**Easter 6A 2014 Sermon**

**“Communities of the Spirit”**

*Adapted from David Lose.* [*www.workingpreacher.org*](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

We know about loss. Each of us and all of us, personally and deeply.

But we don’t talk about it very much.

These two clashing realities often do a lot of damage. But this Sunday there is a juxtaposition of sacred text and national holiday that invites us, even begs us, to move into important, if also largely unchartered, terrain.

First, the holiday. In the U.S., this is Memorial Day weekend, and since the holiday was first established after the conclusion of the Civil War it has been a time to acknowledge those we have lost to war. More recently, that remembrance has been *extended* in two directions. First, we often take time to remember members of our family that have died as well, placing wreathes at the gravesides of parents and siblings. Second, we increasingly recognized **all** who have fought and sacrificed, including those who have lost limbs or returned from their service with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. We have, that is, recognized that the effects of war stretch far beyond the casualty list.

But even with this extension of the scope of our remembrance, we know there are other kinds of losses that we face every day. We may have lost -- or be in the process of losing -- a loved one to Alzheimer’s or dementia. We may have lost someone with whom we were in a significant relationship to a divorce or break-up. We may have lost colleagues from losing a job or moving to a new one. And then there are the personal losses of jobs or health or abilities we once had. All of these losses, even ones that were necessary or resulted from a positive change in circumstances, are difficult and worthy of acknowledgement.

As a culture, we are not terribly good about talking about loss. I don’t know if it’s because it challenges the eternally optimistic stance we are encouraged to take, counters our celebration of youth and opportunity, or reminds us of our own mortality. But for whatever reason, we seem as a culture to lack the resources and emotional wherewithal to acknowledge the losses we, and those around us, suffer. Not sure what to say when confronted by a friend who has recently suffered the loss of a loved one or gone through a divorce, we turn away, leaving the person feeling all the more isolated.

We as a congregation respond pretty well when there is a loss in our midst. We gather around the families who have lost a loved one, bringing food, sending cards, expressing sympathy, praying. Grief is often a time when we feel like there is nothing we can do, and through the church there are many things we **can** do. Altar Guild members happily give of their time to help make the funeral or memorial service as meaningful as possible for the family. Others gladly offer to help in whatever way they can with the reception, bringing food, decorating, setting up and cleaning up. Receptions are so important for the grieving process!

Christ Church is a place where we are not ashamed of loss but recognize it as a difficult part of our human existence, and so reach out to each other in comfort, care, and solidarity in order to combat feelings of isolation. And so, our Gospel reading today is a wonderful text.

Our Gospel story today picks up where last week’s left off. It is just after Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples, the evening before his crucifixion. After sharing this meal with his disciples and offering them an example of selfless love and service by washing their feet, Jesus is now preparing them for his departure. He is about to leave them, and they are distressed. This is what the threat of loss does -- it shakes up our sense of safety and security. In response, he has already told them -- in last week’s reading -- not to worry, that he is going away to prepare a place for them. But they are still upset, for the fear of loss is not so easily defeated. And so he tells them that he will not leave them orphaned, abandoned, or alone. Instead, he will send to them an Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

Now the word employed by John in this passage -- *paracletos* -- and often translated “Advocate”, can have several overlapping meanings. It can function in a legal sense, meaning literally “one who advocates for you before a court of law”. And it can function more *relationally*, describing someone who brings help, consolation, comfort, and encouragement (like we do for each other when there is a loss). All of the several definitions of the word *paracletos*, however, derive from the most basic meaning of the word: to “come alongside another.” To come alongside another.

Now in our Gospel reading, Jesus describes the Spirit as “*another* advocate” -- **Jesus** being the first! Jesus, that is, came alongside us in the Incarnation, that we might come to know and see the otherwise invisible God. *Now*, as Jesus says his farewell to his disciples, he not only promises that he is going to prepare a place for us (as we heard last week); he promises that he will send *another* Advocate, the Holy Spirit. When **we** come along side *each other* to comfort and encourage, and when we act like Jesus, we are living into the Holy Spirit’s invitation and very being.

This past Thursday evening, Georgia Martin, Clydia’s daughter, played the role of Paraclete to the full: she attended the graduation ceremonies of two of her grandchildren in Pueblo West, standing alongside them in this important moment of their life, and then she returned to Canon City to literally stand alongside her mother as she died. We can function as *paracletes* to each other by coming alongside one another both in times of celebration and, *especially*, in times of loss. In this way, we become communities of the Holy Spirit. In coming alongside each other, we become each other’s advocates, and in so doing, we are loving Jesus most fully, by conforming our lives to his life and by keeping his commandments.

And so, this Memorial Day weekend, I invite you to recognize and identify with the profound sense of loss the disciples. And then, I invite you to name a loss of your own, that we might come alongside each other in faith, comfort, and courage. On the 3x5 card which the usher gave you as you came in today, write down someone or something you mourn, someone or something you have lost. You can list more than one. During the Prayers of the People, when you are invited to add your own intercessions, speak that name or thing. In this way, in addition to remembering all who have given their lives for their country, we can also remember these other losses, asking for Christ's comfort.

Then after the alms basins are passed at the offertory, I am going to ask the ushers to pass a basket in which you can place your 3x5 card. You may write your name on the card or not. We will offer them up at the altar. And then we will place the basket at the back of the church, where you may take a card with you as you leave, and pray for that loss in this coming week, as a concrete way of coming alongside each other.  This act will help move us beyond our cultural fear of naming loss toward becoming a community of the Spirit where we practice and grow in our ability of coming alongside each other in faith and love, being for one another a living channel for the Advocate which Jesus sent to be with us forever.

AMEN