

“Are You Flying with Me, Jesus?”
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Easter 6C
John 14:23-29

The Companion, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you.

None of us is born Christian. We can't become Christian by long walks in the woods or by being born in the “right” neighborhood to perfect parents. You are not Christian by some innate, natural inclination that you brought into the world when you were born. Each of us has to be led into this faith. Somebody has got to find a way to tell us the good news so that we hear this news as news for our good.

Someone has got to teach us.

One of our great mistakes is to present the Christian faith as “natural,” common sense, that knowledge that everyone already knows by virtue of being born. No, there's nothing innate about this faith. As the Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said: “Truth does not arise from any human heart.”

You can't come upon Jesus through walks in the woods or rummaging in your ego. Somebody has got to make you Christian by telling you a story you can't tell yourself. Somebody had to hand it over and you had to receive it. One of Augustine's favorite scripture passages is from Paul: “What do you have that you have not received?”(1 Cor 4:7). When it comes to our having faith, the Christian faith, it's gift all the way down.

Every person here had to receive the faith from another. Someone had to teach you about Jesus. We're all immigrants into this faith. Everyone here is a naturalized citizen. Everyone here had to cross over the border into Kingdom of God.

No Christian is self-created. Each of us believes only on the basis of having received the gospel from some “evangelist” sent by God to hand over the truth about God.

That this is “**news**” implies that the gospel does not arise from us but rather must come to us, be told to us, be given to us. Calling this truth “news” also implies public truth meant to be announced to all.

When he carefully read Romans 9–11, Leslie Newbigin characterized Christians thus way: “we are in a position of having to receive salvation from the hand of others, salvation can only be in mutual dependence and relatedness.” Salvation is intrinsically a corporate gift, first to Israel, then surprisingly to the Gentiles: that is, even to outsiders like us, naturalized citizens of the Kingdom of God.

The Advocate becomes that mysterious, sometimes unconscious way that we are given all that we need to know to be a faithful disciples.

Christians are nothing without the Holy Spirit and, in the gift of the Spirit, Jesus promises to give us what we need to be faithful. That is the grand, comforting message is what the Spirit enables us to proclaim today.

Thus today’s gospel with a promise of a very specific, utterly essential gift that is given us by Jesus: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

Without the empowering and prodding of the Holy Spirit, the church is always in danger of becoming just another well-meaning, sometimes helpful only human organization. Is one reason why so few congregations attempt anything demanding is that they are attempting to be the church on their own, limiting their work to what they, on their own, are able to accomplish?

Come! Holy Spirit!

I hope that you will agree with me when I say that it is reassuring to hear that the Holy Spirit “will teach you everything and remind you.” None of us is born Christian. We must learn the faith and, in the Holy Spirit we see that God loves us enough to teach us all we need to know to be with God. Nothing will be held back or whispered only to a few. Jesus tells us some astounding truth that is easy to forget. Therefore the Advocate reminds us. Here is truth we cannot teach ourselves, truth that is not only a great mystery to us but also truth that we, in our human sin, cannot attain on our own. Therefore the Advocate is a truth-teller.

It's easy enough to think like a Christian when you are sitting inside the confines of the church. But we spend most of our lives outside of the sacred precincts of the church. Thankfully, the Advocate is with us "forever," at all times and places, helping us to be the disciples Jesus calls us to be, bringing to mind things we might otherwise forget .

I have a friend who, mid-life, decided that he just must learn how to fly. So he signs up for flying lessons at the local airport. He had a great flight instructor, so good an instructor that my friend said he felt growing anxiety in himself as he contemplated that day when he would wave good bye to his flight instructor and take the plane up for himself. How would he function when he was up there in the clouds alone?

That day finally came but when it came my friend said that he was surprised by his sense of self-confidence, not really confidence in himself but confidence in his instructor. "He had taught me so consistently," said my friend, "repeatedly, so reassuringly, that I just knew what to do. I could almost hear my instructor, as if he were in the cockpit with me, speaking to me, saying, 'first do this, now take the next step.'"

In a way, that's just how Jesus, the teacher speaks to us today. As Christians, we're always beginners, amateurs. But Jesus never expects us to walk his narrow, demanding way alone. He doesn't expect us to have the right words to say to others, in his name, on our own. He gives us his Holy Spirit to continue to teach us, reassuringly guide us.

Now, go forth from this time of worship into the world in Christ name. But remember this: *a good teacher goes with you.*

—William H. Willimon © 2019