

No Better Advocate

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May 21, 2021 - Sunday after the Ascension

Scripture: John 17:1-11

I came across this week a collection of the worst defenses that have ever been offered in front of a judge. Now granted, these have been sourced from the Internet, so they come with the caveat that the details may be less than accurate, but they make for a good story in any case. Among my findings:¹

There was the man who went to the stand to testify in his own defense, against his lawyers advice, claiming that he was not guilty of the DUI charge as he had only consumed two bottles of wine before operating a vehicle.

There was the woman who claimed that the high blood alcohol content was due to a combination of her diabetes and her dog licking a cut on her arm, introducing yeast into her bloodstream and turning the sugar in her blood into alcohol.

¹ These three stories came from <https://moneywise.com/a/ch-c/dumb-legal-defenses>

But my favorite I found was from the man who was suing another man for an accident that had injured him. He claimed that the accident had permanently reduced the range of movement he had in his arm. The judge calmly asked the man to show how high he could lift his arm now. Slowly, the man lifted his arm part of the way up. Then, the judge asked the man how high he could lift his arm before the accident. Stretching his arm all the way up, the man confidently declared "All the way up here!" He did not win the damages he was seeking.

As it turns out, when trying to make a legal case, it matters who is representing you. When you have needed help in your life, and we all do, who offered that help? Was it the teacher who used her time after school to make sure you were keeping up with the rest of the class? The coach who showed an interest in not just who you were as an athlete, but as a person? Who was it who advocated for you? Maybe you are among the fortunate this morning and multiple names are coming to your mind. Perhaps you find yourself wishing that you had an advocate, or at least better advocates than you had.

A good advocate needs a lot of things, but I want to boil it down to two broad traits - standing and sympathy. By standing, I mean that the person has the ability to help you. Whether through knowledge, skill, position, or authority, an effective advocate possesses something he or

she can leverage for your good. By sympathy, I mean that the good advocate cares about your situation, your predicament, your problem and wants to help. A sympathetic advocate desires for things to get better for you.

You can see how one of these aspects without the other leads to little or no help at all. An advocate with standing but no sympathy has no reason to help. I think of Mister Potter in "It's a Wonderful Life," - all the ability in the world to aid George Bailey, but no will to do it. Similarly ineffective is the would-be advocate who has sympathy to spare, but no standing to be effective. When you are sick, you need a doctor, not just someone who wants you to get better. Sympathy is not a replacement for expertise.

So, in our struggles, in our sins, in our griefs and burdens, in our spiritual lives, who is there to be our advocate? More importantly, who has not only the standing to help us, who has not only the sympathy to care about us, but who is it that has both?

Here in this brief season of Ascensiontide, and as we've focused for the entire season of Easter on the risen Christ, today we look to the not only risen but the ascended Christ. For he is the one who possesses both the standing and the sympathy to be our only mediator and advocate.

And so I am going to follow the preaching advice of one of my fathers in the faith, who revealed a central task of preaching when he gave advice on what to do if you ever find yourself at a loss for words in the pulpit; “brag on Jesus.”

And he is certainly worthy of our praise. If you did not get a chance to listen to Fr. John’s Ascension Day sermon from Thursday, I commend it to you. I won’t attempt to re-say the good words he shared with us, but I will paint a brief picture of our not only risen, but reigning Lord. When Jesus ascends, it is not just some object lesson for the disciples to remember that he will come back again. Jesus’ work in the world isn’t put on pause until the end of all things. No, he ascends to the throne at the right hand of the Father, taking his rightful place as the second person of the Trinity, the King of the Universe. Remember those words he says to the apostles before he ascends? “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”² Ascension is serious business.

Paul describes things in Ephesians chapter 1 by speaking of God’s power and Jesus’ role, emphasizing it for us so that we may know, “what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly

² Matthew 28:19, emphasis mine.

places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”³

Or take the hymn-like language of Philippians 2, which puts the Ascension as a bringing back of the full glory and honor that Christ has emptied himself of in the Incarnation, a reversal of sorts, that leads to even more glory and authority:

“...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁴

³ Eph 1: 19-23

⁴ Phil 2:6-11

“Him who fills all in all,” “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,” “Every knee should bow...every tongue confess,” this is the language of someone who has standing to be our advocate.

