

Sixth Sunday of Easter and Rogation Sunday
John 14:15-21

Zealous Advocacy*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Some people are surprised to learn that the Episcopal Church has a 700 page book of saints and other individuals who we commemorate as “A Great Cloud of Witnesses.” These witnesses range from the expected – such as St. Augustine of Canterbury and Dame Julian of Norwich – to the not-so-expected – such as Sojourner Truth and C.S. Lewis.

On this past Wednesday, according to the liturgical calendar from this “book of saints,” we commemorated one of the great advocates of the twentieth century, Justice Thurgood Marshall. Marshall was, of course, the first African American Supreme Court justice. As a lawyer, he won the seminal *Brown vs. Board of Education* case that desegregated public schools across the nation.

What many people do not know, however, is that Marshall was a faithful Episcopalian throughout his life. He was the senior warden at St. Philip’s Church in Harlem, and he served as a deputy to the 1964 General Convention. Marshall’s feast day in the Episcopal liturgical calendar is May 17th, which is the day on which the *Brown* opinion was issued by the Supreme Court in 1954.

As some of you know, I was a lawyer before being ordained a priest. I am well aware of the public perception of attorneys, and I have heard more than my fair share of lawyer jokes. That’s why I’m so grateful that our church’s liturgical calendar honors the vocational calling of Justice Marshall, which reminds us of the important work of legal advocates on behalf of the least among us.

My first job right out of law school was serving as a law clerk to a federal appellate judge on the United States Court of Appeals in Los Angeles. For a year, I had the privilege of observing first hand the work of outstanding lawyers who were zealous advocates for their clients. They worked on many issues involving life-or-death matters, such as asylum, deportation, and capital punishment cases.

In fraught political times such as these, I am convinced that – more than ever – lawyers play a critical role as zealous advocates in our system of checks and balances.

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In today's gospel reading, we hear about a zealous advocate of a different sort – the Holy Spirit. Our reading is again from the fourteenth chapter of St. John's gospel. As you may recall from Fr. van Dooren's powerful sermon last week, this chapter is taken from Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples at the Last Supper, right before his arrest, torture, and brutal execution.

The fourteenth chapter of John has given countless Christians hope and comfort through the ages during times of despair. In today's gospel passage, Jesus tells his friends not to worry about his immanent departure. "I will not leave you orphaned," he says. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

Jesus' words are particularly fitting for us on this Sunday before the Ascension. In just four days, we will remember Jesus leaving his disciples a second time – when he ascends into heaven on the fortieth day after Easter.

The Greek word used by St. John to describe the Holy Spirit is *parakletos*. Our gospel reading translates this word as "Advocate." Other Bible versions have translated this as "comforter" or "helper." I think "Advocate" is a good translation choice, however, because there is actually a legal meaning behind that word.

In classical Greek texts, *parakletos* was used to describe someone who would advocate on your behalf in a court of justice. The *parakletos* was a friend of an accused person, called to "speak to the person's character" or to "otherwise enlist the sympathy of the judges." As a result, some biblical scholars have translated this word as "legal assistant" or "pleader."

It's interesting to think of the Holy Spirit as a "friend of the accused," isn't it? In the fourteenth chapter of John, Jesus promises us an Advocate – a *parakletos* – to be with us forever. Like the dedicated appellate lawyers who I observed during my clerkship, the Holy Spirit is a powerful advocate who will argue zealously on your behalf whenever you need a friend, either in the world or before God. You've got your own personal Thurgood Marshall advocating for you!

Today is Rogation Sunday, which is traditionally observed on the Sunday before Ascension Thursday. Over the course of the next three days, we will pray for God's blessing upon the fields, and we will ask for God's mercy upon all of creation.

Specifically, we will pray for fruitful seasons on Monday. We will pray for commerce and industry on Tuesday. And we will pray for the stewardship of creation on Wednesday. You can find the beautiful collects for those days on pages 207 and 208 of the Prayer Book. I commend them to you for your private devotions. At the end of mass today, we will honor this ancient tradition by processing outside together and blessing our garden.

The custom of Rogation Days started in the fifth century when a diocese in the southeast region of France experienced a series of horrific disasters in a single year – first a huge fire, then a plague that killed the livestock, then attacks by wild wolves, and finally earthquakes. Their bishop led the people in three days of processions and prayers in order to ask for God’s forgiveness and to appease God’s wrath. (Rogation comes from the Latin word *rogare*, which means to ask.)

We continue this tradition in the twenty-first century by asking God to forgive us for our shortcomings as stewards of the earth. In the familiar words of the Prayers of the People, we pray that God may “[g]ive us all a reverence for the earth as [God’s] own creation” and that “we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to [God’s] honor and glory.”

As we heard in Peter’s speech to the Athenians in today’s first reading from the Acts of Apostles, one day the world will be “judged in righteousness,” and we will be called to account for all the things that we have done and all the things that we have left undone. But we need not be afraid. We are comforted by Jesus’ promise that the Holy Spirit will be a zealous advocate for us at that time.

On this Rogation Sunday, I invite you to reflect upon the gift of advocacy and the Holy Spirit. How have you been helped by advocates in your own life – legal, spiritual, or otherwise? Who has stood by your side, or remained as your friend, when you have been accused? And how might God be calling you in these times to serve as a zealous advocate for the least among us, just as Thurgood Marshall and so many others have done from our great cloud of witnesses?

May we always be comforted by the fourteenth chapter of John, and by Jesus’ promise never to abandon us. “I will not leave you orphaned,” he says. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”