

Sunday, May 25, 2014
Easter 6A
John 14:15-21
In Spirit and In Truth
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ENCOUNTERING THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

We're entering the part of the church year that I call "that Annie Dillard quote" season. Her jarring words from *Teaching a Stone to Talk* usher me into this season of Spirit at the tail end of Easter. She writes:

"Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return."¹

Last week we said faith in Jesus is to be walked out. This week we start walking, and it very well may lead us to where we can never return. That's the risk of the Spirit.

We'll spend three Sundays talking about the Spirit of God resting on us, hovering over us, dwelling within us, advocating for our good. It's important to linger here because we're talking about giving a name to the times we experience God at work in our lives. We're understanding together that God is at work in our story when we stand up for what is right, when we work for the common good, when we tell our truth, when we help and love each other. Those are not just right and good moments, those are the moments that God's story intersects with ours—those are moments of Truth that point us to God's invisible Spirit at work around us.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

As Jesus prepares to leave for good, he prepares his followers to welcome Spirit and pay attention to Spirit. Not a presence of coercion or force, but one available to all who seek it out.

Sometimes these biblical stories and concepts are hard to make practical. We can understand Jesus and Holy Spirit as Advocate in many ways. For today, we consider how we are invited to participate in the story. Just like God invites the man and woman of Genesis 1&2 to be co-creators, the work of the Spirit beginning in John 14 is work that we are called to do. Just as Jesus walked alongside the disciples, teaching them and showing them his way of life, the Spirit is ever present to us and ever ready to invite us to something new. In welcoming God's presence in this way, we are committing ourselves to walk alongside one another here in this church, throughout this city, and across the world. The first step is to listen quietly for direction.

LISTENING QUIETLY

This past week felt disjointed to me. It was a week with many unexpected phone calls, office visits, fascinating and hilarious conversation, frightening then relieving medical news in our family, but no easy rhythm to the days. Now I step back and see surprising moments in which God's Spirit showed up. So when I advise that we listen quietly for the voice of God, what I really mean is living slowly enough that we make room to listen to our lives. We pay attention to our days, to the moments that could feel like interruptions but are really opportunities to know ourselves more fully, understand our interconnectedness more clearly, and discern in the interruptions where our path might be leading us next.

So often we want others to tell us what the right thing is or someone to confirm the right next step. We're scared of making the wrong choice that will ruin us forever—should I take that job, change schools, say yes, say no, stand up and speak out or lay low and stay quiet? The answer is often: be still, be quiet, and listen. Listen to the Spirit of God moving within you, listen for your own voice, pay attention to the way your body communicates with instinct and impulse. Trust that God is with you even though you cannot see. Trust that Christ speaks to you even though you cannot hear. Because the Spirit is attentive and present as breath. The Spirit calls us to Truth.

When we are anxious and not listening to our lives, we easily veer off the path of Truth. My favorite hymn text reminds me, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love." Jesus knows it's true about those disciples and about me. We need an Advocate to remind us who we really are, to bind us to God's Truth, and to move us back onto the way of action and compassion and faithful living. Just as Jesus was an advocate, the Spirit is an advocate. And we are to reflect this way with our lives.

It really is all of us, too. WE are to reflect this way with OUR lives, together. The “yous” in this text are plural. This is not “you” individual follower, believer. This is “y’all” as in “all y’all”—when y’all love each other, I’m with you. When y’all act in loving ways, you’re acting in my ways. We listen and discern and perceive God’s presence as a people. We act in God’s ways together, as one body. This is why Jesus says the Spirit will be in you—y’all. The world will know God when the world sees y’all living this love out.

The Spirit is working for the good of all people and all things. The Spirit guides us to turn outward by first listening inward. When we are still, breathing, listening, we prepare to move beyond the walls of this church. The walls can close in on us when we aren’t living in Spirit and in Truth. They become walls of isolation. But with the advocating presence of the Spirit, they become walls of welcome and safe harbor. We welcome people in, we walk alongside and love one another, then we head back out to live in love out there. So what happens in here is holy work.

RESPONDING IN LOVE

Rev. Emily Scott writes, “Recently I learned that ‘holy’ is from the old English word halig, which simply means ‘whole.’...Perhaps that changes everything. That the church might be less about setting certain things apart as holy, and more about marking what is rare, what is beautiful, what is lovely, as whole.”²

We’ve talked often about the need for us to love one another here in this community. This is the place where all are welcome (really welcome), a place where we admit when we’re wrong and forgive each other graciously, a place where we laugh and eat, agree and disagree, a place where we share life together. A place where we are made whole.

We need the Spirit because we forget. If we have trouble remembering to love each other in here, then we certainly have trouble remembering to love the world out there. That’s why David Lose suggests this text is calling churches to become “communities of the Spirit”.³ We help each other remember how to live.

John’s gospel returns to the theme of Christian community loving one another in the name and way of Jesus. But that love is not to be restricted to the space of Christian community. In fact, one emphasis of Jesus’ preparing words in this text (and in the two

² Emily M. D. Scott, *Reflections: Yale Divinity School Spring 2014*, “Holy Things for Holy People”, p. 15

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3226>

weeks to follow) is that our love should extend beyond this community into the world around us. When the Spirit calls us to live in Truth, we are actively looking for ways to serve others. In John's context, we're also being called to live as God's advocates.

