

Pentecost Sunday – May 20, 2017

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As I have been thinking about how to talk about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit this past week and to try to connect the meaning of this difficult gospel text to our lives, I kept coming back to a song from my childhood. It's a song written by Carole King called "You've got a friend." It was on her Tapestry album released in 1971, and that's where I first heard it because my dad had that album and I listened to it over and over. But it was also recorded by James Taylor in the same year and went to the top of the charts. I just found out that those two versions of the song were recorded at the same time using the same musicians, and both of them won a Grammy that year, King for the song and Taylor for his performance of it.

The song starts with these words: "When you're down and troubled, and you need some love and care, and nothing, nothing is going right, close your eyes and think of me, and soon I will be there to brighten up even your darkest night." And then comes the chorus, "You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I'll come running to see you again. Winter, spring, summer or fall, all you have to do is call and I'll be there. You've got a friend."

Then comes another verse and another chorus, and then the bridge:

"Now, ain't it good to know that you've got a friend when people can be so cold? They'll hurt you, yes, and desert you, and take your soul if you let them. But don't you let them."

Carol King wrote this as a simple song of friendship and support, and I'm pretty sure she didn't mean anything religious by it. But as a child who was brought up in the church, I have always seen a connection to my faith in this song. And as I read Jesus' words about sending the Advocate, the song came rushing back to me. Jesus is preparing his disciples here to continue his work as he returns to the Father. And that work is to bear witness to the life that Jesus embodies in himself in his life, death, resurrection. That life is the real thing. The good life. But not what we're used to thinking of as the good life – wealth and power and self-indulgence, and whatever spin on the truth that will get us those things. What Jesus offers is just the opposite: a life turned outward toward God and others, expressed in compassion, humility, and sacrifice.

And that makes Jesus a threat. It puts him at odds with the powers that be. That is why Jesus was put to death, and it's why those who follow him and bear witness to his way of life will be similarly opposed. And that's why, if you're paying any attention to what's going on in the world, you too might be "down and troubled," as Carol King put it, and feel that nothing in the world these days, "nothing is going right." I know I've been feeling that way lately, with yet another school shooting this past Friday – the sixteenth school shooting this year. Or was it the twenty second? It depends on which news source you follow. We're the only country where this happens on such a regular basis, and the only country, it seems, that is powerless to do anything about it. That's got me down and troubled. And then there was the violence in Gaza, with more than 50 killed. That conflict has been going on my entire life and then some. It's deeply complicated. There are no simple solutions. Extremists on both sides control the narrative, with millions caught in the crossfire. And on top of that we have a dysfunctional immigration system that we don't seem to want to fix. And then there the deeply embedded racism and sexism in our culture that just won't go away. Our political and social relations are increasingly polarized and nasty. Our government seems more corrupt than ever, and downright vindictive in some of its policies. And it's hard to see what can be done about it. There is a strong temptation to ignore it all and just get on with our own private lives – to accept all of this as the new normal.

And that's why we need a friend. An advocate. An encourager. Because Jesus does not want us to give up "when we're down and troubled." But the friend that we celebrate today is, surprisingly, not Jesus. In fact, Jesus says that he has to go away in order for this friend to come. What's that about? I think it's an indication that our relationship with him has changed now in light of his death and resurrection. Last week I told the story of learning to drive, and how my mother went from being my teacher to my fellow driver. She never planned to spend the rest of her life in the passenger seat every time I drove. At some point, for me to become a driver, she had to step out of the car and let me drive on my own.

So Jesus has to go in order for his disciples to become his agents in the world. But he does not leave us alone. He sends the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for Advocate here means "one who is called along side." This is someone who is there for encouragement and moral support – not to tell us what to do, but to support us in doing what we have learned and received from Jesus. To testify to the life he offers and makes possible.

When Jesus says that the disciples are to testify, he means precisely that they are not to give up when they are "down and troubled" by the world as it is, when "nothing is going right." Testifying and bearing witness to Jesus means living as if God was actually at work in the world, as if God even now is making good on God's promise to reclaim the world and reconcile all people to God's self. As if we were actually partners in God's work, as if we truly believed that the life he offers is our best option.

But testifying and bearing witness to Jesus also means saying no to the way the world works now. Jesus couldn't be any clearer about that. When the Advocate comes, says Jesus, he will prove the world wrong about him and God's way of life. The world believes in retribution, retaliation, getting even and then some. God's way is mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. The world believes in violence and the threat of violence. God's way is self-giving love. The world believes in death as the ultimate power over others. God's way is resurrection: life through death. Life in spite of death.

Martin Luther and his allies talked about the Holy Spirit as the one who creates faith in us when we hear God's promises for Jesus' sake. The Holy Spirit is the one who encourages us to trust God even when everything seems hopeless, who tells us never to give up. The Holy Spirit is the one who prods us to be true to ourselves and true to our Lord, when it would be so easy to give in to our self-serving, self-preserving instincts. And that sounds like a friend to me.

So, "ain't it good to know that you've got a friend?" to quote Carole King one more time. "when nothing is going right," when it would be so easy to throw in the towel and accept the way things are? A good friend won't let you do that. A good friend will say, "don't you let them take your soul. Don't you let them!" Being down and in trouble is a good sign. Stay uneasy with the world as it is. Trust that God is with you even and especially in unsettled times, and that God is at work in you and through you by the power of the Holy Spirit to change the world for good. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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