

#760 See my Lawyer

This week's Thursday Theology is a Pentecost sermon by Steve Albertin, my fellow editorial-board member and a frequent Crossings writer. Pentecost may feel far away, but Steve's main points are timeless: the judgment inherent in God's law, the salvation given to us through his Son, and the role of the Holy Spirit as our divine Advocate.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"SEE MY LAWYER!"

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Day of Pentecost

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Christ Church

The Lutheran Church of Zionsville (Indiana)

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The legal profession has always been a lightning rod of controversy and a source of contention. William Shakespeare in his play *Henry VI* once recommended that we ought to kill all the lawyers for all the harm they do.

Much of the criticism and ridicule that is directed at lawyers is unfair. It reflects more the distortion of a stereotype than the truth of reality. Who of us, if we were in trouble, would not want a lawyer? If we were the target of an unfair accusation, who of us would not be grateful to say, "See my lawyer?"

Forty-six years ago the Supreme Court's Miranda decision guaranteed every person accused of a crime, regardless of his or her race, religion, economic, or social status, the right to say, "See my lawyer." The hard work of lawyers puts the guilty in jail and keeps the innocent out of jail.

Today we celebrate the birth of the Church on that first Pentecost when (according to our first reading, from the book of Acts), in the midst of tongues of fire and the sound of a rushing wind and the miracle of many languages, the Holy Spirit was poured upon Jesus' disciples.

In today's gospel Jesus calls that Holy Spirit...a lawyer.

It is Maundy Thursday. Jesus gathers his disciples in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover. He knows that danger is near. His betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion are at hand. He declares that he is about to leave his disciples. They are afraid to be alone without their Master. Then Jesus says something that is simply amazing. Even though He will be leaving them, He will not abandon them. In fact, He is leaving them so that they will actually be better off. He is leaving so that He can send them a lawyer, an advocate, the Holy Spirit to defend and protect them in times of need. In the future whenever they have their backs to the wall, with complete confidence they can say, "See my lawyer."

That day arrived on Pentecost.

A lawyer is skilled in the art of rhetoric and persuasion so that he can defend and speak well of another. Jesus says that is the job of the Holy Spirit. His first job is to speak well of Jesus TO US, to make the case for Jesus as our Savior so that we would believe in Him. The Holy Spirit helps us to believe the gospel and the good news it offers.

That is how Martin Luther describes the work of the Holy Spirit in his explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism. He says,

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or effort believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me with the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept in the true faith.

But the Holy Spirit, the lawyer, does even more. He not only makes the case for Jesus TO US, he makes a case for us TO GOD! Like a lawyer defending his client, the Holy Spirit speaks *for us and on our behalf* TO GOD.

Can you imagine standing before God with our whole life in our hands? What would we do? What could we say in defense of ourselves, standing before the creator of heaven and earth, who owns the universe and knows everything about us?

Do you remember Ken Starr, the special prosecutor appointed to preside over the investigation of President Clinton back in the 1990s? Whatever you might think of Ken Starr and his investigation of the president, it is not surprising that after spending \$50 million he was able to turn up "dirt" on the former president. Who of us would be able to withstand someone spending \$50 million to investigate us? Surely after spending that kind of money any lawyer would be able to discover our sins and misdeeds, the secrets we would like to keep covered up and buried in the past, the skeletons we would like to keep hidden in the closet and under tight wrap. The deeds of which we are ashamed and the slips of which we are embarrassed would be brought to the light of day. And if \$50 million could do this, can you imagine what almighty God could do to us? Who of us could ever hope to withstand an investigation like this?

We encounter that God every day in the criticism of our

teachers, the demands of our employers, disapproval of our rivals, the rejection of our friends, the complaints of our spouse, the accusations of our enemies, the shame of our failures, the slow decay of our aging bodies, and the disappointment of not making the team or being invited to the big party. We want to run. We try to make excuses. We rationalize. We blame. But there is no escaping the criticism and the constant pressure to make our case and prove that we are right.

Can any of us hope to stand up to such criticism, especially if the one shaking His finger at us is not merely our boss, our friend, or our rival...but God?

We may not think that we can, but Jesus does! He tells us what we can do. It is really quite simple. He says, "See my lawyer." The Holy Spirit will be our defender and lawyer. He will make a case for us in response to all the critics who wag their fingers, list our failures, and expose our dirty underwear for all the world, and God, to see.

However, the Holy Spirit has a strange defense strategy. We expect a lawyer to defend us by disputing the charges against us and proving our innocence. A lawyer should offer evidence to get us off the hook. However, not this lawyer! Not the Holy Spirit! This lawyer does not defend us by refuting the charges against us and proving that we are better than we seem. He does not overlook our foibles. Instead, he reveals our guilt and then does something that is utterly mind-boggling. He talks not about us and what we have done but about Jesus and what He has done. He points to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, as if that is all that matters.

If any other lawyer would try to use this kind of legal strategy in a court of law, he would be laughed out of court. Even worse,

he would be declared out of order. And worst of all, he might even be disbarred for dishonoring the court with such an outrageous strategy. It would be like a lawyer arguing for the innocence of his client, who, even though he was caught with blood on his hands and the murder weapon in his pocket, couldn't be guilty because his friend was innocent. It would be like Johnny receiving an F on his math test but arguing that he should receive an A because his best friend got an A. It would be like a worker arguing with his boss that he ought to get paid for forty hours of work even though he didn't show up for work all week but his friend did.

It is absurd, but that is precisely the strategy that the Holy Spirit uses to make His case on our behalf.

As we meet the Creator of heaven and earth, the ultimate judge of all places, things, and people, in the criticism and demands of daily life, God says, "Explain yourself. Show me why I ought to acquit you."

We answer, "Yup! You got me, but...See my lawyer."

And our lawyer, the Holy Spirit, says, "See Jesus, whom You, God, sent to suffer, die, and be raised on behalf of just such sinners as these. Now, this was all Your idea in the first place. Are you going to renege on what You did?"

And God says to us, "Well, with this kind of a lawyer what can I say? Your sins are forgiven! You are free. Go and tell the rest of the world the good news. They too can say, 'See my lawyer!'"