So often, we seek for help, we seek to place our identity in things or in persons that don't have the standing to truly help us. We are far too often content with a counterfeit authority. Maybe it is because that so-called authority tells us what we want to hear, maybe it's because we feel like it is our only option, or maybe it's because that counterfeit authority is ourselves and we just want to have it our own way. But we know all too well the end of counterfeit authority - broken promises, broken lives. Nothing good comes from claiming an authority which we simply do not have. The good news of the Ascension is that Jesus' authority is infinite and everlasting. He's not going anywhere and his role is not changing.

That Jesus has this power and authority begs another and equally important question: what does he think about us? You want the person who has authority to like you. This is why teacher's pets exist. I had a friend in eighth grade who had a tendency to get into trouble. And there was a little bit of injustice involved because there were times where he and I would do similar things and he would get the rougher end of the consequences. The difference between him and me was that I had been a little bit more of a goody-two shoes than he had been in sixth and

seventh grade, and so, deservedly or not, I had a better reputation with the teachers than he did. And so, I gave him some slightly devious advice as we went off to separate high schools: I suggested that he take his first two years, ninth and tenth grade, and become the biggest teacher's pet he could be: obeying immediately, yes ma'am-ing and no sir-ing his way to a stellar reputation. Then, his junior and senior years would go much easier and he could take his foot off the gas with the good behavior a little bit. I do not know if my friend followed my advice, but I still maintain that it matters what the person in authority thinks of you.

And here's the thing: we can't fool Jesus into liking us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. We can't good-behavior our way into his favor. But here is the even better news: we don't have to do anything for him to love us. Jesus was for our good and advocating for our good from before we were even born.

If you want to know what someone really thinks of you, listen to how they pray over you. I think we have all had an experience where someone used their prayers to tell us what they thought we should change in our lives. But hopefully, we've much more often heard the prayers of faithful moms, dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters in the faith praying in such a way that reveals their deep love for us, their deep joy in who they see God has created us to be.

If you want to know what Jesus thinks about you, read his prayer over you. Because, yes, the scope of John 17 expands to not only the disciples, but Jesus even prays over us, those who come after them. Hear what Jesus thinks about you from our Gospel reading: “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.”⁵

Jesus first speaks of the gift of eternal life for all of us who are in him. From the top, Jesus is for our eternal good. And remember that he was about to back up this declaration by going to the cross so that it could happen.

Then Jesus goes deeper on what he means by eternal life, asking that we would know God: “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Skipping down to verse 11, Jesus asks that God would keep those who are in Jesus in God’s name, that he would sustain our faithfulness through the difficulties and trials of life, so that we may remain in him,

⁵ John 17:1

that we would remain faithful, and that we would be unified in our obedience, even as Jesus and the Father are one.

Extending beyond our reading for today, Jesus asks that God protect us from the evil one in verse 15, that he sanctify us by his word in verse 17. He asks that we could be with him in verse 24 and declares that God's love is in us in verse 26.

So you want to know what Jesus thinks about you who are in him, what he said about you long before you ever came to be? He seeks to grant you eternal life. He asked that you would be one with those who are also in him. He asked that you be given help in remaining faithful to him. He asks his Father that you would be protected from the evil one and that you would be made holy by God's word. He declares that God's own love is in you. Jesus not only has the standing and authority to help us. He is not only at the Father's right hand. He is in our corner. He has the sympathy to seek our good.

What does Jesus do all day? That sounds like a question a child would ask. Kids ask the best questions. And it's an understandable one, because we have this detailed record in the gospels of Jesus' ministry and then he Ascends to heaven and then what? Is he just waiting around until it's time for him to come back?

I'm not able to give a full answer this morning because we could not even begin to imagine all the the Lord is working for the good of his creation in a single day, but I can tell you this - he is interceding for you, just as he was in the garden, for your good and for God's glory. Romans 8:34 says that at his high and lifted up position at the right hand of the Father, Jesus is not just sitting there, he is interceding for us. The prayer of John 17 continues on our behalf. 1 John 2 calls Jesus our advocate when we fall short in sin. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus "always lives to make intercession," for those who seek God through him.⁶ This is what Jesus does.

Where does your hope lie this morning? We settle far too often for things that neither have the authority to truly help us nor have any actual concern about our well-being. But Jesus is better. If you have not put your trust in him, there is never a better time than now. If you need to do so again, he is waiting. If you need to hear that there is someone who is for you and for your good today, it's him. Whatever your circumstances, he is the one who is fit to be your advocate. Let us come to him. In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶ Hebrews 7:25.