

Welcome

Introduction to the Vigenère Cipher

This is one of the first ciphers we've seen that really takes a lot of help. It's designed to be much more secure than the Caesarian or Pigpen ciphers, for instance.

I thought this one would be fun because today, we're exploring legal codes. What do we do when following God goes against the law of the land, or at least the cultural mores.

Since Jesus was crucified by Rome, executed as a political criminal, Christians have always found ourselves speaking truth to power, standing against the forces of injustice and oppression for the sake of the most vulnerable.

But... anyone else want to admit they feel wildly underqualified for this sort of work?

I know I do.

What does Jesus expect us to do when we're in over our heads? When the forces of evil are so insidious and overwhelming?

Message

We're in the wake of Easter, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. Here at Catalyst, we celebrate the resurrection not as a cool thing that happened that one time, but as an ongoing reality in which we all get to participate. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of a new creation, a new reality that is coming into being all around us. We can learn to see this new reality breaking through the old through Jesus himself. By giving us the Holy Spirit to live within and among us, Jesus enables us to see and participate in God's new world.

That's why our series is called DECODER RING. Jesus enables us to discern what would otherwise be hidden to us.

We began on Easter with the Resurrection as the Eighth day, the first day of a new creation week. Then Sonya and Matt helped us see how Jesus invites us to see that he is the fulfillment of God's long plan for the flourishing of all peoples.

Last week, we saw that Jesus invites us into his work in the here and now, not after we die.

Today, then, I want to explore how Jesus promises to be with us in that work. After all, it was exactly his proclamation of good news that got Jesus crucified. Throughout history, Christians engaging in the real work of bringing God's peace to the world around us has been dangerous. From the early Christians martyred by Rome to the 18th and 19th century abolitionists to the civil rights activists of today, those who engage our unjust world for the sake of Jesus' liberating good news often face real danger.

That's because sin and evil function at more than just an individual level. When Paul writes in his letters about the 'powers and principalities', or when Jesus warns about the 'ruler of this world', they're talking about the systems and structures of our world.

After all, it's not a question that individual enslavers were sinners. But they couldn't have enslaved millions by themselves... it took a sinful system - laws, lawmakers, culture, society - to enable them.

We see the same things today when it comes to lawmakers enacting anti-trans and other anti-queer legislation, or banning books in our classrooms because they tell the truth about racism.

And in our little congregation, we have folks who feel the weight of these harmful policies, these sinful systems and structures.

What do we do when right is wrong? When following Jesus is against the law? Or more generally when standing up for what's right against cultural pressures that want to keep things the way they are?

Turn with us to [John 14](#).

John's gospel likely dates from around 90 CE, which is about a generation and half after Jesus' death and resurrection. Many of the Christians across the Roman Empire were facing persecution that ranged from legal action - up to and including execution - to the more informal social pressures. That could be anything from being kicked out of your vocational guild for refusing to worship the local gods to being rejected by friends, neighbors and family.

It's into this context the gospel writer reminds these disciples of Jesus' words. He self-consciously uses legal language. Jesus refers to himself as an Advocate - what we think of as a defense attorney.

So think about that image for a moment:

Jesus is the one who defends us against the accusation that we're wrong. That we're false.

Jesus' love is radical. It's offensive to the powers who want to maintain unjust systems from which they benefit. So when we imitate Jesus' radical, liberating love, we can expect to meet the same sort of resistance Jesus did.

Jesus defends us. He's our Advocate, proving by his resurrection that we are following the way of truth.

But that's not all... let's read beginning in verse 15 of [John 14](#):

"If you love me, obey my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you. No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Since I live, you also will live. When I am raised to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them. And I will love them and reveal myself to each of them." -- John 14:15–21 (NLT)

That's right... Jesus' death and resurrection open up a new relationship to us - one with God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to be our Advocate. The Holy Spirit will be our defender, the one who argues our case before the world court, the one who demonstrates the righteousness of our cause, or lives.

This is an incredible promise with massive implications for us as we seek to follow Jesus today. But before we dive into those, I want to celebrate with you the truth that Jesus didn't abandon us - to death *or* to heaven.

Rather, by going to the cross, he made it possible for us to receive God's Holy Spirit!

