

“Mother and Advocate”

I do not often, if ever, offer topical sermons, but over the past week I have been compelled to think about what it means to be an advocate. This word comes up in today’s Gospel reading. We heard Jesus say, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” This one sentence is so loaded with meaning that we could easily spend an hour parsing it. But I want to focus on the word advocate and the Greek word behind it, *paraclete*.

The translators of this passage wanted us to attend to that word so much that they capitalized it. It was not capitalized in the Greek because *Koine* or common Greek was written in minuscule or all small letters. No caps were used. We think it is weird, but it was not so to them. The Greek word that is being translated as advocate could also be translated as comforter, counselor, consoler, and witness. That Greek word is *paracletos* or *paraclete*. In *Koine* Greek, it was often used as a legal term; thus, we get the translation as advocate, counselor, or witness. A *paraclete* was one who advocated on someone’s behalf in a courtroom or counseled a party to a legal action. But as happens to so many words, its meaning broadens and encompasses a spectrum of meanings. After all, an advocate could be a mentor, a teacher, a guide, or anyone who takes on the task of encouraging or working on behalf of another.

Since May 2<sup>nd</sup>, I have officiated at four funerals. All of the deceased were women. All but one of the women were mothers. I have heard sons and daughters share beautiful memories about their mother. They have also shared the quirks, talents, and more about their mother. Including how they served as surrogate mothers to other children in their neighborhoods.

Of course, one of the special attributes that all of these mothers had is that they were the champions of their children. These mothers did more than feed, bandage wounds, teach, tell stories, read books to their kids, and so much more. They were also advocates, comforters, counselors, and consolers.

We know that some mothers have more of this quality than others. Or they manifest it differently. Still, the adult children who spoke at these funerals, there was a consistent feeling that their mother had been an advocate for their children. The advocacy manifested in different forms. The mother was sometimes kind, sometimes stern, sometimes gentle, or sometimes tough. However they advocated for their children, they did so the best way they knew how.

Advocates, comforters, counselors, and consolers are just some of the roles mothers play. I would like to read to you two poignant poems written by adult children about their mother.

The first poem is “To My Mother by Wendell Berry.

I was your rebellious son,  
do you remember? Sometimes  
I wonder if you do remember,  
so complete has your forgiveness been.  
So complete has your forgiveness been  
I wonder sometimes if it did not  
precede my wrong, and I erred,  
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,  
or my bed at night, so that almost  
I should forgive you, who perhaps  
foresaw the worst that I might do,  
and forgave before I could act,  
causing me to smile now, looking back,  
to see how paltry was my worst,  
compared to your forgiveness of it  
already given. And this, then,  
is the vision of that Heaven of which  
we have heard, where those who love  
each other have forgiven each other,  
where, for that, the leaves are green,  
the light a music in the air,  
and all is unentangled,  
and all is undismayed.<sup>1</sup>

The second poem is “What I Learned from My Mother” by Julia Kasdorf.

I learned from my mother how to love  
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand  
in case you have to rush to the hospital  
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants  
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars  
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole  
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears  
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins  
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.  
I learned to attend viewings even if I didn't know  
the deceased, to press the moist hands  
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer  
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.  
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,  
what anyone will remember is that we came.  
I learned to believe I had the power to ease  
awful pains materially like an angel.  
Like a doctor, I learned to create  
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once  
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.  
To every house you enter, you must offer  
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,  
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.<sup>2</sup>

Happy Mother's Day to each of you who is a mother as well as those of you,  
female or male, who have served in that role for someone who needed a mothering  
presence. May God bless you and those you love all the days of your life.

---

<sup>1</sup> “To My Mother” by Wendell Berry, from *Entries*. © Pantheon Books, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Reprinted from *Sleeping Preacher*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992, by permission of the publisher. First printed in *West Branch*, Vol. 30, 1992. Copyright © 1992 by Julia Kasdorf.