

Jesus is headed for Jerusalem, where he knows that a terrible ordeal awaits him, one that will end in his suffering and death. On his way, he pauses to bid farewell to his disciples. It's a touching scene, made more poignant because those to whom he speaks – his disciples, his closest friends – are also the ones who've repeatedly disappointed him, failed to grasp his teaching and resisted following his way. Soon, they'll also be the ones who abandon him, fleeing into the night when the soldiers come to arrest him. They, who've been so close to Jesus during better times, will be nowhere to be seen when he's dragged into court, mocked, whipped till he's nearly dead, and then brutally crucified.

Time and again, they've been unworthy to be called "disciples." For years, Jesus has shared God's truth with them and done miracles in their presence. Yet, still, they just don't get it. Jesus speaks of the way he's going. They respond, "We don't know the way, and we don't know where you're going." True to form, they're clueless to the end.

Yet, strangely, their failure, their stupidity, even their betrayal, offers a kind of peculiar comfort to us today. Let's face it, if we'd been there that night with Jesus, and soldiers came with knives, clubs, and spears can we be sure we would've done any better?

It's a test I've often flunked. I know that my impulse to self-preservation is as strong as theirs.

Sure, Jesus said, "take up our cross and follow," but I also know that for many, faith is more cushion than cross, a comfort amid the storm, a way to soften the blows of life and help make its bitter pills go down. Am I wrong? Did you come here hoping Jesus would make your life harder? I doubt it.

And so, as Jesus speaks his strange words about peace, a peace that passes understanding, about love, but a love that's quite different from our love, about glory, but a glory that has taken the shape of a cross, I can sympathize with these disciples who we so often speak of with superiority and scorn.

Yes, their stupidity and weakness are a comfort to me. No, they just don't get it! And, yes, they lack strength! But as dumb as I am, maybe they're dumber, as weak as I am, maybe they're weaker!

Yet, it's to these pitiful disciples that Jesus promises an "Advocate."

He shares the sad news that he is leaving them. The world he came to save will try to put an end to him. The darkness he came to enlighten will try to overwhelm him. He'll suffer an awful death.

But before he goes, he tells them this isn't the end. Though he's going away, he'll still be with them. Though he'll no longer teach them face to face, he'll continue to teach. Though they'll no longer walk the dusty roads together, he'll still go with them. They think the door's about to close between him and them, but he says he'll open another. This is the end of the way, yet he says that he's still the way. They're horrified at the prospect of his death, but he says that in this death is life.

To those who couldn't give Jesus understanding, faithful discipleship, or courageous obedience, he gives an Advocate. He promises not to leave them, but to stay close to them, even closer than now.

He'll be with them, to help. Jesus, who's been frustrated by his disciples' lack of understanding when he taught them, is sending an Advocate, who'll be their teacher, and show them everything.

The Holy Spirit teaches us and advocates for us. The Holy Spirit is the power of God. God the Father, and God the Son, speaks to us, instructs us, advocates for us, through the Holy Spirit.

Christian life's too hard to do alone. We're not to try to understand scripture, be a faith family, take up our cross, or witness for Jesus, alone. When it comes to following him, we can do nothing alone.

That's why when we baptize we say a prayer for the Spirit. We trust God to give the Spirit to teach, strengthen, and guide us as children, to help us be the child of God, disciple of Christ, and member of the church, God created us to be. Nobody can do this alone. That's why we need an Advocate.

During college, I worked at a store that sold orthopedic shoes for children. All of the salespeople were free to fit (it was that long ago) any shoes. But only one, Bill, was trained to put in the inserts that made "corrections" in the orthopedics. So, it made me really uncomfortable, when Bill went on vacation, that I, the youngest on the staff, was designated to install the inserts and make corrections. I had images of kids who already had problems with their stride or posture being totally crippled by my mistakes. It didn't help that all Bill gave me was a brief overview and the encouraging words, "You already know how to fit shoes; this little *Orthopedic Manual* has everything else you need to know. If you have a problem, this will show you what to do. It's your Bible while I'm gone."

Some people think of the Bible as that sort of thing. Here is life's little instruction book. If you've got questions about how you are to live as a Christian, just open it up and it'll show you how.

That's not what Jesus says. He doesn't say, "I'm leaving you an instruction book." He says, "I'm leaving you a teacher, a guide, a friend – the Advocate – who'll tell you all you need to know.

The Advocate is more like old Bill telling me, "I'm leaving on vacation, here's my email address, cell phone number, GPS location, (though he could've offered none of that back then); feel free to call me day or night if you've got any questions, or if the job gets to be too much for you."

Sometimes, when you consider the challenging work to which Jesus calls us, his great expectations of us, you get the impression that you have to be a hero to live a Christian life, that only the very best and brightest could hope to be disciples. But look who Jesus called to be his disciples – ordinary people who were not at all quick on the uptake. How did he expect 12 losers like them to be faithful?

