

May 20 2018 Pentecost

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

During the Easter season, leading up to Pentecost, we have been reading from the book of John, and listening in on Jesus' last conversation with his disciples. He has called them friends, commanded them to serve, prayed for them, and in today's passage he promises them the Holy Spirit. Today is Pentecost – the Sunday we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem after Jesus' death, so today we hear Jesus' words from John:

'When the Advocate (or Paraclete) comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

'I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, "Where are you going?" But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A lot of what Jesus has said about the Holy Spirit has been the subject of dry theological debate forever. You can get caught up in all kinds of debates about the relationship between God, Christ, and Holy Spirit. And equally technical debates about when the Holy Spirit has been present – since the beginning of creation when God’s breath moved across the waters? FYI yes, but not everyone thinks so. Because of this passage.

It somehow feels wrong that the Holy Spirit is the subject of dry theological debate. Because in the book of Acts, the Spirit comes to the disciples 50 days after Jesus’ death, descending like tongues of fire and with a rush of wind, while they celebrate a religious holiday in Jerusalem. The Spirit empowers the disciples to speak different languages to the crowd - languages that peasants from Nazareth would not have ever learned to speak fluently. How can this crazy life changing spirit turn technical?

In the book of John, Jesus calls the Spirit the Paraclete. It’s a hard word to translate, although our Bible today translated it as Advocate. The Greek noun Paraclete is related to a verb that means “I call alongside.” So the Paraclete will accompany or come alongside Jesus’ followers as helper, counselor, advocate, and guide.

This conversation Jesus is having with his disciples takes place the night before his death. As Jesus talks about no longer being with them, his disciples have been stunned into silence. They don’t know what to say. Jesus assures them, however, that when he leaves the Paraclete will be constantly present. They will experience still the living presence of the divine among and within them. The Paraclete will help them to abide in Jesus’ love.

Jesus also describes the Paraclete as the Spirit of truth who will expose sin, righteousness, and judgment and who will lead Jesus’ followers into all truth. Key here is what Jesus means by truth. We aren’t talking about dogma here. Jesus does not send the Spirit to make sure the disciples define the Trinity correctly or have the right description of the nature of Christ’s presence in the consecrated bread and wine – something which has divided the church for centuries.

No, Jesus sends the Spirit of truth to help his followers live in the Way of Jesus. And the way of Jesus and the truth of Jesus is this: that we are created to love one another. So the Holy Spirit is first and foremost about helping us swim in the river

of God's love. And when the Holy Spirit exposes sin, righteousness and judgment: Sin is about hurting and harming others, righteousness is living rightly which is being honest and kind and building others up, and judgement has everything to do with Jesus' judging the violence of the world by overcoming it in his resurrection.

The Spirit of truth leads us in the way of Jesus, whose love for the world led him to lay down his life for it. The Spirit's task is to help us remember what Jesus has already taught the disciples and to teach us more – teach us things that will only make sense after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus is all about living in the ways of life and creation, not in the ways of death and destruction.

The institutional church has tended to be very cautious about the work of the Holy Spirit. It has suggested that we experience the presence of the Paraclete very personally and it's all about a sense of God's presence. Then the simple question is: "when did you last feel the workings of the Holy Spirit?" And it can embarrass us – make us feel like we aren't adequate Christians. Which is the opposite of what Jesus intended. He wanted us to know his eternal presence, not his absence. Yet that question can make us wonder about our remoteness from God because most of us just don't powerfully experience God's presence all that often.

Moltmann, who is one of the foremost theologians of today, suggests rephrasing the question. He thinks we can answer: "when did you last feel the spirit of life?" We can talk about experiences of great inspiration or encouragement, or of great sorrow. We can talk about our love of life, about the things that delight us, and about how the love of life awakens in us energy.

Moltmann would say the spirit of God is called Holy Spirit because it makes our life here something living, something with energy and purpose and beauty – rather than life as something to be endured. It sees this life – lived in the presence of the living God – as something that not just occurs but something that has substance and form and takes shape in the great river of eternal divine love. Moltmann lifts our awareness of the unity between the experience of God and the experience of life.

He suggests we can understand God the Holy Spirit better in the experience of affirmed and loved life. Life becomes about living and joy as it affirms other life and is itself affirmed. But because there is lots of destruction going on, we miss out a lot on the opportunity to see God's presence in affirming and loving others. We forget to do it. We forget the power it has.

Moltmann warns of the danger of getting used to death. I couldn't help but think about the school shooting in Texas this week. If you heard interviews with people afterwards you heard some people say they didn't expect it to happen at their school. But you heard others say they weren't surprised, and they did almost expect it – it was only a matter of time....

Getting used to death freezes us into lifelessness. We throw up our hands in helplessness as if there is nothing we can do. We become not unlike the folks in Germany who felt there was nothing they could do to stop the execution of Jews. We become not unlike the folks who had questions about slavery but felt like you can't change society and cautioned against moving too fast. We become like those who said the Cuyahoga River and Lake Erie could never come back to life. We become like those who say you cannot feed the hungry when in fact we continue to bring the proportion of people who go hungry down.

So it is essential to affirm life – the life of others, and our own lives. If not, there will be no rebirth and no restoration of life that is threatened.

When we open ourselves to the ways of Jesus, the creative powers of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit it changes everything. We refuse to get used to the ways of death. We live in the river of divine love. We experience energy and the presence of divine love in all that builds up life.

We say no to poverty, to violence, to injustice, to torture, to suffering to murder. We refuse to get used to it. We do not conform.

We experience God as immanent, present and powerful. And we experience ourselves and others as capable of change and becoming better.

The Holy spirit doesn't just reveal God to us but helps us see all of life as sanctified, holy, set apart for God. And a place where God is powerfully present.

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