

Building for Faith in Action – Union as Advocate

May 28, 2023

Advocate

Many of you may remember my dear friend Lindsey Draper. I invited Lindsey to speak here in Adult Education a couple of years on Martin Luther King weekend. He's particularly suited for that role, as he is the only person I know who was baptized by Rev. Dr. King. Not only was he baptized by King, his parents were on the search committee that called King to his first church, Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

Lindsey is a man of deep faith and phenomenal character. You may also remember Lindsey from a sermon I preached shortly after one of those MLK weekend events here at Union, in which I told the story of taking him out to a local restaurant after church here, only to have the server ignore him the whole time. The overt racism toward this living, breathing servant of God was mind blowing.

Lindsey comes to mind again today as we lift up the idea of Union as an advocate. You see, one of the ways that Lindsey chose to live his faith and put his lineage as a child of God and a godchild of Rev. King into practice is by serving as Commissioner of Children's Court for Milwaukee County for decades. For those of you unfamiliar with the role, the role of a court Commissioner is to do a lot of the early intake and pretrial work that a judge would do. For Lindsey, what this ended up meaning was that his courtroom was the clearinghouse for the majority of juvenile offenders in Milwaukee County.

One of the conversations that Lindsey and I would have regularly was about the staggering proportion of youth who came through his courtroom alone. Time and again he would say to me, "Bridget, if you or I were a teen in court, no matter what the charges, our parents would be there." And then we would go on to reflect on and process the experience of so many youth who don't have that support, who don't have a parent or guardian behind them, no matter the situation. In his time as Children's Court Commissioner, Lindsey saw it as his vocation to make sure the youth who made it into the system had an advocate, had someone who had their back and their best interest at heart.

The Scriptures

In the passage we read today from the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that, when he is gone, God will send the Holy Spirit as an advocate, and that the advocate will continue to teach us, remind us of Jesus' teachings, and bring us peace. So what is an advocate? At the beginning of worship, Jeff helped us lift up a number of ways that Union has served as an advocate over the years, but what does that word actually mean?

An advocate is someone who pleads your case, who supports and promotes your interests. In our current legal system, an advocate is someone whose sole role is to be looking out for your interests. So, when the Gospel of John repeatedly calls the Holy Spirit an advocate, the image of God it is giving us is that of the Divine pleading our case, supporting and promoting our interests, whose role is looking out for what is best for us.

You've heard me lament popular religiosity from this pulpit plenty over the years, lament how Hollywood and bad theology have conspired to niggle their way into so many people's spirituality to ill effect. Well, this is one of those rare instances that I'll say that I think popular religiosity has done us well. I think that many people have absorbed the image of God as advocate from popular culture, and I couldn't be more pleased.

Today, as we celebrate Pentecost, the 50th day after Easter on which the church lifts up the idea that God didn't abandon us when Jesus died and ascended, we celebrate God as advocate. We celebrate that, even though Jesus is no longer walking among us, the Divine is still with us, and still has our best interest at heart.

The passage that we read from the Acts of the Apostles today tells the story of the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples, but I don't think descend quite captures it. I think infest is a better word. Descend still feels "out there," whereas infest makes you think of something that you can't get rid of.

We're told that the Holy Spirit came to rest over the heads of the disciples like a flame. That flame imagery has become one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit. It's why I asked Betty Bienash to festoon the altar today with all of our mismatched candles.

Acts 2 also tells us that, once infested by the Holy Spirit, the apostles were able to speak to people of every race and language under heaven and be understood. When the Spirit of God weaves its way into our very being, as intimately as the air we breathe, understanding – both being understood and understanding – is one of the fruits.

Last week, when we celebrated Confirmation, you may have noticed that the prayer I offered over each Confirmand was different, but that there was some commonality. With each youth, we prayed that they would have the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit when they need them. We prayed for wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, reverence, and wonder and awe in God's presence.

Application

One of the understandings of the faith that I hope will be my legacy is the idea that, as we come to embrace and understand God's presence and action in our lives, we are then responsible to embody and pass on those gifts. We hear this in the Lord's Prayer – forgive us as we are forgiven inspires us to then be forgiving. Hopefully, as we receive healing, we become healers. As we are welcomed and understood, the commission is that we pass on welcoming and understanding. As we come to realize that God knows us at the core of who we are, our amazing potential and our deepest of flaws, and loves us wholly and completely, we are compelled to love deeply and without exception.

And so, this applies to our experience of God as advocate, too. As we come to experience and embrace the fact that God loves us and has our best interest at heart, so we are to model this advocacy in the world. Our Moderator, Tim Harder, talks a lot about being a "Matthew 25 Christian." In Matthew 25, we read of people asking Jesus, "When did we see you hungry or naked or in prison?" and Jesus responding, "Whatever you do to the least of mine, you do to me." How we engage with the least – those in need of food and shelter and also those in need of

systemic change – is how we treat God. Christian advocacy, then, looks like the building up of this world into the reign of God.

I know this can be a tricky line to draw right now. We don't want to be the kind of Christians who impose our faith on others, banning books and drag and healthcare, thereby pigeonholing others into living a certain way. No, advocacy is much more intimate. It doesn't say, "my way is best," but rather, "I am committed to helping you find ways to thrive." That's something that came across differently for me in reading Acts 2 this year and thinking about Union as an advocate: the disciples, when the Holy Spirit infests their speech, don't all speak the same language which is miraculously able to be understood by all. The Holy Spirit doesn't miraculously make everyone's experience the same. Rather, they speak differently to each hearer. Advocacy isn't making someone conform to our way of being. Rather, it is employing the gifts of the Spirit so that they can live their best lives.

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