

DATE: May 10, 2026

TEXT: John 14:15-21

THEME: In these challenging times, the Paraclete will sustain us.

SUBJECT: Trial, Difficulty

TITLE: Facing Adversity

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: How can we face adversity with hope?

Children: This Sunday, Judith Foster will speak during the time with children about what Southminster has meant to her over the years.

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

Today, we are 36/50ths of the way between Easter and Pentecost. On Easter, of course, we celebrated Jesus' resurrection. Throughout this season of Easter, we're continuing to look at the early community of Jesus' followers - not yet called Christian - and their encounter with the risen Christ. Today's scripture actually takes place before the crucifixion as Jesus gathers with his disciples in the Upper Room of a house to celebrate the Jewish Passover Feast. It's a scene in which Jesus offers final words of encouragement to his followers and to all who find hope and Truth in his words and example.

Jesus knew that rough times lay ahead for his followers. After a tumultuous week in Jerusalem, the disciples knew that something was about to change, but they probably didn't realistically imagine how things were about to change. Even at that late hour in Jesus' earthly life, some still imagined that the Messiah would come in power to transform their society and sit on the throne of David. For certain, Jesus was all about societal transformation, but none could imagine what would actually take place just a few hours later. Call these events the birth pangs of a new age (Matthew 24:8): the

disciples would flee from Jesus upon his arrest, would deny even knowing who he was, and would watch their beloved rabbi hang on a cross. The aftermath for them - the inner and outer struggles - would be quite rough on them.

So, Jesus offered words of comfort even before the disciples knew they needed comfort. Isn't that always the way: God gives us all we need even before WE know what we need. Some listen and attend well and are better prepared to deal with challenge when it comes. As for the rest of us, we're like deer in the headlights. Life can flip on a dime individually: life goes along swimmingly until it doesn't. Or life can go along unswimmingly until it does swim. Whole societies can experience change as well, in a seemingly short time. Malcom Gladwell calls this the *tipping point*, the "magic moment" when a social trend or idea crosses a threshold, tipping and then spreading rapidly. Now, I say "seemingly short time" because societies don't just change out of a vacuum. One event leads to another which leads to another, and eventually a tipping point occurs if the conditions are right. Theologians use the term *kairos moment*, the time of divine fulfillment, which acknowledges the hand of God in these "magic moments." Jesus knew that the *kairos moment / tipping point* was at hand in the Upper Room as he gathered around the Table with his disciples when he said to them: "God will give you another **Advocate** to be with you forever (John 14:16). "What do you mean, 'ANOTHER'? You're right here, Jesus. We're on the eve of triumph and you're talking about someone else being our (what did you say?) Advocate?" They did not understand the moment.

You may be wondering why, in verse 16, the word "Advocate" is used instead of "Holy Spirit". It's because John uses the word "paraclete" here, not "pneuma". "Another". Jesus was their first counselor. He knew, however, that people don't always hear things the first time around. They need repetition, reinforcement. So, he said that

another Counselor would come to be with them to reinforce his words. Some English Bibles translate the word “Paraclete” as word “Helper” or “Comforter” instead of “Advocate”. The Greek word “paraclete” can mean all of them. Dr. Yung Suk Kim at Virginia Seminary in Richmond says, “The Paraclete’s primary function is to safeguard and sustain the believing community, enabling it to persevere and bear witness to God’s love-driven mission in the face of adversity.” Just the disciples’ looming adversity? No. Just the adversity of Christians in the first couple of centuries of the Common Era? No. Everyone for all time! Because “forever” means forever. Women who were accused as witches in the 15th - 18th centuries, Jews who endured unspeakable pogroms of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the people of Gaza and Palestine today. Not Christian, some may say? The Paraclete doesn’t care about religion or doctrine, though people often do. How often has war and mass murder been carried out in the name of religion and of Truth. The primary purpose of the Paraclete is to safeguard and sustain in times of persecution and war, not endanger and destroy. We know that those who are guided by the Advocate bear witness to God’s love. And we know that anyone bearing witness to anything else is not guided by the Paraclete; they are instead deluded. In Jesus’ words: “This is the Spirit of Truth (referring to the Paraclete) whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees nor knows the Spirit.” The Paraclete is the one through whom God acts in the world. Without the Paraclete, we cannot act out of love.

