

HERE'S THE KICKER

A Pentecost Sermon on Acts 2:1-21—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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“I need a name for my soccer team,” Carlo told me. It was my last year at Divinity School studying to become a minister. My roommate, Carlo, had entered our apartment with his cleats over his shoulder, dejected. The Divinity School’s intramural soccer team, which Carlo had started the year before, had lost another match. Carlo needed something to raise his and the team’s spirits, something to unite them. Some of the other graduate school intramural teams had names: the Forestry School’s Shoots and Leaves, the Biomedical department’s Biohazards and the Law School’s Torts Illustrated. I looked at Carlo and inspiration hit me. It was as if a mighty wind came upon us and gave me the gift to utter just the right word. The Holy Spirit had given me an answer. The Holy Spirit WAS the answer. And it was right there in front of me.

You see, Carlo and I, who had both taken New Testament classes, knew how in John chapter 14, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the one who will replace Jesus after he leaves this world. This Holy Spirit, Jesus says, will comfort us, advocate for us. *The Spirit cannot be controlled but it will remain with us through thick and thin, even in the messiness of life.* The Greek word that describes the Holy Spirit as Advocate or Comforter is made up of two parts: para-, alongside; and -clete, make a call. To call alongside. Paraclete. “Carlo,” I said, taking the shoes off his shoulder and pointing, “God tells me, ‘Name the team Paracleats.’” And so for over fifteen years the intramural soccer team has been named for the Holy Spirit.

I think it’s apt that a Greek word for the Holy Spirit is also pun for muddy athletic shoes. While I imagine the Holy Spirit as described in the Bible as wind, as a dove, or as fire spinning down from the sky, I also envision the Holy Spirit a well-worn pair of cleats.

I read the two scenes leading up to the Pentecost event, for instance, and I already see the Holy Spirit’s footprints there. In the first scene of Acts, Jesus appears to the disciples just before he ascends into heaven. He tells them to stay put in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit arrives, to “wait for it.” The disciples, still clueless about what Jesus is up to, ask him when Israel will break free from Roman rule. Jesus tells them, ‘Don’t worry about when a human kingdom and human power might be restored. Instead, be ready to receive the power of the Holy Spirit and to expand the heavenly kingdom on earth. You’re gonna be my witnesses not just in Jerusalem, but also all the whole region of Judea and Samaria, and, here’s the kicker, you’re going to be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.’ In other words, Jesus tells them: “Kick up your feet for now, but get ready for a wild kicking time because it’s going to get REALLY interesting really soon.” Jesus tells them to rest a little while until the Holy Spirit comes, but then prepare to wear out their shoes ‘cause the Holy Spirit is gonna set the pace for them to travel far and wide. The Holy Spirit, the Pair o cleats, will lead their path out from Jerusalem and into a world that needs an Advocate for them, to advocate for the value of all God’s children, for the value of the Spirit’s spark that dwells inside each of us.

In the second scene of Acts, while the disciples are waiting semi-patiently for the Holy Spirit to arrive, Peter recommends that Judas, who betrayed Jesus and who has since died, be replaced among the twelve inner disciples. Peter suggests as qualifications “someone who has accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning” from day one until now: They “must become a witness with us to his resurrection” [Acts 1:21-22]. Peter’s saying it has to be someone who walked with Jesus all the way from start to finish, who followed in his footsteps. They need to be someone who clung near to Jesus as a witness and an advocate to him, who followed where Jesus’ feet took him, from Galilee and the Jordan River through towns and cities, along the road to Jerusalem and on the steps of the temple, to the upper room, the garden—perhaps the cross—and then the empty tomb. That is a disciple who will then be prepared to be led by the Holy Spirit, the one who walks with us and Advocates for us, through hell or high water.

In today’s story, the Holy Spirit rushes in like a mighty wind, or like divided tongues of fire. But that Spirit doesn’t just inspire the disciples to speak in different languages that the disciples themselves aren’t familiar with. That Spirit like a good soccer cleat kicks the disciples in gear and outside to meet the people of Jerusalem where they are. This Spirit gives them a swift kick in the rear end to leave the room they’ve waited in and to speak of God’s power and love in the world, no matter the language necessary, to advocate for the people who needed to hear the Good News in the world.

Some of the crowd is skeptical of what’s going on, saying, they don’t know what they’re really

talking about. They must be drunk with new wine, they’re talking gibberish! But Peter refutes them, says, “No, instead they’re fulfilling Joel’s words that God will pour out God’s Spirit on all people: through this Spirit, children will see the future, young adults will see visions, elders will dream dreams. Before the coming of the Lord,” Peter continues, “things will get wild, but everyone who calls on God will be saved.” Down the road, things may get messy in this world, it may seem like the world is going to end, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, by the traction of the Paraclete you will make it through the muddy patches and be lifted out of the pits. The Holy Spirit will be the shoes that push you out of the otherwise intractable impasses and quagmires you will face, leading you onward and upward.

As for now, though, Peter says, the Holy Spirit will empower God’s people to envision and dream of the future and to shape their path ahead.

And indeed the biblical witness holds true that the Holy Spirit has and continues to lead people forward in faith and love both around the world but also right here in Connecticut. I have seen the Holy Spirit inspire Senior PF, our high school youth group, to put on their pairs of running cleats to bring God’s good news far and wide to disaster zones and impoverished communities in Kentucky, New Orleans, Long Island, and soon in San Marcos, Texas.

I have seen the Holy Spirit lead you to follow the footsteps of Jesus in worship services, as you have waved palms, listened to or read the Maundy Thursday Tenebrae readings, and sung the Alleluia Chorus on Easter morning. I have seen the Holy Spirit at work in you sharing Holy

COW stories in Lent or Mother's Day stories last Sunday.

I have seen you in tough mudder cleats trudge with the Holy Spirit when you can't go over the swamps, and you can't go under it, you have to go through it, the muckity muck of cancer treatments and bouts of anxiety and depression, addiction in your own life or the life of one you love dearly. The Holy Spirit has been your advocate, helping keep you sane and poised and grounded.

I have seen the Holy Spirit pour itself over this church, leading us to dream of a community where people are healed through the borrowing of medical equipment. With the Holy Spirit we have dreamed of the people of mountainous Peru finding psychological healing after decades of traumatic guerilla warfare. We have dreamed of a place where a refugee or local family in crisis is lifted up by living in an apartment and having advocates, advocates from this church training them for life. And most recently we have dreamed of a community here where local children are fed over the weekends so that they can play and learn with a little more joy in their lives seven days a week. Those dreams became real through the faith of our church and the Holy Spirit working together.

And when I look both inside this space and around downtown Milford, on a beautiful Sunday morning, I see a community that began 377 years ago as a dream of my predecessor Peter and his partners in faith, a dream inspired by their advocate, the Holy Spirit. I see how the Holy Spirit has led this church through so much social change, helping us see the Holy Spirit in all God's people more clearly, helping us to contend with forces of alienation near

and far, until now when the Holy Spirit is still breaking through among us in new and wondrous ways. The Holy Spirit, in the midst of so much division and tumult, unites us in the wonderful name and love of God through Jesus Christ.

This is what we celebrate on Pentecost, not just that the church is born, but that the church is born through the moving of the Holy Spirit, moving us from the sidelines to the front lines, transforming us from disciples who follow into apostles who are sent out into a world that longs and waits to hear from God.

Like the disciples, we have come here waiting for the Holy Spirit.

Now let us tie up our pair o' cleats and get ready to be sent out into the marvelous and messy world in the name of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Amen.