

Easter 6C 2022

Jesus tells the son of James, whose name is Judas, that once Jesus is no longer with them, God will send The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, who “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

How does the Advocate do this?

Many people feel that they pray to God and follow the teachings of Jesus, but they do not know what this Advocate is.

In other words, what is our primary relationship with the Holy Spirit?

We learn something about how the Holy Spirit interacts with us from Paul’s experience in Troas, where he had a vision of a man who encouraged him to go to Macedonia.

Our text actually says “pleaded” with him, but “encouraged” is also a good translation.

John actually uses the nominal form of this same Greek word to refer to the Holy Spirit, the Encourager, or as our text translates it, the Advocate.

So while Paul is in Troas, he is *encouraged* by the *Encourager* to go to Macedonia.

The Holy Spirit, in other words, encourages us to act.

Paul senses this encouragement, this nudging, and then “knits together” what it means.

Again, our text uses the more prosaic term, Paul was “convinced,” but the more literal meaning of the term is that he *knit together* from his experience “that God had called [them] to proclaim the good news to [the Macedonians].”

We understand from this that we receive the nudging of the Holy Spirit and have to knit together what we are being encouraged to do.

Our place is to say yes to the Spirit, but that often does not turn out as we anticipate.

I imagine, for example, that Paul expected to meet a *man* in Macedonia, like the one he had seen in his vision.

It is possible the Spirit knew that Paul would not have been moved to go to Macedonia had he realized that he would meet not a man, but a strong woman, Lydia, who traded in purple cloth.

This means that she received shipment from the Phoenicians, who were the local purveyors of purple dye, and distributed the finished product to those few who could afford it.

The dye, you see, was 15 times more valuable than gold,¹ so Lydia was very wealthy.

She was nevertheless not fulfilled by wealth alone.

She needed to know that existence has meaning.

She needed to hear the good news of the God who is love.

1 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/colour-purple-dyeing-techniques-phoenician-sea-snails>

She heard the gospel and her house was baptized.

As with Paul, the Spirit often encourages us down paths leading to unexpected consequences.

The Tyrian purple cloth that Lydia traded, for example, was created with dye made from an edible marine mollusk, *Bolinus brandaris*.

These mollusks are not purple.

To create the purple dye, a gland that secretes a milky mucous must be removed from each mollusk and treated for days with heat and light, a process that produces a great stench.

One gram of dye requires 120 pounds of mollusks, roughly 8,500 of them.

That one gram is enough to dye a shirt sleeve, thus purple was reserved for royalty and the very rich.

This made the Phoenicians, who discovered the process in the area, quite wealthy.

But how did they first figure out that removing the milky gland of a mollusk and treating it for days would produce a colorfast purple dye?

At some point, they must have said yes to the Spirit, who encouraged them in the right direction.

Purple continued to be made from mollusks until 1856 when, at age 18, William Perkin discovered the first synthetic dye.

At the time, he was a very young member of the royal society of Science.

He had been looking for a way to make synthetic quinine to treat malaria in the colonies in order to facilitate the spreading of the British empire.

As a result of his efforts, Perkin ended up with a black, sticky mess that he decided to dispose of by dissolving it in alcohol.

When he did, it produced a purple liquid.

At that point, the Encourager must have spoken to him, and Perkin said yes because, rather than throw the purple out as a failed experiment, he tested it on cloth and found it to be colorfast.

With the help of the Encourager, Perkin had stumbled upon aniline purple, also called mauvine, the first synthetic dye.

He set out to build the empire, but the Spirit had led him to make purple available to the common person.²

We listen to the Spirit who encourages us, knitting together where it is leading, but the results may not be what we anticipate.

In fact, they rarely are.

2 <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/in-ancient-rome-purple-dye-was-made-from-snails-1239931/>

John Walker liked to mix chemicals and see what happened.

He mixed two with a wooden stick.

When they dried on the end of it and he tried to scrape it off, it burst into flame.

He had created matches.

Penicillin, microwaves, superglue, x-rays are all “serendipitous” discoveries.

People were looking for one thing, found another, and said yes to its possibilities.

They had been encouraged in directions they had not understood.

Such discoveries make dramatic stories, but the same process holds true in everyday life.

We may not make an impressive discovery, but when we follow the encouragement of
the Spirit, it leads us in interesting directions.

People have called it their muse, intuition, and inspiration (a word that means taking in
the spirit).

Whatever one calls it, saying yes to the Encourager requires hope and trust, the ability to
follow a path without knowing where it leads.

We must be open to possibilities.

The more afraid we are, on the other hand, the more we try to direct things, to control
the outcome, and the farther astray we go.

Paul might have argued that his work in Troas was not yet complete.

He might have feared going to Macedonia when things had not worked out with his attempt to go to Bithynia.

Perkin might have focused dejectedly on his failure to produce synthetic quinine rather than being open to the potential of what he had unwittingly produced, but they both said yes.

Fear blinds us to the very possibilities toward which the Encourager leads us.

It is not that we should stop trying, but that we should remain open, ready to accept the Spirit's encouragement.

Much of life is learning how to say yes to holy nudging, to the encouragement of the Spirit.

We rarely have any idea where we are being led, but that is not failure.

In our dance with the Spirit, we often end up where we do not anticipate.

I hope that, when you look at your own lives, you can recognize the traces of the Spirit that has led you in unexpected directions.