

A new inmate arrives in prison. He walks into the dining room, sits down next to an older inmate, and starts eating. Suddenly someone jumps up and calls out, "122!" Everyone bursts into laughter. A few minutes later someone else jumps up and says, "38!" More laughter. Another says, "3!" Laughter again. Finally, the new inmate asks the older one, "What in the world is going on?"

The older fellow says, "We've all been here so long -- and know each other so well -- that we know one another's jokes. Rather than wasting time recounting them, we assign each joke a number. All you have to do is shout a number, and we all recall the corresponding joke and laugh. Try it!"

"Oh no," says the new inmate. "I don't know any of the jokes." "It doesn't matter," says the older fellow. "Just pick any number between 1 and 500." So the new man jumps up and says, "107!" Dead silence. No one laughs.

Confused, he sits down next to his friend. "What happened?" he asks. "Well," says the older fellow, "Some people can tell a joke, and some people can't!" (James Martin, BETWEEN HEAVEN AND MIRTH, p. 180-181)

First, some gospel background. We know that John's gospel is very different than the other three, called the Synoptics – Matthew, Mark & Luke. The author of John's gospel seems to know more of the rest of the story than do the synoptics, but of course, HIS gospel was written last. John's Jesus knows of His pre-existence; He knows that He must die in order to be exalted; He goes to His passion and death in full charge and control of His destiny.

Today's gospel is part of the farewell discourse read every Easter season. Jesus consoles His disciples regarding His upcoming death by telling them that He will remain with them through the presence of His Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the gift and presence of Jesus in His absence. The Spirit is the church's corporate memory that reminds us to conform our lives to Jesus' teaching and life. The Spirit nudges and prompts growth. Wherever there is growth and goodness, the Spirit is on the scene.

John wanted the disciples to look past Jesus' suffering and death to His resurrection and His heavenly reign. In so doing, they would be able to look beyond the sufferings of their own lives and see their own future participation in Jesus' own glorification. The Paraclete would see them through the sufferings of this world until they entered into the next.

The term 'another paraclete' was used in the Johannine tradition as Jesus was understood as the first paraclete. John identifies Jesus and the Spirit as one. Throughout the gospel Jesus promised He would be with His disciples after His death. It was also said that the Spirit would be with them. Things said about Jesus throughout the gospel were also said about the Spirit. Jesus and the Spirit are one and the same. The Spirit would continue the work of Jesus and continue to reveal Christ to the nations long after His death and resurrection. (adapted from Mary Birmingham, WORD AND WORSHIP WORKBOOK FOR YEAR C, p. 300-301)

Second, a little about the role of the *paraklitos*. There is a long history of debate about how to render this word into English. The word means literally 'called alongside of.' The Paraclete is the one called alongside of us as disciples of Christ. Comforter, advocate, counselor. But REMINDER is a big part of its context in today's passage. The Holy Spirit walks beside us, with us, teaching us, reminding us. A great deal of education

is not putting into our brains something that previously we did not know, but also reminding us of what we already know. When we say, “I get it!” sometimes what we mean is “Now I remember!”

Plato taught that we are born with all of the great ideas implanted in our souls. The teacher is the midwife who helps to give birth to those ideas, to enable us to recall what we know, to remember. We have all experienced the work of the paraclete in our lives. There are those moments, and they are wonderful, when we are reading or hearing a passage of scripture, perhaps a passage that we have heard or read a dozen times before. And suddenly it leaps out at us – it hits us in a way it never did before. And we remember, as if seeing for the first time, what it means. That’s the paraclete walking beside us.

Or we go through a tough time in our life. For days we have been in a funk, a dark place. We’re not sure which way to turn. In our pain, we have asked questions like “Where is God?” “Does God even care about me?” “Why is this happening?” Then, here at Mass, through the music, or the scripture read, or (it’s EVEN possible!) in another boring 3 point homily, we suddenly realize “Yes, now I know. God loves me. God is not far from me. I can go on!” We could have truthfully said, “Now I remember! For a while, due to my troubles, I almost forgot. Now I remember, I am a child of God, precious to Him, held in His loving embrace – always.” The paraclete is walking alongside us.

