many roles in our lives. Sometimes Mom is an educator. She teaches her children all the necessary skills for self-care, hygiene, and self-preservation. As they grow older, Mom is often the go-to for help on homework or applications to college.

Mothers are disciplinarians. My mom never said, "Wait till your father gets home." She would apply the necessary discipline in real time, as they say. Then my dad would reinforce the point when he did get home.

Mothers are healers, from the band-aid applied to a skinned knee to the comforting word applied to the broken teenage heart. Through practical experience, most moms earn their medical and counseling degree.

Mothers are caregivers, of course. They provide food on the table, clothes on our backs, an attentive ear when we need one, and advice whether we need it or not. Under their care, we grow and thrive. Most of us are functioning adults today by the grace of God and because of our mother's love.

Today, many of our moms are also breadwinners—sometimes jointly with their husbands, but sometimes alone. There are almost 9 million single mothers in America today—80% of all single parents—and most of them have to provide for their children's needs.¹

Being a mother is complicated. It's not always an idyllic, June-Cleaver-vacuuming-in-pearls-and-high-heels, Hallmark-card-sentimentality sort of scene. It's hard work. Sometimes mothers are estranged from their kids. Sometimes mothers are not able to care for their children because of mental illness or addiction. Some mothers make the choice for their child's sake to give them up for adoption. Some women make the tragic choice for abortion and carry the long-term pain of a life that never was.

It's complicated. That's why I quit many years ago making a big deal about Mother's Day in church. For some it is a hard day. But that does not mean we appreciate any less the good mothers and loving families among us, which is most of you. To quote country music star Luke Bryan, "most Mama's oughta qualify for sainthood."²

Mothers have much in common with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit also plays many roles in our lives, and that's what I really want to talk about today. The Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity was a gift of God through the promise of Jesus. There are earlier references to the Spirit of God, going all the way back to the creation. But the Holy Spirit as the presence of Jesus on earth only came about after the death and resurrection of Christ. On the night before he was crucified, in the 14th chapter of John, Jesus tells his disciples he is going away, but he will make arrangements: "*I will ask the Father, and he will give you [the spirit of truth] to be with you forever. ... I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.*"³ After Easter, Jesus gives the disciples the Holy Spirit—in John on Easter afternoon, in Acts on the day of Pentecost. The assurance for the disciples is that even though Jesus is leaving, they are not going to be alone, abandoned, or on their own moving forward.

In order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, two things are required: love and obedience. Both are key words in John's Gospel. Jesus says, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*"⁴ And again, "*They 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.*"⁵ William Barclay says in his commentary on this text, "To John there is only one test of love, and that is obedience. It was by his obedience that Jesus showed his love of God; and it is by our obedience that we must show our love of Jesus."⁶

If we love and obey God, God will give us the Holy Spirit. The New Testament word for Holy Spirit is very interesting. It is the Greek *parakletos*. The Holy Spirit is the Paraclete—not parakeet, but Paraclete. *Parakletos* means "someone who is called in." A *paraclete* in the ancient world could refer to any number of things. Sometimes it referred to a legal advocate, someone who defended you in court. A *paraclete* could be a witness in a trial or a consultant in a business deal. On the battlefield, *paraclete* referred to the soldier who stood behind you and "got your back" to protect you from the enemy. It is a word rich in meaning.

I think we can get at the meaning of the Holy Spirit for us today if we look at three ways the word *parakletos* is translated into English—Comforter, Counselor, and Advocate—and see how these function in our lives.

The first word is **COMFORTER**. The King James Version of the Bible translates *parakletos* this way. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter, the One who comes alongside to help when we are down. The Holy Spirit reassures us of our relationship with God. The Spirit tells us deep inside our hearts that Jesus is still alive, and God is still our God. The Holy Spirit has a ministry of compassion and healing.

This reflects the character of Jesus. People came from miles around to experience the healing touch of Jesus. Matthew says, "*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*"⁷ Later on, as he was teaching in the Temple during Holy Week, he lamented over the Holy City: "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under*

her wings, and you were not willing!"⁸ The heart of Jesus was full of compassion; he was a comforter. Why wouldn't his Spirit be?

Frederick Douglass was one of the great abolitionists in American history and a Methodist lay preacher. He grew up as a slave in Maryland in the early nineteenth century and escaped to freedom as a young man. In his autobiography he tells about the custom among the plantations in Maryland to separate mothers from their children at an early age, to break down the family structures. Shortly after Frederick was born, his mother was sold to a man named Stewart who lived about 12 miles away.

Nevertheless, on a number of occasions, Frederick's mother would come see her son. After dark, she would slip away and walk the 12 miles to where he stayed. She would curl up with her son and hold him until he fell asleep. Then she would leave in time to walk the twelve miles back to her own plantation. The penalty for leaving and for not being in the fields at sunrise was a severe beating, but still Frederick's mother came, time and again.⁹

How amazing is the power of a mother's love! Facing exhaustion after a full day's work and two 12-mile hikes, plus the danger of a whipping if she were discovered, nothing could keep that woman from comforting her son. And nothing can keep God from comforting us. "I know," Paul said, "*that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"¹⁰

The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, is also known as **COUNSELOR**. Several versions of the Bible translate John 14:16 as "*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever.*"¹¹ The function of the Holy Spirit is to be our Guide and direct us in our thoughts and in our actions to follow the will of God for our lives. Jesus taught the disciples, "*The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*"¹² So there are two functions of this Holy Spirit counseling. The Holy Spirit brings new insight, and the Holy Spirit reminds us what Jesus said.

