

June 5, 2022

John 14:15-21

God Is in This Place

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Have you ever had the experience of saying something and immediately regretting it? I can tell you this because my husband is not in the room and believe me, he is not listening to the sermon, even though he could because he is right outside in the fellowship hall. Here's the thing...he has the uncanny ability of instantly making me regret saying things, especially if we disagree about something. Yes, ministers argue with their spouses and, no, God never smites him. Anyway, for some reason when we disagree, "Theatrical Kelley" comes out. I tend to use sweeping, dramatic, generalities to make my point. This benefits John because he likes to drill down on the details and point out the inaccuracies of my points. When I say something like, "You always say that." His response is, "But do I though? Do I always say that?" It is always so annoying, and I always regret saying what I said to him in the first place. Yes, always.

I don't know why I make that mistake over and over. In "real life," my need to maintain integrity and "rightness" keeps me from those dramatic displays and from saying things I might later regret. In fact, when I was in high school, I avoided asking even the most basic questions in class for two reasons: First, I didn't want to ask a "stupid question" and appear that I didn't know everything I was expected to know and, second, I used to talk so much in class that I feared someone else had already asked the question and I just hadn't been paying attention. It makes me cringe even now thinking about the angst I felt about saying anything in class. And no, it did not occur to me to stop talking to my neighbors.

Our text today begins with a moment I imagine could have been similarly cringeworthy, brought to us by the author of the Gospel of John, at Philip's expense. Jesus had just shared with his disciples that he wouldn't be with them much longer. It's not hard to imagine how they were feeling: scared, anxious, and sad. Usually, in tense situations like this the gospel writers use Peter to ask questions or blurt out something unexpected, but this time, it's Philip. Having just listened to Jesus say, "If you know me, you will know my father also," Philip asks:

⁸ ...“Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, but if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This 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. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They 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.” ²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?” ²³ Jesus 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. ²⁴ Whoever 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. ²⁶ But 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. ²⁷ Peace 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. ²⁸ You 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. ²⁹ And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may believe. ³⁰ I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me, ³¹ but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

This may not be the Holy Spirit story you expected to hear today. Maybe you came expecting the story in the book of Acts that includes a great, rushing wind and tongues of fire, suspended over the disciples' heads. It's a great story...loud and colorful, full of excitement. It reminds us of God's love of diversity and our call to include everyone as, suddenly, the Word of God can be understood by each person in their own language.

The author of John's story is more subdued, less special-effect-y, and may seem a little anti-climactic, especially in light of the amazing ceiling centerpiece before us and the dramatic weather outside. The different stories highlight different aspects of the Spirit. The Acts story reveals an "in your face" Spirit, while the Gospel of John's story tells us about an "in your heart" Spirit. I think the author of John's story has a word for us today.

As I mentioned, the news that Jesus was going away, that his death was imminent, was fresh. In the narrative, Jesus' explanation of the Holy Spirit's presence and activity was meant to comfort the disciples. But really, this story was written to comfort the author of John's estranged from the temple, Jewish community years later. At that time, Jesus had been gone for decades and nothing had changed for the better and it was wearing on the people. The temple was in ruins. The oppression had not ended, in fact, it felt worse. The hope that was present a generation ago, in the people who knew and saw Jesus, was fading.

The author of John reminded his community that Jesus was not gone from their lives, that hope was still alive, and it was alive within them through the Holy Spirit. In the story, Jesus told the disciples the Advocate (or Spirit) would be with the ones who keep his commandments. To understand what the language about commandments means in this gospel, it's helpful to look back. First, in chapter 12:49-50, when Jesus said, "...for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment...and I know that his commandment is eternal life. And second, in chapter 13:34, when Jesus said, in his explanation of washing the disciples' feet, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another." In the context of John's Gospel, when Jesus talks here about commandments, he is talking about simply love and life.

And the ones who are about love and life are the ones in whom Jesus will continue to reveal the ways of God. He said, “They 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.” Jesus’ followers will be left with the Spirit that will continue to reveal God and the ways of God to them, just as Jesus had done in the flesh.

