

“We Are Not Alone”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Pentecost Sunday – June 4, 2017

Acts 2: 1-13

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says: “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:25-26).

When you hear the word “advocate”, what do you think of? (ask people to share their thoughts) I guess for me, when I hear the word “advocate,” I think of someone who will speak up for you, who will be your defender, who will never abandon you.

In our church, some specific people come to mind. I think of Patty McKinnon, who as a family practice attorney is an advocate for women and children who do not have a voice in the legal arena.

I think of Kim Grant, our secretary, and Lisa Crismore, who so often are advocates for the poor who walk through our church doors during the week. They take time to listen, find services that would be helpful, and offer a voice for those who feel they have no voice.

But the most striking example I think of in terms of someone being an advocate is when it comes to health care. In today’s world, you must have an individual who serves as your voice, your champion, your advocate when you are a patient in the hospital. Otherwise, amid all the layers of care, you might get lost in the great shuffle we call health care today.

I have stood beside many of you in such times in the hospital or doctor’s offices, and several of you have served as an advocate for your loved one. But I’m going to tell you there is one person in particular who embodies that advocacy role to a “t”. This will embarrass her, but I don’t care! That person would be Mary Carter. Throughout her husband, Jerry’s, multiple hospital stays, and more recently when her son, Andrew, was hospitalized, Mary was always there, taking notes, making sure she understood what was going on, and how to help make the best, informed decision for her loved one’s care.

That is the definition of an advocate: someone who will speak for you when you cannot speak; someone who will take on your burden when you cannot carry it; someone who will never leave your side when you are struggling and unsure as to what lies ahead.

When Jesus described the Holy Spirit as the Advocate, it was the night before he died. In that passage from John, he was preparing his disciples for his departure, for a time when he would no longer be by their side. He reassured them that although he would not be physically present, his Father promised to send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to teach them, comfort them, and lead them in the days to come. Even last week, when we marked Jesus’ ascension, we heard Jesus reassuring his followers of the promise of the Holy Spirit: “This is

what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5).

Today we celebrate that baptism of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. As the apostles are gathered together, a rush of wind blows through the room. Divided tongues, like flames of fire, rest upon each of the apostles. They are each filled with God's Spirit, and start to speak in other languages, as the Spirit allowed them.

We read that those who were gathered outside were bewildered because they heard the apostles speaking in the native language of each. Each year we hear this list of ancient places and people – Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, and so on. A modern retelling of this story might sound something like this: "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Mexicans, Germans, Africans, Chinese, Americans, French, Koreans, and residents of the Middle East, the Pacific, and India – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

In a sense, we did that this morning in worship. In the 9am service, we sang "Spirit of the Living God" as our prayer for illumination. Most of us sang it in English, but then we were invited to sing it the second time in another language, if we knew it. We printed four others in the bulletin – French, German, Swahili, and Spanish – and I imagine there were some other languages that folks sang. We did this for the opening worship of our reunion at Princeton Theological Seminary last month, and I felt it was a great way to embody this Pentecost moment today.

For in those various languages, we are reminded that we are not alone in this world. As people of faith, we are connected through the Spirit to sisters and brothers who live not only in our neighborhood or city, but who also live across the country, or across the world. We are not divided or separated by national borders or political leaders, but rather are united by the Advocate who helps us hear one another through God's voice and love. Others might sneer, saying we are full of new wine whenever we affirm our unity in the diversity of voices of the Spirit. But as the Body of Christ, we are always and forever grateful that the Spirit has given us the ability to speak in all those native tongues, sharing the good news of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ.

On this day of Pentecost, we are reminded of the Spirit's presence not only in our lives and the lives of others, but also through the visible signs of God's invisible grace – the sacraments. As one commentator puts it: *Henri Nouwen said that we have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking . . . At the (baptismal) font, we remember that we are God's beloved children, called into community. At the table we are fed so that we may be sent to serve. The simple elements of water, bread, and fruit of the vine strengthen us to reject the allergy of the status quo. They draw us toward the places of pain and fuel us to serve with God's compassion. They embolden us to resist the powers of evil at work in the world. They remind us to risk love in the name of Christ* (Anne H. K. Apple, "Living By the Word," *Christian Century*, May 10, 2017: 25).

The promise of Pentecost is that we are never alone when we risk love in the name of Christ. Whenever we try something new as people of faith, we

aren't trying it on our own. When we ask someone to join us - coming to church, participating in an event, serving in leadership - it's not just us taking the risk. It is alongside the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who gives us the words to say, or the heart to care, or the ears to listen in the most appropriate, caring, and effective way. And if someone says, "No" or "Not right now," at least we took the risk in love, and were faithful to the Spirit's calling.

Do you sense the Advocate's presence around you? Do you believe you are not alone in your walk of faith? I certainly do.

In December, Jim Graves fell and had a serious break in his back. After surgery, Jim spent significant time in the hospital, and then in rehabilitation at RHI up the street. It was never a guarantee that he would regain full mobility, or even walk again. But his determination, his positive spirit, and his persistence have gotten him where he is today, walking with a walker, and soon with just a cane. And I told him, as well as Mary Carter, that I felt as if Jerry Carter was walking alongside Jim through these last six months. That positive spirit, that looking forward and not back, that desire to reach and achieve goals - the Advocate was always with Jerry, and the Spirit has likewise been with Jim, never leaving him alone.

I see it when we as a church are not afraid to say it's time to let go of something and see what new thing the Spirit is calling us to be. Lisa shared last month that the Discovery Time program met for the last time two weeks ago, as the attendance and energy of both students and mentors had declined. And the Presbyterian Women have decided to suspend for one year their annual garage sale, as, while it's been a successful fundraiser for them, it has also become a great drain on those who volunteer, serve, and organize that annual event. Both of these are not signs of weakness - they are signs of a willingness to follow the Spirit to that new thing God is calling us to do. We are not alone - the Advocate is there providing guidance, inspiration, comfort, and peace.

And even when we are separated from those we love, we are not alone. I felt that on Friday, when Debbie and I attended the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra in the seats that were her parents' seats. Listening to the orchestra play incredible, inspiring music made us feel as if her father was there alongside us. Even when we grieve the loss of those whom we love, the Advocate holds us in God's loving care, reminding us always and forever that we are not alone.

"All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" (Acts 2:12). Pentecost means we have not been forgotten, that God's Spirit will always be with us, and that we are empowered to speak this good news to our world - wherever that may take us.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the Advocate, God's Holy Spirit. Amen.