

“We Trust in God the Holy Spirit”
 delivered Sunday, March 7, 2010
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 John 14:15-31
 Lent 3rd in 4 Part series on Brief St of Faith

As we make our way through the season of Lent, each week getting closer and closer to the cross, today we have this stunning promise from Jesus as he prepares his disciples for his impending suffering and death. At the heart of this reading are very familiar words of comfort which we lift out of John 14 so often at the time of death: “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.”

This morning, as we think about what it means to say, “We trust in God the Holy Spirit,” it is helpful, I think, to remember the larger context in which Jesus spoke these words. Did you notice the comforting words about the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the blessed peace the Spirit will bring, are bracketed by equally challenging words about our responsibility to love. “IF you love me and will keep my commandments,” Jesus says, our help and comfort and peace will come.

This section of John’s gospel, which follows the Last Supper, is called the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is keenly aware of the authorities closing in on him to do him in, and he is preparing his disciples for their life and witness beyond his earthly life. He can see his own death on the horizon, and he is seeking to assure them that his work will go on through them. As a means of encouragement, his parting words are both a promise and a commandment. Jesus knows that after he is gone from them, they will wish that he had not departed from them at all. They will long for the days when they traveled the roads of Galilee and Judea together, wanting more time with him for questions and stories and clarity about all that he had to teach and show them. With full understanding of how his friends and followers will grieve and long for him, Jesus is saying “Good-bye”.

His parting words include this promise: You will not be left alone; God will send the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, to be your Holy Companion. And he includes this commandment: Love. Love as I have commanded you, and shown you. Love as I have loved our closest friends like Mary, Martha and Lazarus; love strangers, outcasts, despised sinners like the tax collectors; love even your enemies, as I have tried to show forth God’s forgiveness and grace toward Pharisees like Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman at the well. Love God. Love your neighbors as yourself. Love your enemies, for God’s sake. Now, how on earth do you imagine these disciples could obey that radical commandment to love without Jesus himself around, to lead them and show them and help them? Their perplexity and anxiety must have been through the roof trying to imagine how hard it would be to live on without him. But Jesus assures them saying: “You will not be left alone. The Father will give you another Advocate to be with you forever.”

The key to understanding the power of Jesus’ words is to probe the meaning of this one word, “Advocate.” Jesus himself describes it in the next verse as the “Spirit of Truth,” but other perfectly good translations of this very same word are these: “Helper,” “Comforter,” “Counselor.” Advocate, Spirit of Truth, Helper, Comforter, Counselor... all together mean Jesus is sending his own Spirit, his own breath, his inner life. It means we are given the strength and energy to do what we have to do, to do the work of Jesus himself, to live for God and witness to

God's love for the world. An Advocate stands up in court and pleads a case. Jesus assumes that his followers will find themselves as he found himself, on the wrong side of the customary ways of doing things as the Kingdom of God spreads out among the least and the lost. When we risk going against the tide, pursuing the justice and righteousness of God against all odds, the Spirit is our Advocate, our sure defense. When we are pushed to the brink, the Spirit comes as Comforter and Counselor. When we get run out steam to do the work of God, the Spirit comes as Helper. When I leave you, Jesus says, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, so that you will once again be comforted by the near presence of God, and so that you will carry out God's love in my name.

The Holy Spirit will give you all the courage you need "to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace." Catholic theologian, Margaret Dorgan has said of this gift of the Spirit, "Jesus has left us a divine legacy...The Spirit comes to us as One who communicates the breath and energy of eternal life..." It comes as God's Presence with us..."Add to that a dynamic, inflowing of love which gathers us up...breathes into us the likeness of Christ...and invigorates our individual spirits with a gift that makes us holy." (1) A stunning promise indeed, that by the gift of the Spirit, in community with one another, we are so much more than the sum of our individual selves or talents or whatever we feel we can offer up to God. We become the living, breathing, body of Christ in and for the world – sharing Jesus' broad and inclusive love.

A Brief Statement of Faith which we use often in worship as an Affirmation of Faith was written after Reunion in 1983, when the former northern and southern streams of the Presbyterian Church, which long ago divided over the issue of slavery, were again reunited as one denomination. Randy Taylor, then pastor of the Myers Park church up in Charlotte was the first Moderator of the reunited church and he called for a new statement of faith, in celebration of Reunion, that could be used liturgically in worship.

My friend, Cynthia Campbell, now President of McCormick Seminary, was on the committee that drafted *A Brief Statement of Faith*, and she has plenty of stories to tell about how Presbyterians work something like this out by committee. Opinionated and stubborn as Presbyterians can be about matters of theology, it may be that only by the power of the Holy Spirit members of the committee were left standing. There was one phrase that created a good bit of tension among those who wrote this Affirmation of Faith: "In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage...to hear the voices of peoples long silenced." The initial committee, made up primarily of theologians teaching in seminaries and colleges, presented a first draft, which was then handed over to another committee for revision. This second committee was much more broadly representative of the church with more pastors and lay people of a fairly wide range of theological views. Some members wanted this particular line – to hear the voices of peoples long silenced – removed. Why was it there? Where was the biblical base? Isn't this just political code and not a theological affirmation?

One of the members of the committee was the Reverend Henry Fawcett, a Native American pastor who was on the faculty of Dubuque Seminary. Henry was a very quiet, gentle and gracious participant who said little during the months of deliberations. The day of this debate, however, he stopped them in their tracks with this story. "A couple of years ago," he began, "I went home to Alaska to close up our family home and prepare it for sale. My father had died, and others in the family no longer wanted or needed the house, so as eldest son, the work fell to me. You need to know," he said, "that my grandfather was the first Christian in our family, really the whole tribe. When the Presbyterian missionaries came to our part of Alaska,

my grandfather heard the story of Jesus and embraced it with great joy. But it was the practice of missionaries then to give everyone a new name, a so-called Christian name rather than the tribal names we traditionally used. That's how I got to be Henry. The missionaries also taught our people that in order to be good Christians, they needed to get rid of all the trappings and artifacts of the old religion. So, in the early days, they got people to bring blankets and ceremonial robes and costumes and drums, and they had a big bonfire and burned everything. So," Henry said, "there I was cleaning out the family home. When I made it up to the attic, I eventually found an old trunk, way in the back, covered with an old carpet. It was a trunk I had never seen before. I pried it open, and there in the trunk were my grandfather's father's ceremonial robes, beautifully and lovingly decorated with beads and feathers. I took it out, and put it on, and I heard their voices – voices that were silent no longer." (2)

That, my friends, is but one example of the Spirit's power, everywhere the giver and renewer of life, encouraging us to right old wrongs, equipping us to see God's active, redeeming love in new ways – for our time and for our world, to show forth in our lives and in the life of the church the broad, inclusive love of Jesus Christ. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Sister Margaret Dorgan, "The Holy Spirit and the Divine Indwelling," *The Living Pulpit*, Jan-March, 1996, p. 8.
- 2) Cynthia Campbell, "Hearing Voices," Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 10/17/04.