In the biblical narrative, the Spirit that hovered over the waters at creation, the Spirit that gave life to the first human, the Spirit that comforted the disciples after Jesus’ death and inspired early Christian communities, the Spirit that gave hope to Jesus’ followers who had been expelled from the temple a generation later, that same Spirit dwells with us and walks with us today, comforting and inspiring us amid the grief, anger, and sadness of this moment. And at least in my experience, that Spirit behaves a lot more like the author of John describes them than the way the author of Luke and Acts describes them.¹

In Acts, the author described the coming of the Holy Spirit as a loud, rushing wind that set the air on fire. Cool! So cool. And everyone was talking, probably yelling over the wing and each other. It was holy chaos, so much so that Jesus’ followers were accused of *drinking spirits* instead of *being filled with the Spirit*. But as cool as that imagery is, it may be a bit removed from how most of us have experienced God. I have experienced God as an abiding presence in me and in other people; a presence that, yes, at times lights a fire under us, but that is also a presence that comforts and brings peace to our hearts and lives, even when there is nothing peaceful about the world around us. Maybe the flames of Pentecost this year look more like the flames of a fire pit at the end of a long week.

And if I’m honest, right now I don’t want another loud, fiery thing in my consciousness. I bet you don’t either. What I do want, though, what we all need, is the assurance that we are not alone, and in John’s tale of the Holy Spirit, we are given that promise, “God will give you an Advocate who will be with you forever; God will abide with you and will be with you forever; Jesus will not leave you orphaned; You are not alone. We are not alone.

¹ Recognizing that the Holy Spirit is non-binary, I have chosen to use they/them for the Spirit’s pronouns where pronouns are necessary for reading/speaking fluidity

There is more to the Spirit than just a pal to hang out with us though. In her commentary on the Gospel of John, Dr. Karoline Lewis writes that in the Gospel of John, "...we are invited to conceive of the fact that one way of understanding the role of the Holy Spirit is to reread the Gospel up until this point and notice what Jesus has done. To have seen Jesus at work is to anticipate the work of the Holy Spirit." This Spirit that abides within each of us, comforting us, also inspires us to Jesus-y things, like whatever is life-giving and love-sharing in this moment.

I said at the beginning of the service that today is the day we celebrate God's universal and intimate presence through the Holy Spirit. The way the author of John wanted his community to understand the Spirit is that the Spirit is intimate in that the Spirit dwells within each of us, yet universal as the Spirit inspires transformation, not only of us individually, but of the world, and that's work we are asked to join in. Since this text was written to speak to a community, I want us to think now about how we, as a community of people who seek to follow the ways of Jesus are being called on this Pentecost Day to transform. In what new ways are we to bring life to and share love in our community and in the world?

In the last few weeks, I have had the privilege of listening as a few of you have shared your ideas with me, either intentionally or in passing. Here are some of them:

Many of you may not know this, but there is a stone labyrinth on our property...way at the back. It is covered with grass right now. One person suggested that it would be a gift to ourselves and to the community for us to uncover it and keep it maintained.

In the last two weeks, 4 children in our church from 3 different families have asked me why we don't have a playground outside. I told them we used to, but it fell into disrepair, and we took it down to keep everyone safe. One of our kiddos said to me, "Well, let's get that fixed so I can play on it with my friends."

One person, noting our mostly unadorned brick walls, suggested we make our sanctuary walls available for community artists to display their work, as creativity is from God and should be celebrated.

A neighbor, walking through the soccer field as I was coming out of the church one day, stopped me and asked if the church would ever consider doing a sidewalk around the soccer field for walking since sidewalks are not everywhere.

Our staff has been talking for over a year about gender neutral bathrooms and I would add that, if we are going to continue to serve as an emergency cold weather shelter, having showers would be super helpful.

One person said to me, "Yoga has been so great. What other classes could we offer free?"

What are your ideas?

And yes, I recognize that none of these ideas ends the war in Ukraine or stops gun violence or dismantles a single oppressive system. But all these ideas have the potential to build relationships with our neighbors and, in keeping with the Pentecost theme, there is something about them that seems like a breath of fresh air. They could plant seeds of inclusion and hope and beauty. They could make space for people looking for a place to serve and a place to belong. They would help us birth something new and provide new, different ways to love people. And that, dear ones, is what the Spirit of God does in the world. It's very often not loud or flashy, but it's real and persistent and lovely. That is the story of Pentecost. I look forward to living it out with you. Amen.