

B Pentecost 5.19.24

Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

Focus Statement: The Holy Spirit walks alongside us.

On Tuesday, Trinity played host to the synod Chrism service. Chrism, here's your fancy church word of the week, is the oil used for anointing during baptism, healing, and other rites of the church involving oil. The tradition of our synod, or at least the Kalamazoo conference, has been to hold a chrism service every year. Clergy from all over the synod are invited, the bishop leads us in a renewal of the vows we made at our ordination, he blesses oil for anointing, and we all go home with little bottles of blessed oil. Anyway, the point of that whole story was to share with you that I heard the bishop preach on this text this week, and several parts of his sermon are still ringing in my ears.

The bishop started by remarking how as Christians we sometimes think of the Holy Spirit as like a genie or a wishing well. We tell the Spirit what we want, and the Spirit makes it happen. He remembered visiting a church—in another synod far, far away from this one, his general remark before telling a story—where someone approached him after a sermon and remarked that the Spirit would never make him do something that was uncomfortable or unsettling. Then he looked at this room full of clergy and remarked, “this is not how the Spirit works. You all know this, think about how long you ran away from the call of the Spirit.” And an awkward chuckle went through the assembly. Because here's the thing about clergy, we all have a story about hearing God's call and avoiding it, ignoring it, or trying to pretend it was something else. I might even be so bold as to say that how strongly one avoided the Spirit's call is a decent measure for how long one will make it in ministry. For those whom the call felt easy, the work often isn't. There's something about avoiding

the call that gives you the stubbornness to persist. Example, Paul. Church's biggest persecutor to most well-written apostle. Or Jonah, converted an entire city, had to be swallowed by a fish first. But, I digress. The point is, the Spirit does not have a reputation of making one's life easy. In fact, those of us, and I include "us" here, because I also heard at the Chrism service how much people saw the moving of the Spirit in our building, those of us who have the Spirit particularly active in our lives, may find the experience mostly unsettling and uncomfortable, for the Spirit's role is to guide us in the work of Jesus. So let's start by taking a look at this John text, before we jump to Acts.

John has us, yet again, in the Farewell Discourse. Remember these are Jesus' last words to his disciples on the night of his betrayal. This section is after the vine/branches metaphor from two weeks ago and before Jesus' high priestly prayer that we read last week. The section we read this morning opened with Jesus speaking about "the Advocate whom [Jesus] will send...from the Father." This word translated as "Advocate" is an interesting one because the Greek here is *parakletos*. This translation, the NRSV, translates it as *advocate*, but other translations use *Friend*, *Comforter*, *Guide*, or even just the transliterated Greek *Paraclete*. These are all good translations because a *parakletos*, in the Greek tradition, was someone who gave advice and spoke on one's behalf. Sort of like a guardian ad litem for someone going through the justice system. A guardian ad litem is a neutral person the court appoints to look out for the best interests of someone, often a child but also a vulnerable adult, who cannot take care of themselves. The Spirit's role, Jesus was saying in using *parakletos*, will be to come alongside you, guide you, direct you, and advocate for you, when I can no longer be with you in the same way because I have returned to the Father.

We've heard throughout the Farewell Discourse that the disciples' work was going to be continuing in the mission which Jesus had begun, a mission given to him by God, to make God's name known, reveal God's identity and character, to all of God's people, so that all people may know that they are loved by God and be drawn into that love. This work, Jesus reminded them over and over again, would not be easy work. But it would be sacred work, holy work, because it was Christ's own work, given to him by the Father and now handed over to us.

And here's probably my favorite line of the whole passage, verse twelve. "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." I love that line because it recognizes a truth of being human, or at least a truth I've recognized, grudgingly, about being human, that rarely if ever do we get to know the whole story. And that's actually a good thing. If Jesus had sat the disciples down and told them every challenge and trial they would face throughout just the ones we know about in the book of Acts, they may not have had the courage to continue in the journey. But think of all they would have missed, all we would have missed, if they known all they would face and let fear keep them back from it. The rush of the spirit converting five thousand in a single sermon, the joy of community as all the followers shared what they had so that no one was in need, the wonder of the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius the Gentile, finding community and acceptance for the first time in their lives, and of course, the glorious cacophony of voices hearing God's word in their own native tongues. Yes there was fear, persecution, and the challenge of having one's deeply held assumptions shifted

and shattered, but there was also so much joy. And in every step along the way, the good and the hard, there was the Spirit. There's a quote by Martin Luther King that reads, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." This is what the Spirit does for us. She illuminates not where we're going in the end, but the next step on the path, and then the next step, and then the next. This drives me crazy; I admit, I am a whole path person. But on wiser days I can recognize, one step at a time is all I need, maybe all I can handle, to keep me moving forward in the way which God would have me go.

So what is the Holy Spirit like? For that we turn to the Acts reading. Another one which, had we managed to hold onto that hope, immediately bursts our expectations of the Spirit as a nice, quiet, making things easy genie. The Holy Spirit in Acts reminds me of our smaller cat, she is chaos incarnate in the best possible way. The Acts reading opens, "When the Day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." Pentecost, your third fun church fact of the day, is a Greek word meaning "fifty days." It is how Greek speaking Jews would have referred to Shavuot, the Jewish Feast of Weeks," a harvest festival that happened fifty days after Passover. At Shavuot, Jews from all across the known world, speaking all different sorts of languages, would travel to Jerusalem with the first fruits of their harvest, so that God would bless the rest of the harvest. And by "first fruits," I literally mean, first fruits. This was an early summer harvest festival, they're bringing like radishes and spring greens, the very first things to pop up in the garden. So all these devout Jews from all over the known world, speaking all different sorts of languages were together in Jerusalem, when suddenly "like the rush of a violent wind... divided tongues, as of fire appeared among them" as the Spirit showed up among them, and things started to get real

crazy. The commentary I was reading first points out that the Spirit is not wind or fire, but rather is like wind or fire. The Spirit is indescribable in words, but the creative and destructive power of wind, which can power a windmill, provide a gentle breeze, send pollen to germinate crops, and, as we saw just last week, flatten a building, and fire, a force that clears brush and germinates trees, provides warmth and comfort in our homes and hearths, and can destroy homes, buildings, miles upon miles of forests, and send dangerous smoke for miles, starts to give us a feeling of the scope of the Spirit's nature.

So the Spirit shows up, like wind, like fire, and suddenly, this crowd of devout people who cannot understand each other, can understand the disciples, "because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." That's the crazy, wonderful, creative, and chaotic thing about Pentecost. Everyone did not start speaking the same language, but rather the Spirit acted as translator so that everyone could hear God's message in their own native language, their own mother tongue. The Spirit is not the great bringer of unity, she is the dance of diversity, the force that brings us together to do God's work in the world not despite our differences but because of them. Now that the "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Phamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs," had heard them speaking, in their own native languages "about God's deeds of power," they could go back to those places and speak to others about the miracle they'd witnessed, the stories they'd heard, and the promise those stories held for their people. In the Spirit we do not become the same, because we were not created by God as the same, rather we see clear what has always been true, that in our

differences we are a reflection of the many faces of God. Our differences are what help God to be glorified more fully through us.

Dear people of God, the Spirit of truth came at Pentecost and she still comes today. Because there are still things that Jesus cannot yet tell us, still things we are not yet ready to bear.

But we will be, when the time comes, because the Spirit walks alongside us, Guiding us, leading us, comforting us, and defending us. So that we can live out God's glory. Thanks be to God. Amen.