

## **The Advocate**

The Rev. Pamela L. Foster  
Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
Easter VI  
April 27, 2008

On the last evening he spent with his friends, Jesus, his friends and followers shared a meal. As the meal was ending, Jesus stood up, wrapped a towel around him and proceeded to wash the feet of the people sharing the meal with him. His disciple, Peter, and, presumably others in the room, were aghast at his behavior. Jesus, however, chided them — saying that they must take his example and serve one another as he had just served them, even if serving meant the most menial, the most taxing, the most demeaning acts conceivable. After washing their feet, he spoke to them at length. You can read what happened at the meal and what he said to them after the meal in Chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 and, if you include the prayer he prays, chapter 17 of the Gospel of John. It was a long evening.

Jesus tells the people gathered around him that night many things in anticipation of his death. He teaches them many things. He was — that night — beginning his return to the Father from whom he had been sent into the world.

In the text Jesus makes clear that he expects the people gathered around him to continue the work they had all begun with him leading them. To be a community that loves God and one another as he has done; a community that draws people from outside the community in by the way they worship together and pray together and live together and minister in the world together. He expects them to attract people to the loving, caring community that has begun to take shape in his time on earth. Attract people to the pattern of relationship to God and to one another that he has established with them.

How in the world could they do this without him? Well, he says in our text for this morning, the Holy Spirit or — as the Spirit is named here — the Spirit of Truth, another Counselor or Advocate such as Jesus has been will be given to them; sent into the world, as he was sent. The Spirit will be His presence among them, though not in the flesh. And

through this Spirit of Truth, Jesus promises, he will sustain them. He will empower them. Though he will no longer be in the world in the flesh, he will inspire them and be present to them.

Almighty God, [we pray every time we begin a service of Holy Eucharist]  
to you all hearts are open, all desires  
known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the  
thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your  
Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and  
worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ  
our Lord. Amen.

Every time we meet one another in Eucharist, we acknowledge and affirm the power of Holy Spirit in our life. We call upon that power to shape and form us in our worship. And to shape and form us as we go forth from worship — forgiven, healed, renewed to proclaim the love of Christ in the world.

+++

Two weeks from today, we will celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, a festival of thanksgiving for the coming of Holy Spirit in fulfillment of Jesus' promise. That is one reason why we read today about the promise of Holy Spirit — to prepare us, spiritually get us training — for that great celebration. Another, and more consequential reason, in my view, is that we too live on without him with us in the flesh. We are to continue the work in our own time, and it is the Spirit that enables us to do that. Thus, this text is appropriate for any time of the year.

There are at least two versions of the giving of Holy Spirit in Scripture, one in the Acts of the Apostles is dramatic and noisy, involving rushing wind and tongues of fire. Another occurs during a resurrection appearance at the end of this very Gospel of John. It goes this way:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of

the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

He breathed on them, creating them anew. Even as God breathed life into the first human being, so Jesus gives them the breath of his resurrection life, eternal life. He transforms them, giving the power to practice and to spread the transformed life he creates.

That is the very power we receive by the inspiration of Holy Spirit. Beginning in baptism and continuing every time we gather for worship, we are filled with Holy Spirit. Perhaps when we pray that opening prayer at Eucharist, we should stop and collectively take a breath to acknowledge the power Jesus gives us, the power of Holy Spirit.

+++

I want to close today by telling you of a man I once knew. Not terribly well, I must admit, but well enough. He was a professor at the seminary from which I graduated. He deeply desired the church to be a prophetic people in (his words) a hedonistic and pagan land. This land. Which, not incidentally, he deeply loved, having come here following the second world war. But I get ahead of my story. He understood Jesus to be both prophet and savior.

This was a man as full of the fire of Holy Spirit as anyone I have known. And I think he knew little of the peace of Jesus. As a prophet himself, he could cut you down to size with one withering look or caustic comment. Often he carried a riding crop under his arm. And sometimes brought it down hard on his desktop to accentuate a point. I found him terrifying. Accusatory. Deeply in love with Jesus.

When he was little more than a boy, he had been drafted into the German army in the early days of World War II. Eventually, he became a tank commander. But as the war was coming to an end and there was no longer fuel for tanks, he was moved to a foot unit, made up largely of the very young and the very old, many of whom had no weapons. Came the day when this unit stood in the way of advancing British troops. The commander, later my professor, paced back and forth, forbidding his troops do anything, anything until he personally gave the order. They waited. They waited. They waited. The British advanced and advanced and advanced. Finally, the commander, later my professor, stood up, raised his arms and surrendered himself and his men to the British, averting a massacre and disgracing himself as a German officer. Serving the men and the boys under his command, demeaning himself and traducing the system he had sworn to uphold.

Years later, an ardent peace advocate, lover of Mozart, distinguished Old Testament scholar, he paced back and forth before his students, with that riding crop tucked under his arm, teaching the God of the prophets and the Jesus of the cross to seminarians. Most of us, he made no bones about it, would sell out and just try to make the people of the congregations we served comfortable and happy. Whereas, our call was and is to be faithful and obedient to the Gospel of Jesus.

How? How are any of us, pastor or people, going to sustain faith and obedience to the Gospel of Jesus? How resist the deep desire for comfort and happiness over the Gospel? By receiving Holy Spirit from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. By letting ourselves be taken where we are called to go and overtaken by Holy Spirit's power to shape and form us, transform us into who we are called to be. Christians everywhere, receive Holy Spirit, the breath of life. And Christ's peace be with you. Amen.