

Sermon for April 27, 2008

Reading: John 14:15-21

Rev. Eldonna Hazen

“The Advocate(s)”

Let us pray: May the words of our mouths and the meditation in our hearts always be acceptable to You, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen

The question we couldn't get out of our heads was: Why is Marco still in a home for under-18's when he is 24 years old? Maybe he was deemed unsuitable to progress on from this residential school to some further education, and was left in the top class indefinitely? No, it was worse than that. Was it just that there was nowhere else for him to go? No. The truth was that Marco had been left there to die. Not that he was being neglected. In fact the staff were very caring, and keen for Marco to move on. But Marco's medical diagnosis was that he had a terminal condition that meant he would not see out his teenage years. And therefore, it was argued, it was pointless planning any post-school services.

This point of view did not alter when Marco turned 20, then 21, 22, and 23. Nor did services click into place when Marco upset the apple cart and turned 24. What set the wheels of progress whirring into action was the realisation that Marco, at the ripe old age of 24, had been holding down a place in this school that another child needed. He would have to move.

The problem with services is that they sometimes don't respond well when a quick response is called for. Marco had been taking a place inappropriately for five years, but urgent action was suddenly required - a place was therefore found with all haste for this 24-year old man, who had spent all his life in Glasgow, and whose family and friends were in Glasgow. This place was a nursing home.

Some things were clear from very early on:

- Marco needed someone to speak up strongly for him right now, or else he would be moved to Millport in a matter of weeks.
- His family were close, but his father seemed drained by the struggle to get the best for his son. If he could be enthused to keep trying, it would make a real difference.
- Marco had been moved from his home district to this residential school. If he could get somewhere to live back home, he would be close to his family again. And there would be the chance to make some friends there as well.

Enter Sophia. Sophia met Marco's parents and they showed her some family photographs. One photograph was of two young parents and a four-year-old boy: an ordinary scene with an ordinary-looking boy in an ordinary house. Later on, Sophia said that that photo was what made the difference for her. At a number of meetings, we put Marco's case strongly. Marco's father wrote to the social services and to his councillor. Then - what seemed like a miracle - Marco was offered not one but two places to live near to his family! And not nursing homes this time, but real homes. For the first time, Marco will be moving from the world of children into the world of adults. But something

else has shifted, something deep and important to Marco. The focus is no longer on his death, but on his life, and how he can fully live it. And for however long that turns out to be, he has his family, friends and advocate to make sure it stays that way.¹

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

Jesus promises us an advocate. And this advocate will be with us forever. It is the Spirit of Truth. I feel a bit like I think Marco must have felt. In awe, wowed, overwhelmed. You mean, someone is coming to help me?

Advocacy literally means, 'speaking or pleading with or on behalf of another'. So does that mean that someone is here with each of us today to advocate for us? Yes! Does that mean that we can just relax and let them do the work? No!

I think this promise comes with some responsibility. I think the responsibility is two-fold. One, we must accept and listen to the Advocate. We have been promised an Advocate, but if we do not accept the help of the Advocate and LISTEN, why do we need an advocate. I believe we have a responsibility to LISTEN to the advocate. The advocate is the Spirit of Truth.

Secondly, I believe we have the responsibility to not only accept the assistance of the Advocate, but we must also ACT as the advocate. Jesus says, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* We don't have to ponder too long to remember the commandments that he is referring to. Love God and love your neighbors. So, it seems obvious to me that we should be acting as advocates for our neighbors.

In Proverbs 31, we hear the words, *Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and the needy.*

Sophia heard the words in Proverbs and ACTED! We hear the words in Proverbs, but have we acted? I will be the first to say, I have heard stories of those in need, those who should have an advocate. But, have I worked as their advocate? Have I worked to get someone an advocate? Or have I been content to stand back and say "that's terrible, I can't believe that's happening."

Isn't it interesting how we are always more than willing to believe that we deserve Jesus promise of an advocate, and are not as quick to believe that we can and should follow the commandment to love our neighbor and advocate for them, whether they are homeless, in need of services of some kind, have been treated unjustly by our justice system, a child who has been abused, someone who has been assaulted. The list is endless!

¹ Taken from the website <http://www.equalsay.org/stories/stories4.htm> Equal Say Citizen Advocacy, An organization in Glasgow, Scotland.

Have you seen any of the 20/20 stories recently where kids are being taunted, where abuse is happening, where inappropriate behavior is being exhibited? The characters are actors, but the situations are real, and the camera seeks to find out how people passing by will respond. Will any of the people be an advocate, or will they pass by out of fear or unwillingness to get involved?

We are in those situations everyday. We aren't being filmed, but we are there. We have the choice to be an advocate. As the old opening of Mission Impossible used to say, "that is your mission, should you decide to accept it."

In yesterday's Madison newspapers, the United Church of Christ churches in the area made bold statements. We said that we seek ways to bridge the gaps that separate people of varied races and ethnic backgrounds. We try to honor the lives and relationships of ALL people, even those we see as different from our own. We promised equality in relationships. And most of all we promised to listen to a God that is Still Speaking. Now are we listening to the Spirit of Truth that is blowing in, around us.

Jesus promises us an advocate. And this advocate will be with us forever. It is the Spirit of Truth. Let us not only feel the Spirit around us, but let it blow THROUGH us. Be Sophia! Love your neighbor! People like Marco are counting on us! Amen!