

## The Comforter

Message #2 in the series “Fresh Wind”

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Hello and welcome again to St. Paul’s Church, we are elated that you’ve joined us for worship this morning. My name is Matt Skillen, I am one of the pastors here, and it is my joy and honor to share God’s word with you today.

We are in the second week of a message series we are calling “Fresh Wind.” And in this series of sermon conversations, we are examining the character of the Holy Spirit—the very presence of God that moves through us and around us—God’s Spirit that moves us ever closer to him. In the weeks ahead we will explore how the Holy Spirit equips us, how the Holy Spirit is our revealer, and our Power. Last week we discussed how the Holy Spirit is our connector to God and how, as an advocate, he works between God and us to further his Kingdom movement here on Earth. This week we are going to examine the Holy Spirit as The Comforter—the voice of inspiration and perseverance in our lives; a voice that reassures and bolsters.

As we prepare for this moment in God’s word, I invite you to think about where you most need comfort this morning. Where are the soft parts in your heart that feel raw and exposed? Sometimes we are at fault and something we’ve done has damaged or hurt someone else. In other instances, we’ve had a run a of misfortune and we have the road rash and bruises to show for it. Whatever it may be for you this morning, I am not going to ask you to divulge what those instances may be, but I would like you to take a moment with me in Holy silence, to simply pray with me that God would begin to reveal his healing grace to you.

God, we lay at your feet these episodes, situations and conditions that really hurt right now. Whether it be a specific situation at school or work, a broken relationship that is weighing heavy on our hearts right now, or circumstance so difficult to think about that we can’t even bring ourselves to voice it. Lord, it may be a diagnosis or a sense of utter distrust or confusion, Lord you know the parameters of our hearts. You know where it hurts most. Fill us, Lord. May our hearts and eyes and ears be receptive to your word today. Amen.

Last week, we read in John’s Gospel where Jesus introduces his disciples to the Holy Spirit. And, as a very brief reminder to those who were with us last week, that passage came from John 14: 15-20, and it says,

**“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. [John 14:15-20 NIV].**

As you might remember, these words of comfort came at a time when the disciples were confused. They had heard in the upper room that Jesus was preparing to leave them—to go to a place that they could not follow. And, as one might expect, they had a lot of questions for Jesus. As their petitions

and questions landed, Jesus very calmly explained that while he was going to leave, the Holy Spirit, indeed the Spirit of Truth, would be sent as an advocate. And there was a closeness that Jesus reveals between God, Jesus and all of us. We are connected. As I re-read this passage again this week, I am drawn to another aspect of this scripture that I think further intensifies the relationship we have in Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and it is found right here in John 14: 18.

**I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. [John 14:18 NIV]**

Indeed. Not only would God send the guidance, instruction, and leadership of the Spirit to dwell with the disciples, but Jesus himself is saying that he, through the Holy Spirit, will come to the disciples. They will never be alone. While this may seem paradoxical, like Jesus is weaving some circular argument that somehow begins to collapse on itself, let's not forget that Jesus is God, and he knows the path ahead. He knows the pain and anguish to come. He knows that he is about to be betrayed, arrested, imprisoned, beaten, questioned, and crucified. He knows his disciples will live to see it happen. These kind words of peace are not platitudes or poetry, they are assurance. Assurance that will certainly wear thin in the days to come in the lives of the disciples. And one has to wonder, since we have the benefit of knowing the account that is about to unfold, how did the disciples hold on for the few days that would follow.

Even for the most devout of disciples, this proved to be a terribly difficult task.

In fact, one of Jesus's most dedicated followers, Peter, would very soon find himself in an absolutely desolate position. In the upper room Peter said aloud in front of Jesus and all the other disciples that he would willingly following Jesus all the way to prison if necessary. And, if the situation calls for it, he will even lay down his life for Jesus. It's a bold claim to love someone so much that you would follow them to prison let alone die for them. The list of people that you may be willing to do that for is likely very short—if such a list exists at all. After this bold declaration Jesus says something that no one is expecting. He says to Peter in John 13:38, **“Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!”**

If you are familiar with what happens in Peter's story, you know that Jesus is ultimately arrested, and Peter does in fact deny that he knows Jesus three times before morning arrives. It was just like Jesus had said. Three times Peter is asked if he knows Jesus and all three times, he denies that he ever knew him. Peter, Jesus's staunchest ally, one of his closest friends, flees from him. Imagine, if you can, for a moment how that must have felt. Just hours earlier Peter was using some pretty tough words to describe his absolute love and devotion for Jesus. Then, when asked, Peter turned himself in to join Jesus in prison, right? No. Oh, that's right. After Jesus was arrested and put hastily on trial, Peter assembled an all-star legal team of religious scholars and priests and sent them to the San Hedren to tear apart the case against Jesus that was built by the Pharisees and the religious elite, rendering this bogus arrest and the trumped-up charges to nothing but pile of ash... No, that isn't what happened either. No, when the time came, as Jesus predicted, Peter denied he even knew Jesus.

