

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

June 8, 2025

## STAND BY ME

John 14: 15-21

Paraclete-it's a borrowed Greek word. That's why it is so easily misunderstood. In my youth, I heard preachers use that word all the time. They said Jesus promised that upon his departure he would send the Paraclete. Now as a youth I daydreamed through sermons-didn't we all? So it is no wonder that I thought I heard Jesus promise to send us a parakeet. But why a parakeet, I wondered? Actually, we already had a little green parakeet, and it was more trouble than you can imagine. So Jesus' promise held little or no appeal to me, the barely awake youth in the pew. Is that why lots of people sleepwalk through sermons-they seem so full of empty promises?

The Paraclete. Jesus does in fact promise that when he returns to the Father, he will send his disciples the Paraclete. Oddly, enough, the Paraclete has a close connection with another bird-the dove. So maybe there was something to my imagining that Jesus would send us, of all things, a bird. Yes, the Spirit, the very life of Christ within us-would descend upon us like a winged creature from above.

Only the Gospel of John calls the Spirit the Paraclete on five different occasions. The word Paraclete means literally, “One called alongside to help.” There have been all kinds of English renderings of this Greek word: advocate, champion, helper, friend, comforter, counselor, teacher, guide. Jesus promises that the Paraclete will stand beside us and helps us. Christ will stand by us in Spirit. That is the Lord’s promise to us. We will never be alone.

Because Jesus is returning to the Father, his followers feel abandoned, like a motherless child. When this Gospel was written near the end of the First Century, Jesus’ followers were unnerved by the death of the “Beloved Disciple” and other leaders. Both the first generation of Jesus’ followers as well as the second and third generation of believers needed a word of assurance.

So the Fourth Gospel has Jesus’ promise to send the Paraclete. The disciples never need to feel orphaned or abandoned. The Paraclete will come and stand with them. In the Gospel of John, the risen Christ stands in the midst of his astonished friends Easter evening. Just as he promised, Jesus breathes upon them and says, “Receive the Spirit” (John 20:22) The Paraclete, the Spirit, comes upon them and will never leave them forlorn. This is John’s version of Pentecost.

I am reminded of the great importance of standing with those who feel abandoned. In a great blues song called “Stand by Me”, B.B. King sings about the enormous comfort when someone stands with you in your hour of need:

When the night has come and the land is dark,  
And the moon is the only light we'll see,  
No, I won't be afraid. No, I won't be afraid,  
Just as long as you stand by me.

If the sky that we look upon should tumble and fall  
Or the mountains should crumble to the sea,  
I won't cry. No, I won't shed a tear,  
Just as long as you stand by me.

This lovely song reminds me of an earlier song-Psalm 46- which says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.” The Paraclete stands with us in the best of times, in the worst of times. When the “land is dark” and “the mountains crumble to the sea”, Christ

stands with us, beside us, and within us, through thick and thin. That is our Lord's promise to us.

And because Christ stands with us, we are given the courage and freedom to stand with others. Others who need us. Others who rely upon us. Others who could not endure unless we stand with them. I have seen it so often especially within our families. Couples who support one another through the hard times. Couples who remember those wedding vows to remain faithful to one another "in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health till death do us part." Sometimes it takes enormous fortitude and love to stand with your spouse "when the sky that we look upon should tumble and fall." By the grace given to us, couples find the where with all to stand by each other through hell and high water. It is amazing when you see it, and I have seen it many times. And so have you. Thankfully.

And it is even more amazing when Christians find themselves willing to stand with those they hardly know. People on the outside looking in. One of my dearest friends is Dr. Lane Leckman, a retired psychiatrist and elder at First Presbyterian in downtown Albuquerque. He and I are walking partners. He will be with us later in the summer to share his enormous knowledge about the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. What amazes me about Lane is his willingness to stand with those caught up in our badly broken immigration system.

Lane has done psychiatric evaluations of immigrants detained in our system who are applying for asylum. Often they come from truly barbaric situations in their home countries. Thus, many suffer from PTSD, Post-traumatic stress disorder. The horrifying tales these immigrants share make you realize why they come to the United States for asylum. They are looking for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”, just as our ancestors were.

Lane visited two young men from the Congo who were detained at the Cibola Prison in Grants, just west of here. Their names are Bokole and Honore. Theirs was a harrowing story of escaping from the Congo, where they were both tortured, meting up in Rio de Janeiro, passing through the jungles of Columbia and Central America, then the deserts of Mexico and finally presenting themselves for asylum in El Paso. This was all done legally and above board. Lane diagnosed them with PTSD and walked with them even when they were transferred to another prison near El Paso. Both Bokole and Honore are deeply committed Christians.

Now the rest of the story is complicated. Both eventually were deported. Lane is not sure where Honore is currently. But Bokole was able to return legally to Albuquerque where he is working two jobs and will have another asylum hearing in July. Given the current administration's policy of arresting asylum seekers on their way to their court hearings, it is anyone's guess what will happen next to Bokole. I ask you to pray for Bokole.

Now through it all, Lane has stood by him and encouraged him. A perfect stranger who has become a friend and a brother in Christ. That's what a Paraclete does. An advocate, a helper, a comforter, a champion. A number of you have been paracletes to these sisters and brother. For you I am deeply grateful for your caring and your love.

And why do this for others? We all understand family members standing by each other through the hard times. But standing with others who are perfect strangers, from another culture, those who are completely helpless and vulnerable? That is truly Christ-like. What Christ promised to do for us, we do for others, freely and willingly. Amazing grace received then passed on to others who need us.

Sisters and brothers, perhaps Christ is reminding you this morning of all the times he has stood by you. Perhaps Christ is calling you this morning to stand with others who need you even now.

When the night has come and the land is dark,

And the moon is the only light we'll see.

No, I won't be afraid. No, I won't be afraid,

Just as long as you stand by me.

If the sky that we look upon should tumble and fall

Or the mountains should crumble to the sea,

I won't cry. No, I won't shed a tear,

Just as long as you stand be me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.