

In its military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has left behind a cohort of thousands of foreign allies. They are the bilingual interpreters, soldiers, cultural advisors, and other specialists who help our troops navigate the local landscape. Once they are no longer needed in combat, these personnel are often displaced citizens of their own countries. These individuals who have risked their lives for the American cause, become targets themselves when our troops pull out. Commanding officers are usually frustrated when they attempt to get these allies into the United States. One officer owed his life to an interpreter assigned to his platoon. After his discharge, the officer began a non-profit agency in 2013. Its mission is to help America's wartime allies who obtain Special Immigrant Visas to resettle safely in the United States. It bridges the gap between State Department and other private refugee relief programs, providing stateside assistance with housing, employment, and cultural adaptation. It serves as an advocate, guide, comforter, helper, and counselor, supporting the successful transition of outsiders to productive, self-sufficient members of our society. The name of this agency is No One Left Behind. Jesus' Farewell Speech in the Gospel of John runs 99 verses, coming again and again to themes of love and obedience. The overall thrust of the Farewell Speech is Jesus' impending return to his heavenly Father and what this means for those he leaves behind. In today's portion of the speech,

loss and abandonment are the issues of concern among his loyal followers. The disciples have been hitched to Jesus for three years. The gravy train, such as it is, may be coming to an end. Jesus is openly talking about leaving their company in terms that the disciples can't quite grasp. He's even talking of his own death. Every parent knows the dilemma Jesus faces: holding on while letting go. Our children grow up in a world ever more hostile, adversarial, and volatile. The systems in which some families find themselves (e.g., health systems, schools, human services) can be overwhelming and confusing. Some parents need a reliable guide along-side. An example is hiring a mediator or an advocate to navigate bewildering bureaucracies: An advocate with deep knowledge of specialized resources and connections. It is often hard for family members to think clearly in the heat of negotiations for their child's welfare. Suppose a school-age son or daughter is autistic. I have no doubt that families who must keep trying to work the systems to the benefit of a child often feel the urge to give up in frustration. Finding the right doctor, the right teacher, or the right therapist takes time and investigation. So too does finding a reliable advocate. Just imagine if Philip or Thomas or another disciple had to recruit an advocate to help them navigate discipleship after Jesus leaves them. How would they proceed? For starters, there's the Roman situation; oh, and the Pharisee situation; and also the lives they've all left to become disciples.

Some no doubt are contacting their old buddies about openings at the fisheries back in Galilee. But first a few questions, to prospective Advocates: How long have you been doing this kind of work? Do you understand us and our needs? Will you seek win-win solutions? And could we have a couple of references? Despair over finding a Jesus-substitute is setting in. Near the close of today's portion of the Farewell, Jesus takes stock of the anxiety of his apostles: Realizing their apprehension, Jesus is telling them that they will never be far from God the Father. No One Left Behind. But Peter, Philip, Thomas, and the others can't get past the idea of losing Jesus. Something is taking over their rational faculties. Today we would call it anticipatory grief – before actual loss, an emotional separation. So Jesus tells them pointedly that he will not leave them orphaned. It's a strong image: Orphaned. Disciples of rabbis were said to be orphaned at their teacher's death. As a figure of speech "orphaned" is apt. This is not unlike the feeling that both your parents have rejected and abandoned you. Your parents! I confess to feeling some of that when my parents both died within six months of each other. Faced with the absence of parents, you may not have even close blood relatives to support and encourage you. The fear of abandonment—physically, socially, emotionally, or spiritually—may be one of our most basic anxieties. At the core of our being, all of us carry the worry that we will be abandoned in our greatest need.

We may carry the fear that even God might abandon us when we most need to feel God's presence. Feeling abandoned is one of the first components of the grieving process. Conventional wisdom is that, after a while, a healthy person gradually lets go of grief and redirects that energy to productive concerns. But that's not how it works for most people. The reaction to being abandoned is too strong. No, redirecting grief into other pursuits isn't how all individuals handle loss, nor is letting go of the memory of a loved one always the best remedy for moving through grief. Grieving folks sometimes think they're crazy to maintain active conversations with a deceased loved one, as if they were still present. Within the past 10 or 15 years, a theory of the grieving process has gained acceptance that allows for something like an Advocate. Some bereaved people, you may be among them, find comfort in imagining a loved one's presence in daily living, with fruitful results for the work of grief. Memory of the departed one isn't a snapshot, frozen, but a dynamic image that responds to lived reality. When a bereaved person imagines a connection, the one who has died becomes a companion – a presence, not just a memory. The departed one continues to grow and evolve, as the bereaved person adapts to living with loss. It is an unlikely lot with whom Jesus leaves the mission of building the Kingdom. As human resources, the disciples probably weren't the obvious choices to carry on the gospel. But then, imperfect people are God's usual way – not just a backup way – of carrying out divine will.