What’s the opposite of love? Hate? Anger? Good answers. At the root of these, I think, is fear. Fascists are guided by fear. Authoritarians are guided by fear. Bullies are guided by fear. Those who are guided by love are not guided by fear because there is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Now, we know that those who are guided by love will face adversity in a world that is ruled by fear and intimidation and punishment and retribution — even though rulers say they are

guided by God. It is to those who bear witness to God's love and who suffer because of it that Jesus spoke these words: "I will ask God, and God will give you another Advocate to be with you forever." In other words, seek to be guided by love and you may suffer, but **you will never be alone.**

Well, how do you go about being "guided by love?" Jesus identifies the Advocate as "the Spirit of Truth." Not Truth Social, but Truth Universal! Lots of people will claim that they know the truth, but I believe that Truth can be found in the words of Jesus. I also believe that Truth can be found in the words of many others which is why the screen showed "words of grace" from the Tao Te Ching earlier this morning. But I'm most familiar with the words of Jesus and I think that's a pretty good start. He said, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them is the one who loves me." What are Jesus' commands? Love God (Mt. 22:37). Love your neighbor (Mt. 22:39). Repent, for the kin-dom of heaven is near (Mt. 4:17). Keep your word (Mt. 5:37). Follow me (Mt. 4:19). Make disciples (Mt. 28:19). Practice forgiveness (Mt. 18:21-22). Serve others (Mt. 20:25-28). Give to the needy (Lk 14:12-14). Do not worry (Mt 6:33). Love your enemies (Mt. 5:44). When I see people going down to City Hall to petition our city counselors, on behalf of immigrants, to pass an ordinance to prohibit all officers in Portland from wearing masks and to require them to wear a name tag, I see people who have Jesus' commands and obey them. When I see peaceful demonstrators raising their voices against authoritarianism — when I watched a video recording of Rick Steves' address at St. Mark Cathedral in Seattle on April 26th, 2026 where he argued that authoritarianism is leaning toward fascism — I see people who have Jesus' commands and obey them. When I see people in solidarity with First Nations at Standing Rock in North Dakota or Oak Flats in Arizona to oppose corporate takeover of indigenous land that will enrich few and impact many, I see people who have Jesus'

commands and obey them. The Spirit of Truth has spoken to people like these. Are they Christian? I have no idea, but I think they're paying attention and they're listening to the Spirit of Truth. Though they may not say it in such terms, I believe they are the ones who love Jesus (more than many who say they love Jesus).

OK, so we're called to obey Jesus' commands and to act in love with the help of the Paraclete. Then what happens? Dr. Kim says, "Verses 18-21 reveal the contagious nature of divine love." How true! Love begets love. It's like Jesus said, "What shall I compare the kin-dom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough" (Luke 13:20-21). Love is the essential bond that connects believers to God and to each other (Yung Suk Kim). Jesus also taught this commandment in that Upper Room: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). This is the same idea. Love begets love. Because of this, the transformation of society is inexorable and inevitable. Though things may seem dim and without hope at times, we know that the light shines in the darkness even as the darkness does not understand it and may even actively work against the light. In the midst of this, the Paraclete assures communities who have Jesus' commands and obey them that they will be safeguarded, sustained and enabled to persevere and bear witness to God's love-driven mission in the face of adversity.

Communities. What about individuals? What if individuals are targeted by MAGA extremists or others who seem to be guided by fear? We live in challenging times when some people are so angry that they can't see the humanity in others. We've already lost to violence some prominent people (agree or disagree with their views): Charlie Kirk, Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark. There have been three attempts on Donald Trump's life. Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro and his

family were inside the governor's residence when an arsonist set it on fire last year; thankfully, they escaped unharmed. An ICE officer was shot and injured outside a detention facility in Texas. Ruben Ray Martinez was killed by ICE officers last year and, of course, Rene Good and Alex Preti were killed in Minnesota earlier this year. I have a personal friend who is being targeted by an extremist through a podcast. Guided by the Paraclete, we hold all of them and their families in our hearts, praying and working for the day when all are guided by love; praying and working for the day when fear will flee away and all will see the humanity in others, whether we agree or disagree.

Meanwhile, in these challenging times, why be hopeful? We have much reason to hope. We hope with those throughout time - communities and individuals - who have endured many things and who have been sustained - perhaps not in body - even amidst suffering and persecution. We are here today as people of faith because of their faithful witness to God's love-driven mission in the face of adversity. We hope in the risen Christ who also shared in our adversity and turned it into victory. And while we may not see victory in our lifetimes, Love's victory is assured; it is inexorable and inevitable. Though we look around and see war, racism, prejudice, partisanship — all of which are inspired by fear — we know that these are short-lived and cannot last. I think I speak for the Paraclete when I say, "God is faithful and the only thing that endures is the love of God."

Let us pray ...