Well, he didn't expect them to be faithful by themselves. He didn't expect them to do *anything* by themselves. In fact, in John's Gospel, he tells them that they *can't* do *anything* by themselves.

That's why he sends them an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to strengthen them to do what they could never do by themselves and guide them in ways and to places they couldn't have found on their own.

We see that in the passage from Acts. When Paul arrived in town, looking for a place of prayer, the Spirit guided him to some women gathered by a river, with whom he could share the gospel. The Spirit moved one of them, Lydia, to believe, be baptized, and extend hospitality to the apostles.

Today, as we celebrate the festival of the Christian home, we give thanks for the Spirit's work with women like Lydia down through the ages, inspiring them to nurture Christian homes, not only where they live, but in their faith families. Look at how the Spirit keeps inspiring women at Bethany, how much praying, visiting, card writing, meal preparing, committee attending and chairing, leading, mentoring, Bible studying, greeting, visitor out-looking, funeral attending, is done by women. And, I want to be clear, I'm not saying that any of this is "women's work," but that we can rejoice at work of the Spirit to call, inspire, and empower them to do so very much to make the church the church!

Several Sundays ago, at the Camp Bethany Leadership Workshop, we took *Making Disciples* as our mission at camp. We said we'd seek to fulfill that mission by doing our best to make camp an *Outpost of God's Kingdom*, a place where God's love rules in attitudes, behaviors, spirits, and relationships. We talked about how different that is from the way the world around us lives, and so how crucial it is for campers to see that what Jesus taught really can be lived, by young people, here, now, today. So we prayed that God would help us do and be that, truly be Christ's disciples. We could never hope to "make disciples" or establish an "outpost of the kingdom of God," alone, so we asked for God's Spirit to help us.

In those same college years that I worked at that shoe store, my mom returned to college herself, to finish earning a teaching degree. It kept her very busy, working part time at the shoe store, keeping house, driving 50 miles to the campus in St. Louis, and, of course, doing her class work.

That's why, when I called home one weekend, and she told me that she'd seen a family of migrant workers, sleeping in their car, and had invited them to come home with her and then put them up and fed them for a week, I had to ask how she found the time and energy to do it.

She reminded me that during the Great Depression, her family lived in the country, at the end of a bumpy road, in a farmhouse with train tracks running behind it. Then she told me that every morning her mom would bake something and leave it on the window sill, for the jobless men who rode the rails (hobos, they were called) to pick up and eat. Well, my mom, knew how poor her family was, how monotonous their diet, and how rarely they ate meat or had dessert. So she asked, "How can you give anything away when we have so little?" Her mom, who'd some day be known by my sisters and me as, "Grandma on the bumpy road, answered, "They have less than we do. It's what God wants me to do. Sometimes it's not easy. That's why I pray each morning for the strength to do it."

The good news is that while Jesus expects us to hard stuff, he doesn't expect us to do it alone. We can really only hope to do the hard stuff if there really is a Holy Spirit.

And the good news today is: *there is!*

O Holy Spirit,

Gracious, powerful spirit of the living God, blow upon us your breath of life:

When our spirits wither and our bodies droop, blow gently upon us,

....lifting us up, refreshing us, restoring us to your service.

When our spirits are dry and dusty and we find ourselves alone and bereft in some desert of a place,

....blow your holy wind through our death valley, give life to our dry bones,

....knit us back together and send us again on your way, resurrected, newborn,

....and empowered for work for you and your kingdom.

When the way is unclear, and we just don't know what to do, show us the way.

O Jesus, you said, "I do not give as the world gives. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you."

We give thanks and praise for the peace you give that makes the world whole.

You said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

We give thanks and praise for the help we receive that helps us not to be afraid,

....for those who've given us a home, a safe place, a welcoming place, a place of healing,

....and who've shown us how to offer home to others.

We thank you for our mothers who loved you and prayed that they might faithfully serve you,

....mothers in our own homes who made home a place of loving nurture in your way,

....and the mothers in our church homes, who've made church a true home for us and many others.

Lord Jesus, you said, "I am going away, and I am coming to you."

We rejoice that you have returned to heavenly glory and that, in the Spirit, you abide with us still.

We give thanks and praise that you live with us, and that you reign in heaven.

We give thanks that there is more: You have died. You have risen. You will come again.

You said, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name,

....will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Thank you for the Spirit that, even now, you are sending.

We give thanks, O God, for all the ways that through our Lord Jesus, and the Holy Spirit he sends,

....that it is clear; you are near, and we need not fear.

We pray for those who bear burdens of fear,

....those who believe they stand alone,

....those who, crushed under the weight of their sins, feel abandoned and lost,

....those who feel no one is on their side, for these and for ourselves we pray.

We pray that all may know we have an Advocate in you, someone on our side,

....who knows our hearts, understands our weaknesses, strengthens our resolve,

....believes our intentions, sustains our hopes.

We pray, confident in your promises.