

“The Spirit of Truth”
Psalm 104:24-35; Romans 8:22-27;
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

May 23, 2021
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Today is Pentecost Sunday. Oftentimes we read the passage out of Acts where there are the tongues of fire, the rush of the wind, and the birth of the church. There is that moment where the Spirit is truly recognized. Yet, we have been following John, and I wanted to think about more than just that moment. I wanted to think about what Jesus is telling his disciples about the Spirit as they are soon to be without him, and how the Spirit is to come. The Spirit comes more than just on that one Pentecost Day with tongues of fire. Jesus invites them to recognize the Spirit will be with them on into their lives.

Why does Jesus have to give us the Spirit? Jesus came and gave us teachings. He came and died for us and showed us the forgiveness and redemption God gives us, the wonder of grace that God has for us. In some ways, that feels like that should be enough. And yet Paul, writing a few years later, is still talking about creation groaning as if in labor pains until the redemption comes, until a full healing is given.

We’re talking about the redemption of the body. I noticed between the time I wrote the confession and the time I was studying for the sermon at the end of the week that “body” is a singular word. Redemption of the body. It probably doesn’t mean the individual bodies of people, but rather us as a group. Maybe even the idea of the redemption of humanity. Just as we think of the church as Christ’s body, it’s that idea of the redemption of the body, the human folk, that healing is given us through the Spirit at work with us.

It feels to me like what Jesus is saying is, “OK, I’ve taught you. I’ve sacrificed for you. I’ve shown you the fullness of God’s grace. I’ve opened the door into the Kingdom, but you still have to enter and go further in and further up. There’s still some work to be done. The struggle is still with you. The world does not accept me.”

In thinking about why we might need the Spirit, I always go to Galatians 5 where Paul talks about the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit. I think about how Paul describes the differences between the two ways of living, and it feels pretty obvious to me why we might need the Spirit and its fruits. He says the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and *things like these* (if the rest of his list is not enough). And if you can’t find yourself somewhere in there I’d be surprised. I certainly find myself. I see our world so full of quarreling and dissension and factions right now that it reminds me of how much we continue to need the work of God in our lives.

There is such a contrast when we think about what the work of the Spirit is. The fruits of the Spirit listed just a little later on are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, and self-control. We can look at that contrast. When Jesus is talking about the gift of the Spirit, there is a way in which he is talking about the fruits of our lives, the way the Spirit will be at work.

When I was preparing for this sermon, I was struggling with it, and I think one of the reasons I struggled with it is because, as much as the Spirit seems so central and important that Jesus invites us to recognize that the Spirit will be the one that undergirds our efforts, we live in a world in which we don't really know what "spirit" means anymore. It feels to me like we live in a world that is so material that the common thought is that there's nothing else. It's a material world. And yet, we know better. We know we experience love. We know we experience our emotions, which are very hard to materialize. I could go on, but I think we struggle with living in a world that has become devoid of spirit as a reality.

We still talk about spirit in terms of somebody having a wonderful spirit. Or we might talk about the spirit of a place, the feeling it evokes. Is it a sad place or is it a joyful place? So we have those kinds of ways of thinking about it. But when Jesus begins talking about the Spirit of Truth – *paraclete* is the word used here in John – it means "one who encourages, intercedes, comforts." One time I looked the Greek word *paraclete* up and I got the long version, and one of the definitions of *paraclete* was someone who carried the standard into battle. It was the one who went with and gave people the encouragement they needed to do what was necessary to go into the struggle. In so many ways, that's what it feels like Jesus is talking about the Spirit here as, as a way to engage us in the struggle and to recognize the differences between those obvious works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit.

Paul recognizes our need for the Spirit when he says, "The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought." My sense is that the Spirit recognizes our weakness and that is indeed why it is so important that Jesus says, "I need to leave so the Spirit can come and work with you, and guide you, and encourage you and comfort you." This is a day when we remember that Jesus is inviting us to open our lives to the work of that Spirit.

He also talks about it as the Spirit of Truth. Oftentimes when we think about truth, it seems like just a set of facts. But I think that it really goes beyond that. The idea of truth has a sense of reality to it. The Spirit is going to help us see the world the way it was designed to be, the way it is meant to be. I go back to that Galatians perspective, to two different kinds of worlds. The Spirit is available to us so that we might engage with the world and bring to it love and joy and the rest of those spiritual fruits as they are expressed in our lives.

Jesus is inviting the disciples to open the door and suggesting they let the Spirit guide them through and into the kingdom. That they will have this guide is to give them a sense of hope, and is a continuing sense of hope for us, I think. It certainly is for me, for I know how much we need, and how much creation needs, God's continued work in our lives. That's one reason I didn't want to just think about that one moment in Acts,

because that was the starting point for the beginning of the church, and we are in the continuing life of the church dependent on the Spirit. That's what Jesus is saying. God will be with us. In the midst of our need, the Spirit continues to engage, to be the paraclete, to be the one that encourages, carries God's standard into the world and invites us to go with it, to be those who allow the Spirit to engage us in the teachings and forgiveness that Jesus has given us in a way that leads us into life.

Jesus talks about three things that the Spirit will help us see and prove the world wrong about: sin, righteousness, and judgment. The sin, because the world doesn't trust in Jesus and we can see how it goes awry. Righteousness, because we see Jesus going to be with God and recognize that the relationship, the right relationship with God and the way it reflects on one another, is central. And finally, that the ruler of the world has been judged. We can make determinations through the work of the Spirit, and engage so that we can also begin to make those right determinations and not live according to the dictates of the world, but follow the one who would produce in us the very fruit of the Spirit.

So, we are invited to open our hearts and minds to the paraclete, to the Spirit of Truth, so that we might engage fully in the way of God and in a relationship with God, and be those who produce the fruit that the world truly needs. Amen.