

SERMON TITLE: "The Holy Who?"
SERMON TEXT: John 14:15-27
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 12, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

There's an old story about a family that had a pet parakeet. The day came when the parakeet died. Of course, the three small children were quite sad. To help them with their grief, their mother suggested that they have a burial service for the dead bird. The children had recently attended their great grandfather's funeral, so they had some ideas about how it should be done. The first step was to place the bird in a little box. Their dad helped them dig a grave in a carefully-chosen spot in the corner of the yard. As they solemnly prepared for the interment, the mother guided the eldest child to read a couple verses from the Bible. Next, the middle child held the boxed bird over the grave and made some comments about what a good pet the parakeet had been. Then, the youngest child gave the final blessing: "In the name of the Father, and in the Son, and in the hole he goes."¹

In the "hole he" what? In the Holy who? Most of us don't say "Holy Ghost" any more. Our 21st century sensibilities prefer the term "Holy Spirit." But even when we clear that up, we recognize that confusion about the divine spirit isn't limited to little children. Some of the words we use to describe the Holy Spirit aren't easy to understand, even for adults. Last Sunday, we read about how the Holy Spirit came with the power of wind, fire, and languages on the Day of Pentecost. But in today's reading from John chapter 14, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as a *Paraclete*. You might think that sounds like *parakeet* birds or like a *pair of cleats* you'd wear while playing baseball, but it's really a Greek word which describes the Holy Spirit.

Depending on which translation of the Bible you read, you'll get a different translation of that Greek word *Paraclete*. The New Revised Standard Version, which Victoria just read for us uses the word *Advocate*. The King James Version uses the word *Comforter*. The New International Version uses the

word *Counselor*. I'd like for us to consider these definitions of the word *Paraclete*, so we can get a good sense of who the Holy Spirit is.

1—ADVOCATE

First, let's begin with *Advocate*. This definition of *Paraclete* tells us that the Holy Spirit is the one who intercedes on our behalf. Like a defense lawyer, the Holy Spirit goes between us and our divine judge. The Holy Spirit makes a case for our forgiveness and pleads for God's mercy. In the New Testament letter of 1 John, chapter 2, we read, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." What Jesus does, so does the Spirit. When it comes to our sin and punishment, the Holy Spirit teams up with Jesus to give us a powerful defense.

There's a story about a man who was charged with thievery. After the case was presented to the court by the prosecuting attorney, the prisoner was ordered to stand up.

"Do you have a lawyer?" asked the judge.

"No, sir," replied the prisoner.

"Can you afford to employ one?"

"No, sir, I can't."

"Do you want a lawyer appointed in your defense?" asked the judge.

"Not particularly, Your Honor."

"Well then," said the justice, clearly annoyed. "What do you propose to do about your case?"

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, sir," replied the defendant, "I'm willin' to drop it, if you are!"²

As you can guess, the judge wasn't willing to drop the case. Rarely do we get off completely free when we do things that are wrong. But it helps to have a good lawyer. Because we're sinners, guilty-as-charged, we need an advocate who can look out for us and present our case in the best possible light. According to the Gospel of John, that advocate is the Holy Spirit.

But the Holy Spirit isn't only an advocate *for us*. The Holy Spirit is also an advocate *for Christ*. In John 14:26, Jesus told his disciples that the *Paraclete* would come in his name and remind them of

everything that Jesus had taught them. Even today, the Holy Spirit advocates to us on behalf of Jesus, so that we will be educated, inspired, persuaded, and empowered to obey Jesus' commandments. We may be sinners, but our plea bargain agreement requires and provides a program of rehabilitation and transformation. As a Holy Advocate for both sides, the Holy Spirit will help us live according to the teachings of Christ.

2—COMFORTER

As we try to figure out who the Holy Spirit is, we come to a second translation of the Greek word *Paraclete*. This one tells us that God's Holy Spirit is a divine Comforter. The *Paraclete* goes beyond the technicalities of legal advocacy to being a friend who supports us through difficult times in our lives. This kind of comfort is especially helpful when we're suffering from sickness and grief, when we're troubled and afraid.

