

Welcoming the Spirit

Menno Mennonite Church
May 17, 2020

Purpose: To enliven the role of the Spirit in the realm of change

Message: We are not left alone to fare for ourselves, but are given the Spirit who we need in our lives.

Scripture: John 14:15-21

Synopsis: We know moments of transition well. There are moments when we may wonder who resides with us in a time and place. The disciples are left in this spot and are promised the Spirit to reside with them. Yet they did not understand, just as we don't either. The Spirit defies our Stained Glass notions of faith. There is so much in-concrete about it and hard to get a handle on. Yet we are left clues—the invitation to emulate the Love of Christ, and to know that we will be visited along the way by the one who is present in that love.

John 14:15-21 (MSG)

- 15-17 “If you love me, show it by doing what I’ve told you. I will talk to the Father, and he’ll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can’t take him in because it doesn’t have eyes to see him, doesn’t know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be *in* you!
- 18-20 “I will not leave you orphaned. I’m coming back. In just a little while the world will no longer see me, but you’re going to see me because I am alive and you’re about to come alive. At that moment you will know absolutely that I’m in my Father, and you’re in me, and I’m in you.
- 21 “The person who knows my commandments and keeps them, that’s who loves me. And the person who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and make myself plain to him.”

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Among the things I wish that our austere ancestors hadn't chucked out quite so quickly is stained glass. Beyond the novelty of it all—pictures in church when you are so used to having anything to look at but the simplest of décor—is the basic utility of it all. Having the stories of the stage and sound also being illustrated with picture and artistic flourish adds something to the experience of worship. There is a depth and breadth to the experience that brings things to life through figure that are precisely larger than life. The originally Amish church that I grew up in had but one nod to the artistic world—an open bible with a ribbon proclaiming God is love wrapped over it painted at the peak of the white front wall. Everything else was told in woodwork and craftsmanship, the stories being left to the properly chaste imagination.

I miss this because some things just defy the imagination and need a little bit of visual import to make sense. We can imagine the moment of creation where God's image is passed on, but Michelangelo's chapel ceiling in Rome gives us the inescapable vision of the spark of life. We have a notion of the feeding of thousands from 5 loaves and a couple of fish, but the depiction of it breaks open a whole new notion of what it is all about. As troubled and complicated as our artistic depictions of the holy are, there is little doubt that they do serve a purpose. Sometimes we just need to see, or at least be shown what it is we are being asked to believe.

But then you have the Holy Spirit. Somehow the metaphorical images of doves and flames that stand in so often for the third element of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit just defies even our Stained glass notions of who and what the trinity is. We know the Spirit; we proclaim the central nature of the comforter that is sent to us. We have a set of symptoms of the Spirit—speaking in tongues, faith healing and the like. But if that doesn't happen to be your thing or your tradition, we wonder, and sometimes we are asked whether the Spirit remains present even if the Charismatic gifts might be absent, or at least not as expressed. So what do we do with the promise of the Spirit that is more than just the hypothetical notion of a generalized presence?

This is where we need to turn to Jesus to get our sense of the Spirit. Jesus here is saying goodbye, preparing the disciples for what was about to be and the transition from being people following a guy around the countryside to disciples bearing witness to and being inspired by the living Spirit of the Living God. The main actor in this transition is that of the Spirit—the advocate that was about to step into the gap left by the physical presence of Jesus. “I am leaving you and advocate,” Jesus promises, “the one that you know.” Jesus is promising the Spirit to

reside with us, and to witness to us time and again to the Love of God and the true nature of God's kingdom. Throughout these chapters upon chapters of goodbye and of prayer leading into the events of the passion, Jesus keep offering again and again the witness of the advocate as the one who will step into the gap left when the scene changes.

Because Jesus knows what is about to happen, and how it will feel not to be in the same place and time as the master anymore. We know it too—this sense of being left behind from time to time, wondering who there is to love, and to be loved by. We can feel orphaned at times, and wonder where God might have gotten to and how God might be found now. Especially in times of adjustment and adaptation it is easy to wonder where we might find the holy in all of this. These are honest feelings and one that come to us naturally. If Jesus was planning for us to feel this way, why is that we are sometimes surprised when it actually happens from time to time?

