

June 15, 2025

Pastor Delaney Beh “How Soon is Now?”

First Congregational Church

Scripture: John 16:4-15

Let us pray: Everlasting and ever-loving God, thank you for the blessing of this day and the gift that is coming together as Christ's body to hear Your word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to You and invoke Your Spirit in this place. Amen.

I'm going to show my youth a little bit here right out of the gate, but I was scrolling on Instagram the other night when I came across a video that stopped me in my tracks. A young man, filming from the gym of all places — stared at me through the phone, and said “Y'all would've hated Dr. King.” My interest was piqued. He continued: “Everyone's saying ‘hey don't block the roads, people still have to get to work,’ but the whole point of protesting is to disrupt your daily life and to force you to look at an issue you were previously ignoring. The entire point is the disruption.” He then goes on to recount the history that I'm sure we're all at least semi-familiar with, that some of the loudest voices opposing King's marches weren't from hardline segregationists, but from white moderates — the kind of people who claimed to support civil rights, just so long as the movement was quiet, dignified, and polite about it. The folks who said: *just wait a little longer*. We now know some 60 years later, that those with such a lukewarm position were ultimately on the wrong side of history. Yet when faced with a new set of protests, in a new part of the country, organized around a new issue, we see this tendency to encourage those in the street to ‘play nice’ rear its ugly head again. Those with grievances are admonished to ‘be patient,’ ‘call and email their representatives at home,’ ‘let the courts work it out, that's what will bring about justice now.’ And yet — *how soon is now?*

As one of my favorite bands, The Smiths, asks in their song by that very title, “When you say, ‘It's gonna happen now,’ well, when exactly do you mean? See, I've already waited too long and all my hope is gone.” Sometimes, waiting in the midst of life-changing circumstances can bring about some degree of clarity and answers. But oftentimes, when we are asked to wait in perpetuity, all it does is inspire further anxiety, diminishes our hope, and gives birth to helplessness and despair.

This is where we find Jesus and the disciples in this portion of John. You see, by the time we get to chapter 16, Jesus has already been proclaiming his farewell to his closest friends for quite some time, the last three chapters to be exact, all while they are gathered around the Last Supper table. Jesus acknowledges their grief, yet assures them that the end of his time with them is not in fact *the* end, but rather the beginning of something far greater than he would be able to accomplish on his own. He is sending them *The Paraclete* — which I'm sure will now be everyone's ‘word of the day,’ it certainly was for all those in the Lectio group on Tuesday! In many Bible translations, you may find the word “Advocate” or even “Helper,” in place of “Paraclete,” but certain others, like the Inclusive Bible we're using today, recognize that the Greek παρακλητος doesn't have a simple one-to-one English translation, just like our theme for the summer, the Zulu word *ubuntu*.

The reason for this is that a Paraclete played a very specific role within Jewish legal proceedings. As Sister Mary Coloe explains in her *Wisdom Commentary* on the Gospel of John, “The Paraclete, in a legal setting, was the one who spoke up for the defense before the accusers in a two-party controversy or before the judge if the situation later went to trial. But one strategy used by the defense in Jewish legal procedures was to show that the accuser is wrong, and so defense can shift to accusation. Throughout Jesus's ministry he has been in conflict with people who believed that *they* were righteous and that Jesus was a sinner...Jesus's return to the Father will show that in fact *he* was the righteous one...Only one who is utterly righteous before God could, following death,

send the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth.”

Through this explanation, we see that the Holy Spirit serves to support the work of Christ and vindicates his ministry in the face of its persecution. Jesus tells the disciples that the Spirit “will prove the world wrong about sin, about justice, and about judgment.” Sounds scary at first, no? Maybe folks are having fire and brimstone flashbacks, I don’t know. However, friends, this is actually good news because conviction and discernment are not about shame, but rather about clarity. The Spirit will move to reveal things to us as they really are, pulling back the curtains that we as humanity hang up to distract us from the truth of the world and from the truth of each other.

See friends, we often suffer from the temptation to engage in what philosopher Martin Buber termed I-It relationships. We understand ourselves as an “I” with all the complexities therein — we know that we hold multiplicity within ourselves, that we cannot be reduced to a single experience, label, or narrative. Yet, we seem to be primed to do exactly that to others. We categorize individuals en masse — the homeless, the incarcerated, Republicans, Democrats, or to the video I mentioned earlier, “protestors,” or the even more dismissive blanket label “rioters.” We assume each other as fixed objects, a monolithic ‘it’ in contrast with our multifaceted “I.” “I” does not allow “It” to have total being, or to perceive “I” as an equal; “I” sees “It” in only one aspect — solely as a tool, an obstacle, a source of entertainment, an enemy, etc. The relation is completely one-dimensional.

Through sincere engagement with the divine, however, Buber argues we can make the shift from perceiving others as an “it” to a “Thou.” Since God is so completely other than humanity, our relationship with God prompts us to see each part of God’s Creation as full, authentic beings in their own right, just as we are. Encountering another as a “Thou” is to meet them without judgment, qualification, or objectification. I meet you as you are, and you meet me as I am. I am because you are. This is what I believe to be part of ‘the truth’ into which the Spirit has been sent to guide us. To help us understand our profound interconnectedness, to lead us away from the temptations of judgment and self-righteousness, to stop throwing the first stone.

This is why we need the παρακλητος: to unveil things to us as God created them to be, and as Jesus spoke about them as he walked among us. This is what Christ is getting at when he says that the Spirit will not speak on her own but rather will take what is Christ’s, and ultimately also the Father’s, and declare it to us as a chief witness. We are seeing the truth of interconnectedness right in these final remarks of Christ! The Trinity — three-as-one and one-as-three — our God cannot be without all of these attributes acting in tandem and revealing their unique contribution to the shared divine essence. Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Ultimate, Incarnate, and Ever-Present. Each distinct, each beautiful, each holy. One cannot be whole without the other parts. In seeing the fullness of God, we learn how to better see the wholeness of the humanity that surrounds us.

Now I know this sounds very graceful and poetic, but this perspective shift Jesus offers is actually incredibly disruptive. So disruptive, in fact, that he hits the disciples with the good ol’ Jack Nicholson “You can’t handle the truth!” “I have much more to tell you but you can’t bear to hear it now.” This is how radical the message of Christ is, friends. It would be a really tough pill to swallow all at once. You mean that person [fill in the blank] is as much of an ‘I’ as I am? You mean those people are integral to the essence of the body of Christ just like me? I mean it goes against all of our human and societal impulses. Yet, gradually bit by bit, through a series of blunders and atrocities, the παρακλητος, the Spirit, tries to guide us towards truth, towards the Kingdom.

Like a protest stalling a crowded intersection, the Spirit offers us revelation that serves to change our course, that attempts to draw our attention to something or someone we’ve been ignoring. And

sometimes we still choose to ignore it, I know that's a sin I'm surely guilty of. Sometimes the prompting of truth we feel in our guts feels inconvenient or uncomfortable or even dangerous. Yet, God calls us and trusts us anyways, as perfectly imperfect as we may be. There will never be a perfect time, a perfect message, or a perfect people. There is no magical, ideal 'now' to wait for. Our now is now. So may we lean on the revelation of our interconnectedness and be open to the Spirit of truth, allowing her to shape how we see, how we speak, and how we live alongside one another because we can't afford to wait any longer. May it be so, amen.