

Tracy Daub
5/31/20--University Presbyterian Church
John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-21

THE PARAKEET AND THE PARACLETE

Today I'm leading worship outside because I want you to hear the birds. If I'm quiet, maybe you can hear them singing. If you can't hear them, I encourage you to go outside today and just listen for the birds. I'm thinking about birds today because today is Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit. And often the Holy Spirit is depicted as a dove. Maybe you remember the story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan and how we are told the Spirit of God descended upon him "like a dove." Sometimes we have a hard time imagining the Spirit of God, and so a bird offers us a lovely image of how the Spirit flies on the wind into our lives. Today, as we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, I'm thinking about birds.

The Bible gives us two stories about the gift of the Holy Spirit. I read both of them today. One is from the Book of Acts, and it is a story full of energy and action and excitement. We hear about the Spirit rushing upon the disciples in a mighty wind, and resting on them with tongues of fire, and giving them the ability to speak and hear in languages they had never studied. And hearing all this commotion, a big crowd gathers together. And Peter gives an impassioned sermon about Jesus. That's the Acts version of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

But the Gospel of John gives us a much gentler, quieter version of the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's the evening of Easter and the disciples are locked in a room because they are terrified for their lives. And Jesus suddenly appears to them and says, "Peace be with you." And then he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And this very tranquil gifting of the Holy Spirit fulfills the promise Jesus made to the disciples which we read about just two weeks ago. In that passage earlier in the Gospel of John when Jesus is talking to his followers before his

crucifixion, he tells them that after he is gone God will give them another *Advocate*, also translated as another *helper*, or another *companion*. Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit. The Greek word Jesus uses to speak about this Advocate, this companion, is *paraclete*. So in our reading from John today, Jesus delivers on his promise. In the gentlest way, he breathes upon his friends and offers them the Paraclete--the Holy Spirit.

Whether it's the raucous version of Pentecost from the Book of Acts or the tranquil version found in John's Gospel, the gift of the Holy Spirit does something very important for Jesus' followers. It sets them free. It sets *them* free and it sets *us* free.

I've shared this story before but I want to share it again because it seems so appropriate for us today. A couple of years ago, I read on my neighborhood's social media site how a little blue parakeet had been seen flying around the neighborhood. Of course, since parakeets are not native to Buffalo, this was a most unusual sighting. No one knew where it had come from. Some weeks after reading this story, my son Zachary came home one day and announced, "I just saw a parakeet up in a tree." He had been walking less than a block from the house when he looked up and saw a small blue parakeet perched in a tree. We went back to the spot where he had seen it but it was already gone. Probably a couple months passed when one day I looked out my kitchen window and saw a flash of blue high up in a tree in my neighbor's yard. It was far enough away and moved quickly in and out of the leafy branches so I couldn't get a really good look at it. It could have been a blue jay--but something about its size, the brightness of the blue, and the way it flew made me doubt that it was a blue jay. I was pretty sure it was the little escaped parakeet. If so, I was surely impressed that after several months on the loose it was still alive. Somehow it had managed to evade hawks and other predators. But the nights at that point

had begun to dip into the 40's and 30's. I realized with sadness that unless it could be caught, this little tropical bird would never survive our bitter winter. It would surely die.

But then I thought, "So what?" Not "so what" as in "I don't care," because I *did* care. But I thought "so what" in terms of "yes it will die but so will all the other little birds outside my window." So will all of us. There is not one of us getting out of this alive. In the meantime, this little bird was free and doing what birds do: searching for food, preening its feathers, flying from tree to tree. To be sure, it might know a longer life if it were safe in a cage. But it would not be free. I had been worried about the bird dying, when in fact, it was probably the luckiest parakeet in all of Buffalo. For whatever time it had, this bird was free to be a bird.

Because, it is not enough simply to be alive physically. We can sleep and eat and breathe. But that form of being alive is not all there is to living. That would be something like being a parakeet in a cage--alive but not really *living* the life of free bird.

The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, sets us free from our cages. That's what it did for the disciples. It set them free from their guilt and shame at having failed Jesus so badly. It set them free from the fear that kept them locked up in that room. It set them free to live life in the fullness of God's love. It set them free to be who God made them to be.

In this time of the pandemic, it can surely seem as if we have been caged in our houses. But the confinement we have been experiencing is not rooted only in fear of getting sick. Our confinement has been a gesture of love for our neighbor, an effort to keep other people safe from the virus. And while our physical confinement is certainly uppermost in our minds these days, it is not the only or even the most significant form of confinement we experience in life. Often we willingly walk right into cages of our own making. Anxious to protect ourselves from harm and need, we turn to money and possessions and education so that we will be secure and insulated

from difficulties. And in all this anxious scurrying to be something, achieve something, have something, we have walked right into a cage that imprisons us. We are not free at all but rather we are hostages to fear and anxiety.

Anger can become our cage as we hold on to past injuries that have wounded us. And guilt and shame over our mistakes and past actions can become a cage. The drive to succeed in life and get ahead in our careers can become a cage. Heartbreak and sorrow can become a cage as can our self-doubt or self-loathing.

And there are other cages that entrap us culturally. Think about the cage called racism. The chains that imprisoned black men, women, and children left wounds so deep that even when those enslaved peoples were released from bondage, all of America, *all of America* remained deeply imprisoned by that legacy of racism. And we see the way our culture remains captive to that that horrible legacy in the violence and intimidation directed toward black men especially but also in the systemic forms of racism that affect black men, women, and children socially, politically, and economically. Racism keeps us all captive.

As I stood at my kitchen window thinking about that parakeet on the loose, I thought about us, and all the cages we live in rather than knowing the true freedom that God desires for all people.

The Spirit of God leads us out of our cages and into the abundant life God offers us: to love one another, even our enemies, to forgive those who have wronged us, to be generous even in times of uncertainty, to work for justice for all God's people, and to consider new ideas. To be sure, following the Spirit of God is not risk-free or safe. Leaving our cages never is. But following the Spirit of God will surely lead us to God's abundant life.

There is a song I really like about the Holy Spirit. It's called "She Flies On" and it is one of our musical pieces for today. I've included the lyrics as part of the order of worship. The "she" that the song sings about is the Holy Spirit. The song imagines the Holy Spirit as a bird that flies on into our lives. The refrain goes: "She comes sailing on the wind, her wings flashing in the sun, on a journey just begun, she flies on. And in the passage of her flight, her song rings out through the night, full of laughter full of light, she flies on." Each verse of the song alludes to the Spirit's activity in a sacred biblical story: the creation of the world, the work of the prophets, the Spirit's encounter with Mary, the occasion of Jesus' baptism, and the story of Pentecost. But the refrain keeps reminding us that the Spirit's activity is not yet done. For this beautiful bird flies on into your life. Your life is part of the Spirit's sacred activity. The next verse waiting to be sung is about the wondrous ways she flies on into your life, loving you, guiding you, sustaining you, and setting you free to do great acts of love. There is just no way of telling how the Spirit of God can touch your life, and upend your life, and lead you someplace new. For the Spirit is as wild and free and fantastic as a parakeet flying through the trees in Buffalo, New York.