The comforting character of the *Paraclete*, or Holy Spirit, is clear in John 14. Throughout this chapter, Jesus was telling the disciples that he would be leaving them. His death on the cross and his resurrection and ascension to God would take him away from them. But Jesus comforted his followers with the assurance that they wouldn't be left as orphans. Eventually they would join him in the place where he was going. But in the meantime, God would send them another *Paraclete*—a companion, a teacher, a helper. All this comforting was meant to give the disciples peace in their hearts and minds.

We need a comforter in our lives. No matter how independent and strong we'd like to think we are, we all need someone who will encourage us and pat us on the back. We need friendly smiles, warm hugs, and the assurance that things will turn out all right. We need people who will give us grace and peace for those times when we're bumbling along in a fog of confusion or stumbling over our own stubbornness. Fortunately, most of us have a number of people who help us in those ways. Family members, friends, business associates, and church members offer us comfort to keep us going.

But even if we have an ample supply of comforting people around us, it's good to know that the *Paraclete* is there to comfort us too. For those times when we don't want to talk about our problems with our family or neighbors, or it doesn't seem like they would understand, it's good to know that we can be comforted by the Spirit of God, who already knows everything about us understands us better than we know ourselves—who sticks with us through thick and thin.

An old hymn proclaims this good news:

Oh, spread the tidings 'round, wherever man is found,
Wherever human hearts and human woes abound;
Let every Christian tongue proclaim the joyful sound:
The Comforter has come!
The Comforter has come! The Comforter has come!
The Holy Ghost from heav'n, the Father's promise giv'n!
Oh, spread the tidings 'round, wherever man is found:
The Comforter has come!³

3—COUNSELOR

A third definition of the Greek word *Paraclete* tells us that the Holy Spirit is also a Counselor. This translation helps us understand that the Holy Spirit wants to help us become more mature and healthy as human beings and as Christians. A counselor may be an advocate sometimes and usually comforts us a lot, but the primary job of a counselor is to guide us toward options for change and opportunities for growth. Along with comforting the challenged comes the need to challenge the comfortable. As a counselor, the Holy Spirit pushes and pulls us to stretch our understandings and expand our hearts.

Just like in counseling sessions with a psychological therapist, this kind of Holy Spirit counseling doesn't always come easily. It's human nature to resist change. We don't like to admit our faults or work on our weaknesses. Because we're so afraid of the growing pains we might experience, most of us won't even seek the help of a counselor until our marriage is in shambles, our children are using drugs, or we're unable to cope with our responsibilities. Even then, our hope is that the counselor will pat us on the hand and say, "There, there. Everything will be fine."

But the truth is that things often don't get better until we begin doing some very intense self-examination, until we begin breaking some persistently bad habits, and until we begin practicing some new ways of living. We didn't get ourselves into this mess quickly, and we aren't going to get out of it quickly either. The honesty and vulnerability required in counseling is difficult to bear. That's why some people turn away from such psychological therapy. And, sadly, that's why some people turn away from the therapy of the Holy Spirit.

Accepting the wisdom and direction of the Holy Spirit isn't easy, but it is worthwhile. As we follow the guidance of our Holy Counselor, we'll find ourselves becoming more hopeful Christians and more healthy human beings.

CONCLUSION

As you can see, an identity search for "The Holy Who?" reveals a number of answers. Some of you Sci-Fi fans might "get it" if I compare the many dimensions of the Holy Spirit to the many different aspects of British television's Dr. Who—an alien Time Lord who has regenerated as 13 different humans over six decades and is about to regenerate again.

While the "Holy Who" of the divine Trinity may be even more mysterious than that, we do have some confidence about the one whom Jesus was sending. Like Jesus said to his disciples, there is no reason to be troubled or afraid. This one that would come after Jesus is no scary holy *ghost*. As Jesus told his disciples, the *Paraclete* from God is a Holy Advocate, a Holy Comforter, and a Holy Counselor. According to John 14, that's who the Holy Spirit is.

¹Adapted from Eric W. Johnson, ed., *A Treasury of Humor* (Ivy Books: New York, 1989), pp. 133f.

²Adapted from *Sourcebook of Wit & Wisdom* (Communication Resources: Canton, OH, 1996), p. 128.

³"The Comforter Has Come," lyrics by Francis Bottome (1823-1894).