

Holy Trinity 6.16.19

John 16:12-15

Focus Statement: God is changeless, but we are not. So God changes how God meets us.

I listened to an interesting study the other day about how people underestimate how much they will change in the future. Psychologists call it the “end of history illusion,” this idea that the person I am today is essentially the person I will be ten years from now. Yes I may have a few more gray hairs, but by and large my identity, values, personality, etc. will all remain largely the same. Daniel Gilbert, the psychologist who studied this, noticed this fact about himself. Thinking about himself at fifty-five, he was pretty sure he was who he would be. This was despite the fact that when he reflected back on who he was at forty-five, he could see all the ways he’d changed. He wondered if this was true for others. So he and some colleagues questioned almost twenty-thousand people about how much they had changed in the past ten years, and how much they thought they might change in the next ten. The study found out that regardless of age, people from teens to seniors could look back and see change, but when they imagined forward they saw themselves staying the same. The psychologists concluded that we never stop growing, changing, learning new things and becoming new people, we just think that we do. Yes it slows, someone in their teens changed more than someone in their sixties, but everyone does change with time, and changes more than we expect.

I got to thinking about this study when I was reading our Gospel text for this morning, when Jesus told the disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” To recap, we’re still where we’ve been for the past few weeks, in the Farewell Discourse, Jesus’ final words to his disciples before he went to be crucified. And I think it’s

interesting that Jesus said the reason he couldn't finish all the things he needed to say wasn't because of his impending death, but because the disciples weren't ready yet to hear them. Time wasn't the limiting factor, the disciples' preparedness was. We might wonder, or even fault the disciples for their lack of readiness. After all, they'd been with Jesus for three years by this point. They'd traveled with him, studied under him, seen him work countless miracles, what could he possibly have to tell them that they weren't yet ready to bear.

But they hadn't been to the garden with him. They hadn't stood at the foot of the cross. They hadn't seen him laid in a tomb, or returned to find the tomb empty. They hadn't put their finger in the mark of the nails in his hands, or put their hands in his side. They hadn't seen him ascend into heaven, standing gap-mouthed into the emptiness as two angels told them, "why do you stand looking up to heaven?" They hadn't heard the rush as of a violent wind of the Holy Spirit descending on, among, into them. Without those experiences, that presence, they could not understand, could not bear, all of the hope and heart and promise that Jesus had to say. Yes, they had been told, but there is only so much we can learn through listening. There are things that can only be known through experience, wisdom that can only come when we stand on the far side of the shore looking back at the rapids across which we came. Jesus knew this, he knew the disciples weren't, couldn't absorb all that he had to share with them. They couldn't know what it would be like when the twelve would become a movement. When devout Jews of every nation under heaven would hear them speaking of God's deeds of power. When three-thousand would be baptized in a day. When Paul would turn from persecutor to proselytizer and would start bringing gentiles

into the community. They could not, when they were nothing more than twelve men having dinner with a beloved mentor, have ever comprehended how much more was in store for them. Jesus knew that, and that's why Jesus promised to send the Spirit. So that as each of these changes occurred, as they faced each new challenge and learned each new lesson, the Spirit would be there as a guide.

And that's something else that struck me in this passage. Jesus said that the Spirit of truth would come not to tell them the truth or to give them the truth, but to "guide them into all the truth." What this tells me is that even with the Spirit there's evolution of understanding. Truth itself doesn't change, but our understanding of it, how far along the path we have been guided into it, does. Just because we think we know something today, doesn't mean there is not more to know.

This Wednesday was Loving Day. Loving Day, if you're unfamiliar, is the annual celebration of the Supreme Court's June 12th, 1967 decision in the Loving vs. Virginia case, striking down all state laws that banned interracial marriage. Mildred and Richard Loving were an interracial couple who were sentenced to a year in prison for, and I quote, "cohabiting as man and wife, against the peace and dignity of the Commonwealth." When I was reading about the case, my favorite thing I read was a message Richard Loving gave to his attorney to be read to the Supreme Court. Mr. Loving said: "Mr. Cohen, tell the Court I love my wife, and it is just unfair that I can't live with her in Virginia."

Racism, obviously, still a huge problem in our country, but I think at least in this room, we all agree that laws against interracial marriage are unfair, unjust, and even unfaithful. But I bring it up in this sermon because the arguments made against the Lovings case were in many times scriptural. Good, faithful, God-believing Christians cited scripture to argue against Richard and Mildred's marriage. The texts haven't changed, the Bible they read in the 60s was, is, the same Bible we read today. What's changed is how we understand the text. God hasn't changed, truth hasn't changed, but we have. We have grown from a narrow-minded ethnocentric read of scripture to one that more fully captures the incredible richness of creation. And the Loving case is just one very recent example of how people of faith, through prayer, study, conversation, and most importantly, the guiding of the Holy Spirit, can find ourselves led more fully into God's truth. This movement seems not unlike the change Martin Luther made when he found in scripture the promise that we are saved by God's grace alone, and not by the purchase of indulgences. Or even what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Fulfillment it turns out, takes a long, long, long time. Much longer than we, time-bound mortals, want to admit or can even imagine, but the promise of our Gospel text is that for as long as it takes, the Spirit of truth is with us, guiding us further along into the truth.

Is this challenge? Yes, it most certainly is. It means we're going to have to do some soul-searching, going to have to admit that we're probably wrong about a whole lot of things. That we probably don't understand near as much as we think we do about God, who God is, and how God wants for us to be. But, the good news is, this also means that how things are

now is not how they will always be. And I can't even tell you how hopeful that makes me feel. We are not stuck in this reality. The "end of history illusion" is just that, an illusion. Because the Spirit of truth is here, is with us, has been sent to us to "guide us into all truth." This Spirit knows we cannot bear all things now, but has promised to declare to us, as we can bear it, "the things that are to come." Thanks be to God who is unchanging, and yet who helps us to change. Amen.