This is where the Holy Spirit comes in. We are used to hearing time and again “I am leaving you the advocate” in the more common renderings of the passage (the exact reason why I selected the Message for us to read this morning for a different voice). Advocate brings a certain image to mind- the lawyerly class where someone stands in and represents someone else in their absence. We are acquainted with the notion in our daily lives as people sometimes represent us on our behalf—say our lawyers, bankers, and the rest. All of which sets up a notion of an adversarial relationship because when else do we need representation then when we need people to mind our business with someone else. In reading this text, I have time and again thought of the Spirit as the one representing and intervening for us with God on our behalf, a by product of our dominate image of God as a prosecutor seeking a conviction. So we have Jesus and the Spirit intervening between us and God.

But what if it is the other way around? I think Jesus here is sending an advocate on behalf of God, on behalf of the kingdom to come to us and be present to us in our need rather than to translate for us the other way around. There is evidence of this. Elsewhere in this story there is evidence for this reading. He is promising another advocate, which assumes that Jesus himself has been advocating already. Jesus and the Spirit both come from YHWH God and are sent into the world to reconcile the world to God's self, to borrow Paul's phrasing. If Jesus glorifies and points to God in life, in death, and in resurrection, so too does the Spirit in inspiring us toward God. Both the Spirit and Jesus teaches us, witnesses to us, and exposes the brokenness of the

world in us. And for both, the reaction is the same—the world cannot, will not see the work of God by itself, and refuses to recognize the work of Jesus; the work of the Spirit.

Coming to faith is like falling in love. We can all remember our first infatuations in Junior High and High School—the notions of love we entertained with notes wondering if the desired other “Liked us” or “LIKED us”. At that stage we were enamored with the notion of the other, and the abstract idea of a relationship so we played around the edges pretending it was the real thing. But when love—true love comes, we know that it must be known and felt and believed in truth through body, mind and soul. The same is true of faith. Faith is a relationship with the living presence of Christ, the presence of the Spirit that challenges and sustains us, incarnating in Spirit the love of Christ to us. The work of the Spirit is to be the conduit of God to us and in us and in spite of us to accomplish the work of God in the world—to make the love of the kingdom of heaven real in this world and the next. The best illustration of the Spirit there is happens to be the inspiration of faith, and the assurance of God’s presence that is with us, often far beyond the time, place, and way that we are expecting it. Just as our relational love can never simply be encapsulated by infatuations that begin it, but must be followed by the experiential encounter of relationship, so too must our notional concepts of the living Christ must be followed by the inspired love of God and of the Neighbor which are invariably inspired and maintained by the Spirit. We know the Spirit because we know the love of God; We are able to show the love of God because we know the Spirit.

I think this is what Jesus is getting at when he says that the world cannot receive this gift. The world here are those who remain alienated from God. But anyone who has been brought into the realm of the Spirit and been exposed to the work of the advocate cannot remain the same, but much change in response. When you encounter the working of the Spirit, you cannot remain entirely the same. You can choose to accept the working or not. You can choose to follow or not. But you encounter the Spirit all the same, and that is a changing reality by its definition. Our illustration of the Spirit is less about the physical representation of the third person of the Trinity and far more about our ability to respond to and be changed by that Spirit as we are brought into a new world and new life time and again. The work of the Spirit is to convict, change, and witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God. As such we do well to point when asked to explain the Spirit to the work of the kingdom where ever we find it—in the kinship of people we barely know from around the world, the willingness to care for those who

are vulnerable even when this is not popular, to build all things in the name of Christ who leads us on. The list is endless, as is the work of Spirit.

We are all people of the Spirit even if our gifts are not as charismatic than others. May we each make our peace with that Spirit, owning its presence and being sustained by its goodness that leads us forth, even when the path is less than clear.

Amen