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John 14:25-31

THE PARAKEET AND THE PARACLETE

A word of explanation is needed about today's sermon title. No doubt most of you know what a *parakeet* is: a small vibrantly colored bird from the tropics, which is sometimes kept as a household pet in a cage. Most of you, however, have probably never heard of the *paraclete*. The *paraclete* is the Greek word meaning Advocate or Helper or Comforter. It is the word Jesus uses here in our reading from the Gospel of John today when he speaks about sending his disciples an advocate to help them after his death. The advocate he refers to is the Holy Spirit. So when we in Christianity refer to the Paraclete, we are speaking about the Holy Spirit.

I thought it would have been fun if I could have somehow figured out a way to talk about athletic shoes in my sermon today because then I could have entitled the sermon: "The Parakeet, the Paraclete, and a Pair of Cleats." But I had no legitimate reason to include a story about cleats, so that sermon title will have to wait for another day. Today's sermon, however, *will* be about the parakeet and the Paraclete.

Some time back, I joined a social media site for residents of my neighborhood, called *Nextdoor Parkside*. Through this site, residents can post notices about all kinds of matters of interest pertaining to the neighborhood--notification about crimes or break-ins, or questions about where to find a good plumber, or information about neighborhood events. One day this summer, I saw a notice someone had posted about seeing a small blue parakeet loose in the neighborhood. Of course, a parakeet flying around Buffalo is an unusual sighting. No one knew where it came from. Maybe it had escaped from a house in the neighborhood or perhaps had it come from the bird enclosure at the zoo, which was not far away. No one knew. I didn't pay this

notice much attention until maybe a week or two later, when my son came home and announced, "I just saw a parakeet up in a tree." He had been walking less than a block from our house when he looked up and saw a small bright blue parakeet perched in a low branch of a tree. I knew immediately this was the same bird I had read about. "Let's go see if we can catch it," I told my son. But first I finished making dinner, and by the time Zach and I left the house, easily an hour had passed. So, I knew our prospects of finding the parakeet were rather dim. I grabbed a shoe box and looked about for some kind of food to lure it down with. I was pretty sure I needed seeds, but lacking any seeds, I grabbed a piece of bread and we headed out the door. But when we got to the spot where Zach had seen the bird, it was nowhere in sight. As we walked home I shared my concern about the poor little bird's fate. If this domesticated little bird managed to find food to eat, and if it somehow managed to evade the hawks and falcons that did indeed inhabit the neighborhood, how could this tropical bird possibly survive our bitterly cold winter? It would surely die.

I didn't think any more about that little parakeet for the next two months as summer ended and fall progressed. Then one day not too long ago, I happened to be standing in my kitchen when I looked out my 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 in and out of the branches made me doubt that it was a blue jay. Could it be our little escaped parakeet? If so, I was surely impressed that after several months on the loose it was still alive. The nights at that point had begun to dip into the 40's and even high 30's.

Standing there at the window I reflected some more with regret that unless it could be caught the little bird was sure to die. And then a thought hit me. "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. All this time 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 really living, is it? That would be something like being a parakeet in a cage--alive but not really living.

Standing there thinking about that parakeet on the loose, I thought about us, and all the ways we choose to live in cages rather than know the true freedom that makes us genuinely alive.

The true freedom that makes us genuinely alive comes to us as a gift from Christ. Jesus offered this gift of freedom to his disciples the night before his arrest. Before he left them, he gathered his disciples around him and he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." He told them about a special Advocate, a special Friend, Helper, Comforter that God would send to be with them in his absence. The Paraclete. It was the Holy Spirit. And this Advocate, this Paraclete, would remind them of everything Jesus had said to them. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," he told his friends, "and do not let them be afraid."

Jesus told his friends these things because he knew what was about to happen to him. He knew he was about to be arrested. He knew that his disciples would abandon him, that one of

them would betray him, and another of them would deny knowing him. And he knew that later, after his arrest and death, his followers would be overcome with two emotions: anxiety and guilt. These emotions would imprison them. And Jesus wanted to set them free from anxiety and guilt.