And each one of us has been right where Peter has been too. In light of everything we say and do in a safe church setting, we are often hesitant to act in faith. We worry and we wring our hands when if we were to zoom out for just a moment and put our faith in place of our fear, we'd likely find the peace we are seeking. It is entirely impossible for most of us to imagine the anguish that Peter and the disciples were experiencing during Jesus's detention, sentencing, and death. It's as if they never even expected to see him again. The weight of Peter's guilt had to be really heavy as one day, turned to

two, and then three. These long days and nights he lived with the fact that he did, indeed, disown Jesus three times in a single night.

I was twenty-two when I took a job as a retail sales associate at a major mobile phone carrier. Trust me, you'd recognize the company name if I could share it in this story. Working at a mobile phone store is a formative experience because you are the front facing point of contact for nearly every customer of the company. You work with a lot of people, and when it comes to their mobile phones, people are very passionate. I met a lot of passionate people. In the slower parts of a normal shift, you do a lot of cleaning and stocking. You move a lot of inventory around and file a bunch of paperwork, so many forms... And, in the process, you talk a lot to your fellow employees.

At one of the stores that I worked at while working for this major mobile phone company, I worked with a guy named Josh. Now, Josh was an interesting person. He'd bring really big books written by philosophers and classic thinkers and he didn't ever really say much to me, until this one day. He put down his copy of *The Collected Works of Fredrich Nietzsche* and asked, "You're a Christian, right?"

I thought, well, that's an easy one, "Yeah." I said, "Why?" Now, I had been preparing for this day for over seven or eight years. Someone was asking me about my faith. This is just how the volunteers at youth camp told me it would happen... In my mind I was seeing Josh sit up front with me at church and going forward to be baptized. I was ready to answer all of his questions about faith and Jesus, but that isn't what happened. Josh wasn't interested in my faith story at all.

Instead, what followed was a very tense conversation, but it really wasn't a conversation. It was something of an inquisition. Pulling from the most difficult excerpts from Nietzsche's work "Beyond Good and Evil" Josh punched again and again at the tenants of faith, tying me up into a pretzel. I left that conversation feeling awful, like I'd let someone down. I didn't deny my faith in God, but I didn't exactly win anyone over either. In just the span of a couple of hours, I went from complete confidence to relative incompetence.

In moments like these, just like the episodes and circumstances that we attempted to reveal in our opening prayer we believe, rightly, that we've done something wrong, or something wrong has been done to us. And because we can't bring ourselves to address the real truth of the matter, either by choice or by the fact that we have been rendered powerless to do so, we recoil. We isolate. We fortify ourselves in our guilt or grief or shame and we do everything we can to keep everyone we know locked out. Maybe no one will find out if we stay right where we are. And so, we are remaining stuck.

Earlier in Johns Gospel, in chapter 8, Jesus goes to the temple courtyard and people began to gather around him, so he sits down and begins to

teach them. The crowd must have caught the attention of the Pharisees, the elite religious scholars, because they hatched a plan to try and rhetorically trap Jesus. Their plan was to give Jesus a really thorny issue to figure out. They'd present a question or inquiry that would put one religious' law against another religious law, so the set up looked something like this.



As Jesus is teaching, the Pharisees bring a woman before Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery. Now, I want you to notice this specific detail that is often overlooked in this story. If you were to read this account for yourself, you'll notice the Pharisees only bring the woman to this very public gathering—only the woman. Even though adultery takes two people, they only bring one of the two people involved, the woman, to Jesus. The trap the Pharisees set in this very public venue is simple “Teacher!” They say, “This woman was caught in the act of adultery and by the law of Moses we are commanded to stone her.” However, to stone her would likely kill her and murder is also against the law of Moses. And to put a little spice to the shade they are throwing at Jesus, they add. “What do you say?”

What happens next is pretty remarkable. The account in John's gospel says that in response to their inquiry Jesus bends down and starts writing on the ground with his finger. We don't know what he writes. Maybe he wrote the name of the man who was also committing adultery with this woman. Maybe he started listing the sins and transgressions of those who brought the woman before Jesus. As they kept questioning him, Jesus kept bending down to the ground and writing.

