

Complete Joy
John 16:12-24
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First Central Congregational UCC
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One of the sacred callings of the church is to be with someone while they die. Often this opportunity falls to the pastor. I have sat at a number of deathbeds now, either as family member or as minister, and to me they are generally profoundly sacred and beautiful moments filled with tenderness and care. In short this is one of the ways we love each other, and it is a blessing to be present.

This week Mildred Smock died. She was 94 years old and a beloved and still vitally active member of this congregation. Even up to a few months ago, Mildred still drove over here two to three times a week to work in the Thrift Shop or to sort through the books. There is a room down in the basement where the books are kept and sorted that I've taken to calling "Mildred's Room." One time I was giving a clergy friend a tour of the building, and we were surprised to come upon Mildred down in her room working away. I doubt anyone knew she was there. I told her she really needed to let us know when she was there. I don't think she ever took that advice.

Which reveals something about Mildred. She was a strong and determined woman. Occasionally stubborn. Last Sunday I visited her in the hospital, and I never would have guessed that she was going to die this week. She was noticeably angry, though calm in her anger, that a physician had said she needed to go into hospice care. I'm convinced that part of her anger was because this week is the Super Sale, and I know if she wasn't in the hospital she would have been here.

Mildred never married, never had children. Her nieces and nephews are her beloved family. None of them live locally, the closest being three hours away in Kansas City. So, Mildred was one of those people for whom the church was very much a second and necessary family. Sometimes we were the ones to alert her nephews and nieces to new developments in her health. We often had to intervene on her behalf. Once, when she didn't arrive at the Thrift Shop at her usual time, and we couldn't reach her on the telephone, we called and sent the emergency workers to her house, where they discovered that she had fallen. Gary and Kathy McConnell bought her a life alert.

And so there was a time on Wednesday afternoon when the physicians had said that death was imminent and Mildred's niece Barbara was still en route by plane, that I had the privilege to sit with Mildred and hold her hand. It's incredible to me how even in a weakened state the human body struggles to stay alive.

I told Mildred how much I admired her. I thanked her for her work here at the church which has been so important. I thanked her for her friendship and support of me personally.

I told her how many people had asked about her and were praying for her. I told her that she was an example for others.

I told her that the new carpet had been laid in the sanctuary and that if she'd just open her eyes, I'd show her a picture. It is significant to me that Mildred will be the first funeral in our newly redecorated space, as she was one of the major donors to this project, something I'm sure she wanted to be kept secret while she was alive. I'm so glad that she saw it on Easter Sunday when it was almost done. Last week she told me how good it looked. I wish she had seen it today with the new carpet. I know that blue was her favourite colour.

On Wednesday, while holding her hand, I told her that that morning the Jackson Street bookseller had come to make his pre-book sale purchases, something he does every sale, usually interacting with Mildred. I said it didn't look to me as if he took a very large stack this time. Then she made a sound and raised her eyebrows and both her health care worker Robin and I were convinced that she had laughed.

This strong, determined, gracious woman, Mildred Smock, child of God, will be missed.

And on Thursday, when I wrote that, I didn't know that on Friday afternoon I would sit with the Felger family while Fred died. . . . [*Extemp details of his death*].

I tell these stories because they connect powerfully with today's Gospel reading. In this section of the Farewell Discourse, Jesus talks about his coming death. He compares his death to a woman in labor, for whom the pain will turn into complete joy. Jesus makes this comparison because he believes that his death and glorification will bring salvation and hope to those who believe. He says, "So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

For when Jesus dies, God will send another Advocate, the Holy Spirit to be with us, to comfort us, and to teach us. This is the larger message of the Farewell Discourse and the lasting meaning of Christ's death and resurrection.

The Greek word used here for the Holy Spirit is *Paraclete* and it can be translated Advocate, Helper, Comforter, or Intercessor. It is word of rich meanings.

In this passage the focus is upon two things. First is how the Spirit will be a teacher, guiding us into all truth. Second is how the Spirit will be present in our pain and suffering because the Spirit itself is well acquainted with pain and suffering.

This may come as something of a surprise, for during much of Christian history most philosophers and theologians would have denounced the idea that God could experience pain and suffering except during the incarnation of the Christ in Jesus of Nazareth. This is because traditional notions of **being** entailed that if God was perfection then perfection cannot experience any loss. It is only in recent centuries that we have recovered what I believe is a more authentically Hebrew vision of God, as one who experiences pain and suffering along with us.

Theologian Andrew Sung Park, in his book *Triune Atonement*, has richly developed this aspect of God as it connects with the Paraclete and Jesus' teaching here in the Farewell Discourse. He writes that the Paraclete is the name given to the Holy Spirit who has experienced the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Paraclete, therefore, is intimately aware of the depth of human pain. According to Park:

This Paraclete is the wounded and resurrected Holy Spirit that knows the depth of

human suffering and grief and the exhilarating joy of resurrection.

Let me simply read you three excerpts from Park's discussion of the Paraclete. I find all of these to be profoundly beautiful:

[The Comforter is] one who [makes] dispirited people brave or strong.

The Paraclete plays the role of a defense lawyer, intercessor, comforter, encourager, and teacher, guiding and helping disciples in time of trials and troubles.

The work of the Paraclete as wounded healer is to comfort the comfortless, advocate for the rights of victims, to uplift the discouraged, to help the helpless, and to teach people about Jesus' instruction.

And all this is made possible because the Paraclete has herself experienced pain and suffering in the crucifixion.

Humans want an answer to the problem of evil. Why if God is good and powerful do pain and evil exist? The answers that people want to that problem don't exist. I don't know why they don't exist, other than this simply seems to be the way that the universe functions.

But there is response that I think is more satisfying than any logical or philosophical argument. It is the experiential response of God-with-us. God's answer to evil and suffering is to be with us, to suffer with us, to comfort us, because God has her very self experienced this pain. Like a mother in labor. And just like any parent will do anything they can to take their child's pain upon themselves and spare the child, God has done the same and continues to do the same.

And this is how the resurrection has lasting meaning for us. As Andrew Sung Park writes, the Paraclete is "the extension of Jesus' resurrection." And the resurrection is extended to us when "The Paraclete walks with victims and uplifts them every day" bringing healing and hope.

The power of God is really present, then, when we are with each other, comforting, supporting, and advocating for one another. God was there on Wednesday with Mildred as she died and as her church held her hand and said good words of blessing to her. God was there on Friday with Fred as he died and his church read the Psalms and prayed. And God will be there when we are most in need and our church surrounds us with love and gratitude.

I wish I could take away pain and suffering. I wish that death was not malicious. But those wishes will never be.

What is true is that death is not the final word. It is not victorious. The powers of love and joy conquer death. They did so on Wednesday as Mildred was surrounded by love in her final moments. They did so again on Friday as Fred's family made the most difficult and most caring decision they have ever made. And they will continue to do so as we remember Mildred and Fred with affection and thanksgiving and celebrate with great joy the blessings that they

were to us, to our church, to all who knew them.

This is the promise of Jesus, made real in the presence of the Holy Spirit among us,

So you have pain now;
but I will see you again,
and your hearts will rejoice,
and no one will take your joy from you.