And so sure enough, after Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples lock themselves in an upstairs room because they are filled with anxiety about their own safety and overcome with guilt about their desertion and betrayal of Jesus. And into that room Jesus appears and he makes good on his promise. He says to his friends, "Peace be with you." Instead of greeting them with accusations and judgment for their failures and betrayal, Jesus' peace is a gift of love and forgiveness. And then he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And those disciples are set free. The gift of Christ's love and grace free them to unlock the doors of the room and come out from hiding and live boldly and openly the good news of Christ's love, no matter what the reactions of the world might be. Instead of being defined or marked by their failures, the disciples accept that they are defined by God's love and grace in their lives. And this knowledge set them free to move into the future. And through these gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, they became genuinely be alive.

Standing at my window, watching those little flashes of blue, I thought about how Christ has set us free as well. He has freed us from anxiety, and he has freed us from guilt, and he has freed us from all the cages which imprison us. Christ has set us free. And yet, we sometimes forget. We forget we are free and we instead stay inside our cages.

Anxiety still holds us in captivity. We are anxious about succeeding and proving ourselves and achieving things in life. High school students are under stress to enter college. College students are under stress to get into graduate school. Graduate students are under stress to find a good job. Those in the workforce are under stress to succeed and get ahead. All the

while, life makes so many demands upon us. And so we are always trying to juggle so many demands while trying to prove ourselves and gain the approval and acceptance of others. In a world of violence and intolerance, we are anxious about our safety. We worry about not only our own futures but the future of our children and the future of the planet. We are anxious to protect ourselves, to surround ourselves with enough money and enough possessions and enough education so that we will be secure and insulated from harm. 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.

Or we are imprisoned in cages of guilt and shame. We are burdened by our failures and mistakes and the ways we have fallen short. We may not feel as if we deserve to be accepted or loved or forgiven. And so we are stuck in a place where the past imprisons us.

There are other cages as well. Anger can become a cage. Anger is not necessarily a bad emotion. It can signal to us that there is a problem in a relationship, or point to an injustice or a wrong. But if we cannot move past the anger, if we cannot find a way to resolve a problem, forgive a wrong, work to improve a situation, then we are captives to this anger. And this anger robs us of genuine life.

I have noticed how we sometimes become hostages to the small irritations of life. Daily annoyances or inconveniences are enlarged in our minds and can easily dominate our thinking and occupy too much space in our hearts. And we go about our day filled with negativity.

But Jesus sets us free. He enters our locked rooms, our cages and says to us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." The peace Christ offers us, the peace that will set us free is very different than the kind of peace the world tries to give us. The peace the world

gives is found in insurance policies, security systems, college funds, nice cars, good credit ratings. Our culture teaches that there are not enough resources to go around and in order to have security, in order to have peace of mind, you had better grab what you can for yourself: possessions, money, success, opportunities. And yet all of this is counterfeit peace.

The world teaches us that in order to count, in order to be valued, in order to be decent and acceptable, in order to be successful, we need to be "good" enough, and successful enough. But Jesus frees us to know that even when we are "bad," even when we really mess up, make mistakes, disappoint, do the wrong thing, even when we fail, we are loved by God, forgiven by God, and valued by God. We don't ever have to earn God's love.

The freedom we receive from Christ is not a license to complacency. But it is a recognition that God is already in you and at work in you. You are valued and you are loved. True freedom comes when we understand this and accept this. God's love and forgiveness sets us free to accept our imperfect selves and then to accept and love the imperfect people around us. And then, released from our anxious scurrying, released from our guilt, released from our negativity, we can know genuine peace--even when life hands us turmoil and hardship.

Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, as our Advocate and Helper in the living of our difficult days so that we will be reminded of all Jesus has said. "Peace I leave with you," he said. "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid," he said. We will remember his love. We will remember his forgiveness. And we will be free.

You know, the image we sometimes use for the Holy Spirit is a bird, like a dove, or maybe, maybe even a bright blue parakeet flying around a neighborhood in Buffalo, NY reminding us that we are free.