

Confidence
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

John 14:15--25 (NRSV)

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

¹⁵"If you love me, you will keep (keep) my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, (Helper) to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." ²²Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" ²³Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

²⁵"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Advocate,* the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ²⁹And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. ³

Introduction and Comments:

This morning's text on the Spirit of Truth reminds me of the two men walking home after a party a little tipsy and decided to take a shortcut home through the cemetery. Right in the middle of the cemetery they were startled by a tap-tap-tapping noise coming from somewhere deep in the dark shadows of the cemetery. However, as the stupid or drunk will do, they sought out the source of the tapping and found an old man with a hammer and chisel, chipping away at one of the headstones.

"Goodness gracious, Mister," one of them said after catching his breath, "You scared us half to death! We thought you were a ghost! What are you doing working here so late at night?"

"Those fools, those blasted fools!" the old man cursed. "They misspelled my name!"

Sermon:

The author of the Gospel of John, as I have shared before, appears to have been a well-educated, Hellenistic Jesus-confessing Jew. He writes to a very cosmopolitan and urban community of like-minded Jews.

As a teacher, theologian, and pastor, John draws on his own unique sources to write his gospel some seventy-odd years after Jesus' death and resurrection. His understandings of Jesus' life and ministry appealed to many people in his urban community of faith as it has to many

across the centuries. His words would have not only informed his audiences about who and what Jesus was but would have encouraged, affirmed, and inspired hope, during some challenging times for the Jewish majority in John's community and maybe for some pagan, God-venerators as well.

In our scriptures this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that the hour of his death and glorification or his fullest revelation of God is drawing near. However, Jesus will not leave his disciples alone or without a unique expression and witness to himself and to God's purposes in him. Jesus says that he will ask God to send another presence like himself as a helper, counselor, and comforter, who will not only stand by them and help bolster their witness to Jesus as the Son of God but to help maintain the Jesus community's cohesiveness and growth. To these ends, Jesus will ask God to send to his disciples the Spirit of Truth, understood to be synonymous with a special work of the Holy Spirit.

My side bar on truth: I believe that the spirit or the essence of truth at its most practical and abstract levels can best be understood as a person's sense of confidence or trust in what they know or experience as accurately describing and reflecting reality to such a point that they can trust it to live by.

To this I add, that Jesus' and John's reference to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, in today's text, should not be confused with the third person of the Trinity. John's and Jesus' world was populated with spirits, good and bad, as normal constituents in a continuum of reality. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Trinity was a Fourth Century Christian philosophical response to pagan accusations that Christians worshiped three gods, i.e. a god the Father, a god the Son, and a god the Holy Spirit. For many pagans, since Christians worshipped three gods, why couldn't they include in their retinue of gods the patron gods of the Roman Empire, including worshiping the Emperor; thereby, demonstrating an undisputed loyalty to the empire.

In response to these accusations, the early Hellenistic church fathers, ever steeped in the Jewish understanding of one god, Creator-Sustainer of All, while rejecting nearly everything else in Jewish thought, formulated a response to the pagans in part out of the stuff of pagan, Greek metaphysics and in part out of what many scholars believe was a misunderstanding of John's understandings of Jesus as the Son of God. This Fourth Century response to the pagans has come to be known as the union of Christ's humanity and divinity within the Holy Trinity. However, John would have simply understood Jesus as requesting not just any ole "good spirit", but "The Good Spirit" from God.

However, since we can't get the experts to agree on the shared natures of the divine and human in Jesus until this day, how is the average Christian to understand the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel, or Jesus for that matter, when the doctrine of the Trinity wasn't written until two-hundred and thirty or thirty-five years after John's Gospel, a product of a religious-political consensus and definitely would not have been a part of the Jewish thought world of Jesus' and John's day. There are explanations that help sort out the quagmire of Christian apologetics over the centuries regarding the Trinity; however, they should be the subject of a class on the Gospel of John not a sermon. Today's scriptures are about the spiritual well-being of those disciples, whom God has entrusted to Jesus, and concomitantly John's community of Jesus believers and ours.

So, let's try to gather John's and Jesus' thoughts on the matter. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus' and John's bible, God's non-physical presence in the world, what we would call God's spiritual presence, was understood through many metaphors such as divine fire, wind, breath, wisdom, light, or the Memra, the creative word or spirit of God. In Greek, Memra is translated as the Logos, which we hear about in the opening verses of John's gospel. For example, in the beginning, the spirit of God moved over the face of the primordial void like a wind, hovering, and spoke order into being out of chaos. In most of the metaphors for God's spirit, it is a divine

presence that gives help, comfort, instructions, and witness to God's people. The Holy Spirit was known to descend and dwell among the people, primarily in the wilderness Tabernacle and in the Jerusalem Temple and was called the Shekinah. The closest the Greek can come to translating this Hebrew word is *doxa* or "glimmering light", since the ancient Hebrews understood the Shekinah to be the radiance or light of the divine self.

