



Who will take care of us?

by James G. Somerville

John 14:23-29

I AM INDEBTED to my friend and former pastor Paul Duke for the image of Jesus as a mother standing with her hand on the doorknob, her coat over her arm, watching her children play with Legos on the living room floor. One of them looks up suddenly and, noticing that she is about to leave, asks: "Where are you going?"

"I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also."

"Can we go with you?"

"Where I am going you cannot come."

"How long will you be gone?"

"A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me."

"Who will take care of us?"

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

The context and questions are those of departure—appropriate in the hours before Jesus' death, but also appropriate on the Sunday before the ascension. Jesus is leaving again, and like children we want to know "who will take care of us."

There is no account of the ascension in John's Gospel, no story of Jesus leaping up into the sky while angels ask, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" (Acts 1:11). There is only a hint, whispered to Mary Magdalene: "Go to my disciples and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God'" (John 20:17). Still, we can safely assume that there came a time when he left his disciples, when they found themselves as alone as children whose mother has just walked out the door.

I picture it like this:

Wherever they are—in an upper room, on the shores of Galilee, on the Mount of Olives—they look at each other in surprise, even shock. At first they are speechless, and then one of them blurts out, "Who will take care of us now?" They begin to look to Peter for answers. He is, after all, the one Jesus has commissioned as shepherd of the sheep (John 21:17). But it is that other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, who remembers.

"Wait," he says. "He told us that he was going away, but that he would be coming back to us, remember? He said he was going to the Father, and that he wanted to tell us beforehand so that when it happened we would believe. Well, now it has happened, and we don't need to be fearful; we need to believe."

The others start nodding their heads. Yes, he had said something like that. They remember now, remember clearly.

"In fact," says this disciple, "he said that we would remember because the . . . what was it? The Advocate! The Holy Spirit would teach us everything, and remind us of all the things the Lord told us while he was still with us."

And then it dawns on them: they *are* remembering the things he told them as if he were standing right there, whispering the words in their ears! And in that same moment they realize with a shiver that they are not alone, that the promises of Jesus to them are promises that have already been kept.

The Greek word for "advocate" is *paraclete*, formed from a verb that means "to call alongside." When I teach the Gospel of John, I usually tell my students that a paraclete is the one whose name you call when you are hauled into court on false charges, when the school bully is beating you up on the playground, when you wake up from a bad dream

in the middle of the night. A paraclete is the one who comes to your defense, your rescue, your comfort, and Jesus has done that for his disciples. But now another paraclete will serve that function. As Fred Craddock puts it: "The Holy Spirit will do for the Church what Jesus has done for the disciples."

John Kysar summarizes the "Paraclete passages" in the Fourth Gospel by noting that the Paraclete meets the needs arising from the departure of Jesus. The work of the Paraclete is within the community of faith, keeping the words of Jesus "fresh." The Paraclete is connected with the power of the witness of believers for Jesus. The Paraclete functions beyond the community of faith by judging the world and demonstrating its wrong. And the Paraclete leads believers into all truth. With that in mind, perhaps we should "rejoice" as Jesus suggests. We are in good hands.

When my wife puts her hand on the doorknob, her coat over her arm, my children look up from what they are doing to ask: "Who will take care of us?" and she gives them the name of one of their regular babysitters. All of them are capable, and my children enjoy the attention, but if my wife gives them one name—"Brittain"—my children leap up from what they are doing and rejoice. Brittain reads to them, romps with them, acts out plays and makes chocolate chip cookies; she nurtures their young lives like a loving parent, and as long as she is with them they are not afraid.

I don't know that the Holy Spirit has ever been compared to a babysitter. But if you can imagine Jesus as a mother, then it may not be so hard to imagine the Spirit in this other role, as one who cares for the church in the interim between Jesus' departure and return, as one who comforts, teaches, reminds and, yes, sometimes even romps with the sons and daughters of God.

In the words of Jesus then, "Rejoice!"

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