And the rest of this account, as recorded in John 8:9-11 says,

**At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”  
“No one, sir,” she said.  
“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”  
[John 8:9-11 NIV].**

This passage is telling. After everyone left, Jesus stood, and directed his attention to the woman. He faced her and affirmed her, letting her know that no one was left to condemn her. In doing so, he called her to go and leave her life of sin behind her.

Our redeeming God is a comforter. But the comfort God and the Holy Spirit bring isn't the type of comfort that you might expect. When we are looking for comfort in our human experience, we are looking for relief. We want the thing that is weighing us down to be removed, we want the pain to go away, we want the anxiety to stop. But the Holy Spirit has a different path to comforting us. As our comforter, the one who will never leave us as orphans, first **finds us**. Right where we are. We don't have to travel miles to find Jesus. We don't have to commit several days or weeks to travel to a holy site. We don't have to pay large portions of money to gain access to the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit is our comforter, he finds us.

Second, the comforting Holy Spirit **affirms us**. And I want to be clear about the context of this affirmation. I am not saying the Holy Spirit affirms who we are in our sin and brokenness. Rather, the Spirit affirms who we are in Christ. Who are we in Christ? We are redeemed, forgiven children of God. Amen? That is far more lasting and powerful than any earthly identity that we could ever claim. And that is a powerfully freeing thing to hear because God doesn't call or affirm you by the sins you've committed. He doesn't call us adulterer or slanderer; he calls you by what? He calls you by name.

The comforting Spirit also **calls us** to action. Just in the account above of the woman at the Temple, Jesus looked to her, affirmed she was no longer held to her sin because she had been forgiven, and he called her to live, leaving her sin behind.

The comforting spirit:

Finds us, affirms us and calls us.

After Jesus's resurrection he appeared to his disciples while they were fishing, Jesus called them ashore and made them breakfast. As the others left, Jesus calls to Peter, also known formally as Simon, and says,



**“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”**

**“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”**

**Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”**

**Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”**

**He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”**

**Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”**

**The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”**

**Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”**

**Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” [John 21:15-17 NIV].**

Shortly after Simon Peter had first proclaimed that he would follow Jesus to the grave, if necessary, to disown him publicly three times only then shortly after Jesus's arrest, Jesus finds Peter. He asks Peter three times to affirm his love for him. In doing so, Jesus is re-establishing the life and boldness that once characterized Peter. You can almost hear the confidence returning to his voice each time he is asked to affirm his love of Jesus. He is being restored. But don't lose track of the very important call that follows each affirmation. Jesus is passing on to Peter the most important calling of all—that of the shepherd—the one who will feed the lambs, the most vulnerable of the flock, the one who will care for the sheep, protecting the flock from invaders, and the one who will feed the sheep, nourishing and bringing up the flock in full strength.

**He finds us.**

**He affirms us.**

**He calls us.**

Following my no good very bad day at the phone store where I was eviscerated by Josh, my favorite armchair philosopher, I felt a deep sense of depression. I don't know why, but my spirit was absolutely crushed. I needed to run by the grocery store on the way home to pick up a couple of items for dinner when I ran into a pastor that I knew. He saw me in my bright retail uniform and engaged me in small talk about work. He even asked for my card because he was thinking about an upgrade. But he could tell something was off.

“How are you really?” He asked.

I admitted I wasn't doing very well at all, and I told him what happened earlier that day. I had run up against Nietzsche and lost. I didn't know if I ever wanted to go back to that store ever again, and I told him that I should probably just quit.

“Don't quit,” He said.

We prayed. He reminded me that no matter what happens, I could never let God down. Which seems kind of silly, but that is exactly what I needed to hear. The next day I walked in to the store to work my shift. Josh was there with a different book, and I don't ever remember another conversation on the matter.

What my pastor friend relayed to me, in his own way, is similar to what Jesus did for both the woman and Peter. The comfort in each of these stories didn't come from erasing the past or magically fixing the present. The comfort comes from a reorientation that comes from knowing Who you are. You are a redeemed child of God. In that reorientation, we should begin to see the challenges, the obstacles, the pressure, and the bruises and scars this life doles out in a very different light.

When we hear the Spirit coming to us, reminding us in his own way that we are God's precious child, we are reminded that no matter what we might be facing, no matter what we have done, no matter what we might feel or hear or experience. No matter how many times we get knocked down... So long as we draw air and blood pumps through our heart, we have a purpose and mission. Love God. Love others. Tell our neighbors about the love of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit. Our comforter.

Finds us wherever we are.

Affirms our identity in Christ.

Calls us to further the Kingdom of God.

In his own words, Jesus said, I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you.