ACTING AS ADVOCATES

In her study of the morning's text, writer Rachel Held Evans pointed out that throughout history, the church has consistently failed to "advocate for the vulnerable among us." We have reflected the values of the kingdoms of the world rather than the values of the kingdom of God.

But scripture keeps nudging us to reconsider and try again. Evans notes the deep significance of Jesus' words, "I will not leave you orphans," writing, "This strikes me as a fitting and profound way for Jesus to introduce the Holy Spirit as Paraclete— Comforter, Intercessor, Advocate—because it stands in the context of vast biblical testimony regarding the importance of defending orphans and widows. "

In John's gospel, "the Holy Spirit is an advocate that looks a whole lot like Jesus. Which means that we've actually seen the Spirit lots of times. Anytime, in fact, someone stands up for another... Anytime someone acts like Jesus... Anytime someone bears the love of Christ to another... we've seen the Holy Spirit."⁴

We're listening for a pattern, a movement, a nudging onto a way. We're living that out in our relationships here. We're welcoming others into this practice with us. And we gradually begin to understand that Jesus says he is sending this Spirit of Truth to dwell with us because he really does believe that we can love the world into wholeness. We can work to make things right. We can name what is good and holy. We can confess what is broken and must end. We can do the work of God when we give our lives to God's way. Then we need that Spirit whispering again to remind us of all the things: that God is with us, that we're doing well, we're on the right path, to keep listening and then acting, to know when to speak up and step out in boldness of faith.

But many churches haven't been living in this way for a very long time. Maybe we got comfortable. We thought we had a sure thing going on that would last forever, so we didn't really have to take Jesus' words too seriously. But at some point, the church in the U. S. became known as being against cultural and social issues while not offering much life. People discovered brunch, and that an hour with friends over coffee offered more life than we had to give in here.

⁴ David Lose: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1573>

Ian Oliver of Yale University says of this shift in the church's story, "But people aren't leaving the church because it's not authentically Christian enough. They're leaving because Christians have finally convinced them by our behavior that Christianity is irrelevant to their struggles."⁵ Too many people experienced that the church was not a place to be yourself, to tell the truth, to find comfort and community, and to offer all of that back to the world. Too many people noticed that the church was more interested in sustaining itself than being a vessel of transformation in lives and in the world.

Any future a thriving congregation may hope to have depends on its willingness to be a community of Spirit. That is to say we either walk alongside one another and advocate for the common good in such a way that we are testifying to the very Spirit and Love of God, or we slowly die out as museums to a popular cultural phenomenon of the 20th century. This is why Annie Dillard says the Spirit may draw us to where we can never return. The Spirit welcomes interruptions and detours, truth telling and risk taking because so much is at stake. "[W]hen we come along side each other to comfort and encourage and when we act like Jesus, we live into the Holy Spirit's invitation and very being."⁶

We are being asked to act in concrete ways, in God's name.

When we hear of kidnapped girls in Nigeria, when we read of yet another mass shooting (seven killed in California and 4 killed in Belgium), or learn of a homeless encampment just a mile up the road from our church building, we are begin asked to act. Our actions will vary with each story and in each place, but their essence will always reflect God's Spirit.

"[T]he word employed by John in this passage," writes David Lose, is "often translated 'Advocate' [but] can have several overlapping meanings. It can function in a legal sense, meaning literally one who advocates for you before a court of law. And it can function more relationally by designating one who brings help, consolation, comfort, and encouragement. All of these however, derive from the most basic meaning of the word to 'come along side another.'"

How then do we advocate by coming along side another, particularly when we start talking about immense need and dramatic events? Darrell Smith got at this idea on Wednesday night during his presentation on creation care and poverty through his

⁵ Ian Oliver, *Reflections: Yale Divinity School Spring 2014*, "A Dispatch from the Front Lines", p. 7

⁶ David Lose, *Working Preacher*

nonprofit organization, Global Environmental Relief. Darrell shared GER's vision and mission "to provide hope by helping to create a world where suffering due to adverse environmental conditions is a thing of the past. Those most affected - the poor, the marginalized, the powerless - are also the ones most in need of someone to work alongside them."

As Darrell talked about the church groups that join him in ministry in far off places, he mentioned that he does not invite groups who are not actively engaged in mission and ministry in their own towns. He consistently partners with groups who understand advocacy in the way that John 14 describes advocacy—walking alongside one another. If the trip might become poverty tourism, then the trip does not form. But if the time spent together will be mutual, marked with compassion and understanding, and valuing the full humanity of all who will participate, then real work can be done. He partners with groups who understand that God is already at work in the world amidst all people, and these trips allow a traveling group to participate (with resources, skills, and open hearts) in the work that God is already doing in a specific place.

A COMMUNITY OF SPIRIT

Some of these ways have existed here for a long time, others are emerging, and some we have fallen out of practice and need to help each other relearn the steps. But in all things, I urge each of us—all y'all—to take seriously this call to welcome God's spirit, to listen for the wind-like movement in our midst, and get ready for what might happen here if we take seriously the idea that God might draw us out to some new and unknown place. We are bold to ask that God show up in the ways of our lives. We are bold to ask that the world see the person of Christ in our community here. We are bold to ask for the Spirit to move, to stir, to reimagine in us. Oh God, may we be ready for your response to all these things. Amen.