Do you ever have the experience of thoughts just popping into your head? Holy thoughts, not like, "I want an ice cream cone." If you can take time to still your mind, put down your phone, turn off your screens, and listen, sometimes God will share some amazing thoughts with you. Sometimes out of the blue, I will get an idea to call someone or go somewhere, and if I follow that urge, it is clear that the Holy Spirit was directing me there. Almost every week, as I am working on the sermon, Scriptures will pop into my head that are not my main passage, but remind me of something Jesus said or did. Maybe that's from studying, writing and preaching for 40 years, but it's so random that I think it's the Holy Spirit guiding my thoughts. If we pay attention, God will teach us and guide us through the Holy Spirit.

Pastor Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message* paraphrase of Scripture, refers to the Christian life as "a long obedience in the same direction." The longer my life gets, the more I appreciate that. He describes it this way, "The Christian life is going to God. In going to God, Christians travel the same ground everybody else walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same government, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same diseases, are buried in the same ground. The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God; we know we are accompanied by God; we know we are ruled by God."¹³

That's the counsel of the Counselor, the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is called the **ADVOCATE**. This is the translation of *parakletos* used by the New Revised Standard Version: "*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever.*"¹⁴ In Jesus' time, the paraclete could be the one defending you in a trial or giving witness on your behalf. The Advocate seeks justice. Sometimes the Advocate empowers us to be the advocates for justice in our world.

You see, the Holy Spirit doesn't just comfort and console us. The Spirit does more than guide us. The Holy Spirit actually gives us the courage to do what God calls us to do. The Holy Spirit is the key to the power of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit is the great Encourager. That gut feeling you get when you just know something is right or wrong? The internal witness of the Holy Spirit. The courage to do the thing? The Advocate at work. The assurance that you are God's child and your life is in God's hand? That's the great Encourager.

Dr. Thomas Lane Butts was a wonderful United Methodist pastor and preacher in LA (Lower Alabama—the other LA) and west Florida up until his death at the age of 90 just two years ago. But he had a rocky start in his ministry career and really needed the presence of the Advocate. Dr. Butts graduated from seminary in 1957; the civil rights movement was just getting rolling in Alabama. He was assigned to a church in Mobile, and he decided he would just jump right in there and make his witness for Christ. So he began marching in some of the local demonstrations and preaching some outspoken sermons on racial justice, and he even signed a public petition supporting the Montgomery bus boycott. As you can imagine, the sparks began to fly in his own congregation.

One night he woke up to find an 8-foot cross burning in his yard. The local newspaper attacked him in an editorial, and the church held a meeting to demand his removal as their pastor. The church board suggested they sell the parsonage and reduce his salary to \$1.00 a year. Attendance at the church was at an all-time high, but it was a hostile crowd. And the money disappeared. The church couldn't pay its utility bills, much less the preacher.

On the brink of despair, an amazing thing happened to Tom Butts. He was sitting in his office one Friday, agonizing over the situation and thinking about leaving the ministry, when he noticed a very fashionably-dressed white woman walking across the church lawn. She came in the church, walked into his office, and handed him an envelope. She said she would like to make a contribution to the church to help them through this time. When Tom asked to whom the donation should be credited, the woman said she would prefer it to remain anonymous. When she left, Tom opened the envelope, and there were two \$100 bills in it. That was a huge amount of money back then and could really help with some bills.

That was not a one-time occurrence. Starting that day, every Friday this woman would show up out of nowhere, leave between \$200 and \$500 in a sealed envelope, and go her way. Nobody ever knew who she was. But she was doing the work of the Holy Spirit Advocate. Through her incredible generosity, the church was able to stay afloat, and Thomas Lane Butts survived the crisis and continued to advocate for love and justice for sixty more years!¹⁵

The Holy Spirit and our moms have a lot in common. The roles of the Holy Spirit—Comforter, Counselor, Advocate—can apply to our moms as well. They do it all. Our mothers are not perfect. Some are very close, but some struggle. On this Mothers' Day,

give them all some grace. Just love them anyway, no matter what, because they have given their love to us.

The good news is, God is even better than a mom. God's steadfast love endures forever, God's faithfulness to all generations. God's presence is always with us. If we will love and obey God, God will make a home with us. God will give us the Holy Spirit. We will know the risen Christ. And we will never be alone again.

¹<https://singlemotherguide.com/single-mother-statistics/>.

² Josh Kear, Eddie Hill, and David Frasier, "Most People Are Good," © Sony Music, 2017.

³ John 14:16-18.

⁴ John 14:15.

⁵ John 14:21.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John, Vol. 2, Rev. Ed.* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 166.

⁷ Matthew 9:36.

⁸ Matthew 23:37.

⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, *PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁰ Romans 8:39.

¹¹ John 14:16.

¹² John 14:26 NIV.

¹³ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction* (Westmont, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 45.

¹⁴ John 14:16.

¹⁵ <https://www.nwfdailynews.com/story/news/2021/02/22/rev-thomas-butts-former-fort-walton-beach-florida-pastor-dies-90/4489098001/>.