

Spirit Advocate
John 14.8-17, 25-27
Pentecost C
May 15, 2016
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St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

A pendulum swings in scripture between action and mystery. As we swing toward action we pass through the cries of the prophets for us to be a particular kind of people in the world, through the life and work of Jesus, and into the formation of the 1st century church. As we swing toward mystery, we hear the poetry of creation, the metaphors of God as lover and mother, swiftly moving through apocalyptic literature, and into this week and the next of paraclete and perichoresis—the presence of God as Spirit and the reality of God as a moving, dynamic, triune reality of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Some of you just got really excited because you love mystery. You delight in the unknowable when we make our best attempts to give words to what is essence and structure to that hovering breath over the formless void. You are not frightened by the ambiguity of such things, and you are comfortable hanging your hat on a hunch. You have seen a gleam in the eye and felt a breeze on your skin that lets you know the mystery is, in fact, close as breath and just as real. You do not need a step-by-step guide to the Divine. Your awareness is heightened to a less linear, Divine flow, and you know that you are rooted in a deep and long tradition.

Some of you are now rolling your eyes or tightening your grip because this notion of mystery is either too "hippie dippie" or too abstract—it's not logical and tethered to fact and reality or it's too fleeting and impossible to pin down. Either way, mystery cannot be proven or controlled, and that makes some of you quite uncomfortable. You like action because action creates a direct line between being and doing. When it comes to faith, you want some direct lines between all of the words about God and all of the details of your life. Seek justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God—done. Action. It certainly isn't easy, but these ways of living are definable and tangible. You can give your days to loving, advocating, protesting, studying, serving and know that you are rooted in a deep and long tradition.

A gift of the liturgical calendar and following the readings of the Revised Common Lectionary is that we follow that pendulum back and forth throughout the year. We need both ends of the continuum and the stops along the way. Those of us who

intuitively spend most of our time on the mystic end where God is the source and flow and essence in which we live and move and have our being need the call to action. And those of us who want concrete, actionable tasks to live out our faith in logical, tangible ways need the call to mystery. We need both. We need the movement between all the ways to God because we begin to discover with Catherine of Siena, "All the way to heaven is heaven, for Jesus said, I am the way."

Poet Czeslaw Milosz¹ (Ches-swaf Meewosh) gets at this tension between mystery and action and guides us beautifully into today's gospel lesson:

Come, Holy Spirit,
bending or not bending the grasses,
appearing or not above our heads in a tongue of flame,
at hay harvest or when they plough in the orchards or when snow
covers crippled firs in the Sierra Nevada.
I am only a man: I need visible signs.
I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.
Many a time I asked, you know it well, that the statue in church
lifts its hand, only once, just once, for me.
But I understand that signs must be human,
therefore call one man, anywhere on earth,
not me—after all I have some decency—
and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we look not to the grand display of Acts 2 but to a continuation of conversation between Jesus and his disciples in John 14 where we have stopped so often over the past three months. Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples and has commanded them to love one another. Over and over he has claimed them and said, "Because you are mine, you must love one another. To love me and know me and follow me is to live in love. Be servants to one another. Love as I have loved. You will know God more fully if you live and love like this." This is action. We get it. We can do this. We can live in love and follow in the way of Jesus. We can study the stories and go and do likewise.

Then Jesus keeps talking, and Philip starts asking questions. If Jesus is the Way and knowing Jesus is knowing God, then surely Jesus can just show God to the disciples. "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," Philip says to Jesus. I love Philip for his directness and confidence. I love Philip for either pretending or sincerely believing that

¹ Czeslaw Milosz, *Selected and Last Poems 1931-2004*

he wouldn't have a thousand follow-up questions to this one request should Jesus actually open a portal to satisfy Philip's curiosity. If the statue in Milosz's (Meewosh's) poem had, in fact, lifted one hand just once, would that have proven the God-ness of God once and for all or merely sparked a new obsession?

Jesus doesn't laugh or reprimand Philip for wanting to bring action and mystery closer together. Instead, Jesus gives him even more mystery. "How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works." The action and the mystery are unified in the person of Christ. Somehow Jesus is in God and God is in Jesus through the words and ways of Jesus' life. And in the absence of Father and Son, there will be "another Advocate" to be with Jesus' followers forever. This Spirit of Truth will continue the work of Jesus in the lives of the disciples and will be in them. Jesus is in the Father. The Father is in Jesus. The Spirit is in the people.

Next Sunday is Trinity Sunday, and we'll explore more thoroughly this notion of Father and Son and Spirit existing within one another and within those who chase after that Divine dance. Richard Rohr has a book coming out in a few months dedicated to this very notion of Trinity, and we'll begin to look at some of those concepts next week and again later this year. For today, we sit with Philip's question, "Just show us. Just show us where you're going and what God is like, and we promise we'll be satisfied. We promise our questions will all be answered. Just lift your hand one time and wave at us, and that will be enough."

Instead, Jesus reminds us again to love him and love each other. And somehow, that way of action then invites us back into the mystery and gives us access to this Spirit Advocate who guides us in truth and peace. Jesus promises there is peace in this way, and the Spirit will remind us all of these words when we begin to forget.

On Pentecost Sunday we often talk about the Holy Spirit as the rabble-rouser of the Trinity who breaks into our comfortable world and re-orders everything in ways that may shock and amaze us. I quote Annie Dillard on our unwittingly dangerous invocation of the Spirit: "The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning." And we cautiously question if we might welcome such a holy presence here as though the invitation is optional because all of that sounds terrifying. To think that church may change forever scares us. To think our lives may be rearranged and reordered is unnerving, at best. Is the wild and windy Spirit of God chaotic? Not according to John's Gospel.

For John, to be on the way of Jesus is to be in the Spirit, and that Spirit brings peace and truth. This Spirit re-orders things to connect Jesus' followers to the mysterious action of God. And Jesus makes clear that not everyone knows this Spirit, so there is an element of voluntarism. You must want to know and be known. You must have a hunch that your life needs to be re-ordered. You must have some stirring within you that being on the Way of Jesus is requiring you to let go of some other Ways that no longer serve who you are and who you are becoming. And so this Spirit of peace and truth, this Advocate, begins to move and work when you are ready. And it will not be a terrifying process of releasing and rearranging because this Spirit brings peace, reminds you of the love of Jesus, and is ultimately returning you to your truest and fullest self as created and breathed by God. A mysterious activity, indeed.

Like all birthdays and anniversaries, this birthday of the church is a marking day to remind us of our story. It seems that is surely the work the Spirit—reminding us that we are people of action and people of mystery. We hold tightly and boldly all that we know and profess and believe. We hold lightly and loosely the mysteries of God of which we catch glimpses and hints. When we wonder if we are truly on *THE* path and wish for that sign or that statue's hand to rise to give us a sign, may the Spirit remind us of Czeslaw Milosz' (Ches-swaf Meewosh's) final words in that Spirit poem, "therefore call one man, anywhere on earth/not me—after all I have some decency—/and allow me, when I look at him, to marvel at you."

This Way of action and mystery is not a solo journey. The Spirit is not just working in me but in you and in us. "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied," Philip implores. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," Jesus says. God is already in and around us. The Way of Jesus is winding through us. The Spirit of God is present even now in this very breath. Wake up and take notice! May we look around and see what is already here. Allow us, O God, to marvel at you. Amen.