We could think of Sunday mass, at its best, as the extended work of the paraclete. We get dressed, we come here to church, to remember, to recall, to re-collect the risen Christ. Life being what it is, there are so many occasions when we forget what we already know – that Jesus is Christ is Lord, that Christ has risen, He has risen indeed, and He wants to love us into being with Him forever in heaven. (adapted from PULPIT RESOURCE, Will Willimon, April-June 2004, p. 35-36)

Third, our experience of the Paraclete. Shortly after his conversion, St. Augustine penned these words: “Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness, I plunged into the lovely things that you created. You were with me, but I was not with you.”

Augustine, sincere, but pathologically restless, had been searching for love and God. Eventually he found them in the most unexpected of all places – inside of himself. God and love had been inside of him all along, but he hadn’t been inside of himself. The paraclete had been alongside of him, but he never recognized the presence.

There’s a lot of truth contained in this small piece of one man’s life. We don’t need to try to make God present in our lives. God, the Spirit, the paraclete, is already present, always and everywhere. God is always alongside of us. As Sheila Cassidy so colorfully puts it, God is no more present in church than in a bar, but we generally are more present to God in church than we are in a bar. The problem of presence is not with God – but with us.

Sadly, this is also true for OUR presence to the richness of our own lives. Too often we are not present to the beauty, love, and grace that brims within the ordinary moments of our lives. Bounty is there, but we aren’t. Because of our restlessness, tiredness, distraction, anger, obsession, wound, haste, whatever, too often we are not enough inside of ourselves to appreciate what the moments of our own lives hold. We think of our lives as impoverished, dull, small-time, not worth putting our full hearts into, but the fault of non-presence is on our side. Our lives come laden with richness, but we aren’t sufficiently present to what is there. A sad statement, but unfortunately true.

The poet, Rainer Marie Rilke, at the height of his fame, was once contacted by a young man from a small, provincial town. The young man expressed his admiration for Rilke's poetry and told him he envied him, envied his life in a big city, and envied a life so full of insight and richness. He went on to describe how his own life was uninteresting, provincial, small-town, too dull to inspire insight and poetry. Rilke's answer was not sympathetic. He told the young man something to this effect: "If your life seems poor to you, then tell yourself that you are not poet enough to see and call forth its riches. There are no uninteresting places, no lives that are not full of the stuff for poetry. What makes for a rich life is not so much what is contained within each moment, since all moments contain what's timeless, but sensitive insight and presence to that moment." Poetry is about being sufficiently alert to what's in the ordinary. And what is in the ordinary is God, the paraclete, the Holy Spirit.

Augustine was lucky, the clock never ran out on him. He realize this before it was too late: "Late have I loved you!" Sometimes we aren't as lucky, our health and our lives must be radically threatened or taken from us before we realize how rich these in fact already are, how God-packed and Spirit filled. We are often just not present to them. If everything were taken away from us and then given back, our perspective would change drastically. Victor Frankl, the author of *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*, like Augustine, also was lucky. He had been clinically dead for a few minutes and then revived by doctors. When he returned to his ordinary life after this, everything suddenly became very rich. He wrote: "One very important aspect of post-mortem life is that everything gets precious, gets piercingly important. You get stabbed by things, by flowers and by babies and by beautiful things – just the very act of living, of walking and breathing and eating and having friends and chatting. Everything seems to look more beautiful rather than less, and one gets the much-intensified sense of miracles."

We don't have to make God present, the paraclete is already alongside of us. We need to make ourselves present to God. The secret to finding beauty and love in life is basically the same. Like God, they are already present. The trick is to make ourselves present to them. Rarely are we enough inside of our own skins, present enough to the moment, and sensitive enough to the richness that is already present in our lives. Our lives come brimming with riches, but too often we are not enough inside of our lives to get that. Like the young Augustine, we are away from ourselves, strangers to our own experience, seeking outside of ourselves for something that is already inside, alongside of us. The key is to come home. God and the Spirit and the moment don't have to be searched out and found. They're already here. We need to be here. Because life itself is always – ALWAYS – a miracle.

Karl Rahner was once asked whether he believed in miracles. His answer was: "I don't believe in them, I rely on them to get through each day!" Indeed, miracles are always present within our lives. Because the paraclete is with us, within us, alongside us. Always. Forever. Amen. (freely adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 5/22/2019)