Song

Over the last several years, we've witnessed a concerted effort in the US to harm minority populations. In Texas, we've seen an increasing number of school districts besieged by parents and activists who want to censor textbooks and libraries to exclude books that tell the truth about the history of race in America, acknowledge experiences outside the hetero-normative and teaching about the holocaust, for instance.

We have educators in our own congregation who are at the forefront of these debates, who are working tirelessly to offer a fuller, more comprehensive history of the US as part of a Texas student's education.

This is Jesus-work.

In Jesus' day, he stood against Rome's story of peace. They called it the Pax Romana - the Peace of Rome. The story was that Rome was the divinely-ordained ruler of the world, and they came to bring peace to the world.

Jesus told a different story - one he called the Kingdom of God. In Rome's story, enemies were crucified. Jesus invited his followers to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Rome made peace at the end of a sword. It was the peace of "our way or death". Jesus made peace by giving up his own life (like we talked about last week). His good news was the lifting up of the vulnerable, not the continued oppression of them.

When we choose to speak up, to advocate, for the vulnerable, we face real consequences.

None of this should be surprising to us. Jesus warned us that when we follow him, when we make what *he* cares about - announcing a kingdom where the last are first and the first are last, where those at the margins are centered and those at the center are moved to the margins, this kingdom of God - when we make that what *we* care about, those who are at the center, the lawmakers and policy-implementer and the majority culture folks and the Caesars - of course they're going to feel threatened. Of course they're going to respond and use every tool in their tool belt.

This is why Jesus promises we won't be alone in this. We have an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to serve as our defense attorney.

I want to imagine a little bit here what that might look like.

When I was studying New Testament at University, there were several students who objected to the idea that they needed a special training or education to be a pastor. They cited passages like this one and said, "I trust the Holy Spirit to give me the right words when it's time."

One professor laughed when a student expressed that sentiment and said, "You might want to consider giving the Holy Spirit something to work with."

What he was suggesting is really important: when Jesus tells us the Holy Spirit is our Advocate, the one who will lead us into truth, he's *not* saying that the Spirit works like Neo in the Matrix, where we plug in and download whatever info we need.

No, Jesus is inviting us into a partnership, where we show up and do whatever we can and trust the Spirit to take care of us.

Now, sometimes that absolutely will mean we're unqualified and unprepared. Remember the Man Born Blind? Sonya taught us about him during Lent, and we revisited his situation a couple of weeks ago.

Because he was born blind, he was excluded from worship, from any sort of education. So when the Pharisees haul him into the synagogue and begin interrogating him, he says, “Look, I don’t know anything about anything. All I know is: I was blind. Now I can see.”

Then Jesus shows up and goes to bat for him. Jesus is his Advocate there.

But friends, there are plenty of other situations where God calls us into a space of advocacy. There’s a particular injustice that really, deeply rankles us.

In those spaces, yes, the Holy Spirit is still our Advocate. But we can also do our part to give the Spirit something to work with.

I look at folks in our congregation like Sue Sweeney and Sarah Villafane, who are both educators working to help teachers educate rather than indoctrinate kids in Texas. They have spent countless hours educating themselves about the issues that teachers face and the issues they teach. Sue has a bookshelf overflowing with books on history from Texas to US to world perspectives. They both put in countless hours outside their regular work hours, including trips to Austin to advocate for equitable education and just working conditions for teachers.

So yes, they can trust the Holy Spirit to be their Advocate as they work in those spaces. But they’re doing their parts, too. Making sure the Spirit has plenty to work with as they partner together for the sake of justice.

What about you, friends? What are the spaces where you feel a particular nudge toward justice? A particular issue that really weighs on you or a vulnerable population to whom you feel drawn?

What might it look like to listen to that draw as an invitation from Jesus to join the work he’s prepared for you? Can you step into those scary spaces in faith, trusting the Holy Spirit is your Advocate?

Communion + Examen

We come to the table to find our ground and center

When in the last week have I felt connected to the Holy Spirit?

When in the last week have I felt overwhelmed?

When in the next week might I feel overwhelmed by God’s call on my life?

What does it look like for me to trust in the Holy Spirit in those spaces?

Assignment + Blessing