Jesus promises that even after his departure he will still be with them, in spiritual form. His promise is to send "another advocate," meaning other than Jesus himself, who will be with his followers, forever. "I am coming to you," Jesus assures them, and his coming is in the person of an Advocate, called in Greek the Paraclete. "This is the Spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive." Jesus displays wisdom in granting the Paraclete. He knows that his followers will need a Guide, Comforter, Helper, Advisor, and Counselor. Whatever the name, the important thing is Presence – the continuing presence of Jesus to his friends after his ascension to the Father. No One Left Behind. The Gospel of John understands the experience of the Paraclete to be communal. The promise is not so much that the Paraclete dwells in each believer's heart, in the manner of a private experience, but that the Paraclete dwells within the community in order to empower its ongoing mission. Through the Paraclete Christ will still encourage them, plead for them, pray with them, and teach them. ■ This is still the way we know and experience God's presence, through Christ's Advocate. The mission of the church of Jesus Christ in part is to help believers experience the Advocate, which we usually identify as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us out in times of need, sustains us when things are going well, and guides us when we're in a mess. The Spirit furthers God's kingdom in the world, balancing the rights of individuals and society,

providing care for the poor, the elderly, the unloved; crafting peace-accords among nations, increasing knowledge of the cosmos and the workings of our little place in it. By the Spirit, God keeps covenant with us. God remains faithful to us – not because we have earned God's love, but because God loves us in spite of it all. The credit belongs to God alone, present with the world in and through the Spirit. In services of ordination, we perform the laying on of hands as a means of conveying the Spirit. The church preserves this tradition as a mark that sets the church apart. To seek the presence of the Spirit is why we gather in community the first day of every week, just as those earliest believers did. Apart from the church, receiving the Spirit is often subordinated to the spirit of Reason, or the spirit of Freedom, or the spirit of Learning, or similar human phenomena. And yet, how hungry the world is for a morsel of Holy Spirit, divine truth. Even on the first Sunday after a disaster, people make their way to churches. Tired, dirty, hungry, ill-clothed, feeling all but abandoned by God, survivors return to the shell of their church. They raise their voices in familiar songs, without hymnals or accompaniment. They pass the peace of Christ. They engage the familiar liturgy and receive a pastor's assurance of God's continuing love and abiding strength. They may gather around a makeshift table to take the bread and wine.

Devastated people can leave worship
aware of the presence of the Spirit among them,
strengthened to serve one another and endure.

Congress created the Special Immigrant Visa status
for well-recommended wartime allies.

When these allies and their families
resettle in the US, they arrive with nothing more
than the clothes on their back
and whatever they can fit into carry-ons.

Since 2013, No One Left Behind
has been their Advocate.

It has helped resettle over 60 families
throughout the United States.

It has provided some families with a suite of
services

(housing, furnishings, jobs, and used cars)
and helps all of them to the best of its ability
as funding and resources allow.

CONCLUSION

Psychologist Abraham Maslow once observed
that most of the energy of study in his field
was directed toward what makes us

psychologically unhealthy –
that is, mental and emotional illness.

He decided to ask the question the other way –
“What is it that makes us psychologically healthy?”

He discovered that mentally healthy people
who display creativity, inner strength,
and resilience have one characteristic in common:
mystical experiences.

He described a mystical experience
as “aliveness” to the sacred,
a time of peak awareness,
glimpsed in and through the particular instance
of a fleeting moment.

Such a peak experience can strike us
anywhere, any time.

It’s like a fish suddenly seeing and knowing water.

As our knowledge of the physical world has grown,
and with knowledge,
an awareness of how much we still don’t know,
hunger for the mystical has gone unsatisfied.

“We search for God

and perhaps grope for and find God,

though indeed God is not far from each of us.”

That’s what Paul said at Athens; it still holds true:

“What is your only comfort, in life and in death?”

is the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism,
a Protestant creed written way back in 1562.

The answer is as true today as it was 500 years ago:

“That I belong — body and soul,

in life and in death —

not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

In a world where it is easy to get lost,

the good news is that God does not abandon us.

No One Left Behind.

When feelings of grief and abandonment by God

naturally rise, to hear that we are not orphaned

can be our greatest comfort.

Praise and thanks be to God!

Amen.