The Holy Spirit was often seen as an unpredictable force that could settle upon, come upon, or dwell in a person and control their actions not unlike the wind gathering up leaves and animating them. We see this settling on, coming upon, or dwelling in a person in the anointing of Israel's kings and the calls and commissions of the prophets and priests.

Therefore, in the Jewish thought of Jesus' and John's day there existed a well-developed, albeit a somewhat parochial understanding of the presence of God as the Holy Spirit. To this point, I think we should understand the spirit that Jesus was going to request God send to the disciples was the same omnipresent, creative breath or spirit of God, the Logos, that was in the beginning, the same anointing power of Israel's kings and prophets, and uniquely and most powerfully embodied in Jesus.

In summary, this Spirit of Truth has always been present and available to the world, but up until Jesus requested it for his disciples, it had only been given or available to a select few of God's choosing. Now, Jesus will ask God to make it available to his disciples and subsequently to all those who come after them who believe in him. This Spirit of Truth will empower, aid, counsel, comfort, and help these disciples and future followers to continue Jesus' work of making God known in the world, but especially proclaiming to all Israelites God's latest and greatest divine revelation in Jesus the Christ. The Spirit of Truth, therefore, will aid the disciples in discerning the "ins and outs" of the ways of God against the backdrop of an emerging, tumultuous world of rabbinical Judaism, while consecrating them in holy community.

The author, given his conflicts with the local synagogue, perceives post-Temple Judaism as determined to define itself and its relationship to God solely from within various understandings and interpretations of the Mosaic Laws, minus what he sees as the essence of the Law, God's unconditional and all-encompassing love, made known in the witness of Jesus. Thus, the author of John believed that an Israelite's relationship to God the world over was and is a divine partnership lived out in the moral and ethical demands of love for others as well for the self, regardless of a person's interpretive stance on the Law or how it is mediated in the human community.

With emerging, rabbinical Judaism's formal rejection of Jesus as the Christ, at about the same time John writes, and its total misunderstanding of John's understanding of Jesus as the Son of God, John's Gospel is a shift from post-Temple, Pharisaical Judaism, whose theological world views could not fully understand and appreciate Jesus' identity in God and God's saving love manifested in Jesus as the Christ and savior, to those Jews of John's world and later to be embraced by the pagan world.

The new and unique mission of God's immediate and abiding presence - the Spirit of Truth - is now available to all people who will bear witness to the truth, "that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you (meaning you all) may have life in his name." (John 20:31)

The Holy Spirit, The Spirit of Truth, comes to us lo this many years later as a compelling and insightful, non-rational over-plus in John 3:16; wherein, we come to understand that Jesus, a one-of-a-kind human being, who manifested the character, qualities, and purposes of God as no other before or since, out of his love for God, willingly laid down his life for what God loved, and God out of divine love for the greater whole allowed Jesus to die to make known God's redeeming love for the world.

The Truth of God in Jesus and Jesus' life in God, thus becomes the source that empowers one to believe and inspires the believer from beyond the boundaries of logic, regardless of how they may understand the ancient Greek metaphysical or theological details of the Trinity or John's original cultural understandings of Jesus as the Son of God. As we are wont to say, the believer has been born anew into God's, eternal, spiritual family by their belief in and by their living the way of Jesus. And, God's love will sustain the believer for all eternity in the "however's and where-ever's" of God.

In addition, in John's Gospel, the community of faith does not need some sensational experience of the Spirit to know and experience all this. All one must do, is to consider the proposition of God's great love in Jesus and allow its truth to take root in one's heart and mind, and it will give rise to a confidence that will transform and guide a person's and a faith community's life in all aspects now and forevermore.

So, let us also remember that those who honor and are loyal to the Christ, keep his teachings, now live in a special relationship with God, Jesus, and other believers across the ages and into the future because they have been born, as it were, of the Spirit of Truth into God's eternal family. In this relationship, the spirit and purposes of God and the ways and means to realize those purposes reside in them now. The believer knows this to be true because they have experienced its power of transformation, its comfort, its help, and its glory. The believers have actually seen the Christ at work among them and in the world. The believer recognizes Christ's power; they have confidence in Christ's words and live by them. Those who do not know the Christ cannot see or know these things, but those of the Spirit of Truth can and do. However, those who do not do the "love-work" of Jesus dishonor him and the One who sent him because they do not participate in the Spirit of Truth.