“You probably heard about my complaining, didn’t you?” So began the daughter of a person I serve as hospice chaplain. Well, yes, technically, I had heard that she had recently spoken her mind at the nurses’ station at the facility where her father is residing. “I was loud and didn’t hold back. They must think I’m a lunatic.”

I listened for a while to what amounted to a combination of her reporting the incident and what seemed like somewhat of a confession. I kept silent, maybe partly for fear if I interrupted, I’d be the next one in the firing line to get blasted. That concern was only part of my quiet, though. More importantly, I knew she needed to say what she needed to say.

Once there was a moment’s pause, after thanking her for giving me her perspective, I returned to how she started the conversation. “You said, I probably heard about your complaining. If you had a rewind button, perhaps you’d adjust your volume or tone. What if...just hear me out for a moment...what if instead of calling yourself a ‘complainer,’ we say you ‘advocated’ for your father?”
Think about that. Think about what it means to advocate for someone else. Recall a time someone advocated for you.

This notion of an Advocate is central to today’s Gospel passage. As part of the section of John’s Gospel known as the Farewell Discourse, our reading takes on a sense of urgency when we remember Jesus knew he was speaking these words to his disciples within a day of going to the Cross. The band of followers Jesus chose, who became his closest friends, were going to have to carry on without him being there with them.

His words start and end with, fittingly enough...love. If we claim to be Christians, we do what Jesus taught: love and serve others.

But John’s message is much broader than any single, literal “commandment.” Interpreting the Greek means we are to live differently having been shown by Jesus what it is to love.

My pastor growing up, Monsignor Haughney, often said, “Jesus came to do and to teach.” If we identify as Christians, the actions of the one who responded with compassion – feeding, healing, affirming and respecting - must be reflected in our lives, actions, and relationships.
Then, Jesus tries to assure them, and us, with this strange talk of providing an Advocate. Like much of the Gospels, we might tend to gloss over this and say how lovely it sounds.

Imagine, for a moment, being one of those to whom Jesus spoke these words.

In the moment, it might not have felt very comforting at all!
“Why would we need someone else?
You weren’t kidding when you said you were leaving?”

Think about any change you’ve had. Maybe your teacher at school was promoted to principal or moved to a new school or left to start a family of his or her own. Perhaps as an adult, a favorite co-worker or trusted supervisor retired or left to pursue other opportunities. In our personal lives, all of us are touched by loss in some form or another.

Take those feelings and amp them up to what the disciples might have been feeling.
Take those possible disciples’ feelings and sense Jesus reassuring you, in this moment, with his promise.
Our translation uses “Advocate.” The Greek uses the word “paraclete.” (Please note, I am resisting inserting here any number of parakeet jokes!) Using the somewhat unfamiliar Greek word may actually be helpful. Not to confuse us, but rather, to remind us of the broad, sweeping scope of what Jesus was communicating.

To those who first heard John’s Gospel, “paraclete” implied a wide range of meanings, not just one.

One alongside / a voice in a legal proceeding / counselor comforter / consoler / advocate / helper

Whether in his own life or encouraging others, Mr. Rogers quoted his mom who taught him, “In times of crisis, look for the helpers. There will always be helpers.”

That seems to be what Jesus promises his friends, and us now.

I confess I am almost always skeptical and critical of trainings, webinars, continuing education, and the like. It often seems like presenters are there to plug their latest book, which has a shiny cover and fresh title for an idea that already existed.
I listened to one from the Hospice Foundation recently that softened my jadedness. The presenter lamented the term social distancing, preferring to say, in these times, we must be intentionally socially connected. Since it is essential to maintain safety by being apart, let’s call it *physical distancing* instead.

Maybe the idea did not originate with him, but I liked it. (Maybe because it affirmed the last sermon preached at Union Hill before we hunkered down in March!)

The folks at “Lectionary Headquarters” could scarcely have found a better time to make sure we heard this passage! As we carry on with physical distancing, the Gospel reminds us that love has to carry on after the physical presence of the person Jesus on earth has left.

> By living the life lessons of Jesus, his followers could still love Jesus.

None of us were there. None of us met Jesus face to face in ancient Palestine. Yet whenever we see or participate in love at work, we experience the Presence of Christ with us.
Peg Feyl from the Denville PRIDE Council shared with me that someone once expressed curiosity at experiencing a distinct sense of calm and serenity, to which a nurse present at the time responded, “Well, of course. Jesus was here.”

Isn’t that a wonderful thought?

None of us is ever truly alone. Even in stress or crisis. Even in isolation or loss. Just like those who first heard these words, we are promised as those who love Jesus - in how we respond with lives of love and compassion – we are neither abandoned or alone.

Our passage circles back to where it began: Love. Evident in a personal relationship with Jesus, coupled with outward expressions of living differently because of it, love is central to who we are.

The mom of Mr. Rogers taught him well. Whatever you are facing, look for the helpers. They may present themselves as doctors, nurses, teachers, family, neighbors… or fellow church members. Look for the helpers. Look to BE one of the helpers. When you see helpers, what you discover is The Helper Jesus promises.