

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“The Holy Spirit Your Advocate” (John 14:16-18)

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God is on your side.

Even when it feels like everything is going wrong, God is on your side. Even when those you thought were your friends turn out not to be, God is on your side. Even when your savings goes down as your debt goes up, God is on your side.

I have only two illustrations in this sermon—one from a movie most of you have seen, and the other from a book most of you have read. One of my favorite movies is the gospel soaked 1994 classic *Forrest Gump*, a movie that choked me up multiple times the first time I saw it, and still does. Very early in the film when the young Forrest, his legs in cumbersome braces he needs to wear in order to straighten out his back, awkwardly climbs onto the bus on the first day of school. The bus lurches forward and while trying to keep his balance Forrest clammers down the aisle, his braces squeaking with every step he takes, as he desperately seeks a place to sit.

He looks hopefully to a boy in one seat but the boy quickly scoots over, “This seat’s taken.” He looks to the boy in the next seat, who also scoots over and won’t even look at Forrest, “Taken!” Forrest looks across the aisle and a tall redheaded girl just shakes her head and looks away. He is now almost to the very back of the bus and still another boy glares at him as he covers the empty spot next to him on the seat, “Can’t seat here.”

So the young Forrest turns around and begins clanking back up the aisle of the bus, still searching for a place to sit, when the adult Forrest says in a voiceover, “You know it’s funny what a young man recollects, cause I don’t remember being born, and I don’t recall what I got on my first Christmas, and I don’t know when I went on my first outdoor picnic...but I do remember the first time I heard the sweetest voice in the wide world. And out of nowhere comes the gentle welcoming voice of a beautiful girl, “You can sit here if you want.”

The young Forrest turns to her as the adult Forrest remembers, “I had never seen anything so beautiful in my life. She was like an angel.” She asks him, “Well, are you gonna sit down or aren’t you?” Forrest awkwardly climbs into the seat next to her. The little girl’s compassion continues as she asks, “What’s wrong with your legs?” Forrest gets a little defensive, “Nothing at all, thank you, my legs are just fine and dandy.” The adult Forrest further recalls, “I just sat next to her on that bus, and had a conversation all the way to school. Next to momma, no one ever talked to me or asked me questions.”

Then the girl asks Forrest this question, “Are you stupid or something?” Forrest famously replies, “Momma says, ‘Stupid is as stupid does.’” Then the little girl smiles and holds out her hand, “I’m Jenny.” Forrest shakes her hand, “I’m Forrest, Forrest Gump.” The adult Forrest concludes this moving scene, “From that day on we was always together, Jenny and me were like peas and carrots.”

In that moment when young Forrest was clanking down the aisle of the school bus, desperately looking for a place to sit, and even more desperately looking for someone to care, Jenny, who did not know Forrest at all, gave him grace, and gave him a place to sit next to her. Jenny was on Forrest’s side. And in spite of the many ups and down of their friendship over the ensuing years, Jenny was always on his side—and of course, Forrest was always on her side too.

God is on your side, all the time, no matter what. In today’s gospel passage from the Last Supper Jesus assures his disciples that after his death and resurrection God the Father would send Someone to be a Jenny for them:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you (John 14:16-18).

Jesus is talking to his disciples here about the Holy Spirit, the Advocate and the Spirit of truth, who would always be with them no matter what to remind them that they are not alone in the aisle of the bus, but that God is on their side. This promised Holy Spirit would do more than offer them a seat on the bus, and would always be with them and in them, an ever present reminder of God’s love for them and presence with them, an ever present reminder that God is on their side.

Jesus promised his disciples that in the person of the Holy Spirit he would give them “another Advocate,” which makes sense because Jesus was obviously their advocate too, as was God the Father—as Jesus had proclaimed earlier, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). And as if that were not enough, later Jesus further described this dynamic:

Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished (John 5:19-20).

God the Father is on your side, God the Son is on your side, God the Holy Spirit—the Advocate—is on your side. The word “Advocate” Jesus used in this passage from the Last Supper is the word *paraclete*, which means “counselor”, someone who speaks in your defense. In his account of the Last Supper John repeatedly uses this same word *paraclete* in referring to the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; 14:26; 15:26; and 16:7). Again and again Jesus emphasized that the Holy Spirit, your Advocate, is your counselor who speaks on your defense because God is on your side. Interestingly enough John uses this same word *paraclete* on one additional occasion, this time in his first letter—this time referring to Jesus and his death on the cross: “If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2).

In other words, God the Father is so on your side he gave his Son for you, and Jesus is so on your side he willingly died for you, and the Holy Spirit, your Advocate, reminds you again and again and again that God is on your side. This was the case before you were even born, when God knit you together in your mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13), it is the case this very moment, it will be the case when you draw your final breath on this planet, and it will be the case throughout eternity. God has always been, and will always be, on your side.

My favorite children’s book ever is Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* (1964), a book I remember loving as a child. I still love this book because it shows us what the unconditional, never ending love of the God who is on your side looks like:

Once there was a tree....and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide-and-go-seek. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree....very much. And the tree was happy.

But time went by. And the boy grew older. And the tree was often alone. Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said, "Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy." "I am too big to climb and play," said the boy. "I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money." "I'm sorry," said the tree, "but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy." And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy.

But the boy stayed away for a long time.... and the tree was sad. And then one day the boy came back and the tree shook with joy and she said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and be happy." "I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy. "I want a house to keep me warm," he said. "I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house. Can you give me a house?" "I have no house," said the tree. "The forest is my house, but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy." And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house. And the tree was happy.

But the boy stayed away for a long time. And when he came back, the tree was so happy she could hardly speak. "Come, Boy," she whispered, "come and play." "I am too old and sad to play," said the boy. "I want a boat that will take me far away from here. Can you give me a boat?" "Cut down my trunk and make a boat," said the tree. "Then you can sail away... and be happy." And so the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away. And the tree was happy ... but not really.

And after a long time the boy came back again. “I am sorry, Boy,” said the tree, “but I have nothing left to give you - My apples are gone.” “My teeth are too weak for apples,” said the boy. “My branches are gone,” said the tree. “You cannot swing on them.” “I am too old to swing on branches,” said the boy. “My trunk is gone,” said the tree. “You cannot climb.” “I am too tired to climb,” said the boy. “I am sorry,” sighed the tree. “I wish that I could give you something.... but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry....”

“I don’t need very much now,” said the boy, “just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired.” “Well,” said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, “well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest.”

And the boy did. And the tree was happy.

That wonderful giving tree was always on the boy’s side, no matter how old the boy became, no matter what the boy was going through in his life, no matter how costly that love was—the tree’s love for the boy never stopped. That wonderful giving tree could have not been any more on that boy’s side.

And yet, that wonderful giving tree reminds us of a different giving tree, the cross, where Jesus once and for all made it crystal clear that God is on your side. Even as we nailed Jesus to that giving tree he was still on our side—“Father, forgive them” he prayed, “for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). And because God’s love is stronger than death, Jesus was raised on the third day.

And it is Jesus’ death and resurrection that together compose the “greater works than these” about which Jesus preached earlier—and Jesus’ death and resurrection remain the definitive evidence that God is on your side.

So today, especially for any of you who feel alone in the aisle on the bus desperately looking for a place to sit, or worn out and in need of a place to rest, Jenny’s invitation to Forrest, and the tree’s invitation to the boy, is God’s invitation to you, “You can sit here if you want...Sit down and rest”—and may the Holy Spirit your Advocate remind you anew that God is on your side.

Amen.