

2020.05.17. 6th Sunday of Easter SERMON

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**I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.
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.**

Are we able to receive the Spirit of Truth? Can we recognize it? How will we know it? Isn't that what Peter and Thomas wanted to know last week?

Fred Craddock captures that scene [from last week] in a memorable image, likening the disciples to children playing on the floor, who happen to look up and see the parents putting on coats and hats. Their questions are three (and they have not changed): Where are you going? Can we go? Then who is going to stay with us?¹

I read this and a vivid memory leaps into my heart and mind. I am about 4 years old. I wake up suddenly in the dark, snuggled up in my bunk bed. I should be feeling safe and cozy. But... I have the intense feeling that *something* is not right. Through the ultra thin wall between the bedroom and the kitchen I can hear unfamiliar adult voices. How much do I hear? Do I recognize the voices other than my parents? This I don't remember. All I do remember is I jump out of bed and charge into the kitchen. There are my parents – with their coats on. And there are my aunt and uncle – with no coats on. It is immediately and utterly clear to me in a red hot minute – my parents are sneaking away in the night while we are asleep. Slipping away with never a word to myself or my sister. My response is instant terror. I KNOW something must be very wrong. Are they ever coming back? It's that moment of instantaneous recognition of abandonment followed immediately by unreasoning terror. Somebody with a strong imagination – like 4 year old me - knowing about the Spirit of Truth – not a 4 year old me! - might have said the Spirit of Truth woke me up in the night to a reality that was unfamiliar, unwanted, and threatening.

Kind of like waking up one day to a global pandemic, right? A pandemic that changes the very fabric of live our lives - unfamiliar, unwanted, and threatening. It's immediate and there's no escaping it. Like waking up to hear the Master – who has just returned to us from the dead – Alleluia! – is now about to leave us again. Oh no. This is really really bad. Unfamiliar. Unwanted. Threatening. Can we even hear the words Jesus speaks about giving us an advocate to live with us forever? One who abides with us? And we may abide with it too? Can we hear that? Can we make sense of it? Can we reach past our fears and doubts to fit that into our personal reality and be nourished by it? What would it take to do that?

¹ Fred B. Craddock, John, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 98; as quoted by Frances Taylor Gench in Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

I suspect four year old me would not have been consoled by much that night. But how about grown-up us? Can we be consoled by these words? Can we allow them to lodge in our hearts like a little seed, to put down teeny tiny roots and begin to grow there? Verse 18: "I will not leave you orphaned" Jesus promises us. Jesus sees past our adult bodies to the tiny frightened child that dwells deep inside every one of us and speaks to that child. We will not be abandoned.

But/and... that does not mean it will be easy. It might not be easy to recognize the Spirit of Truth. Or maybe sometimes we will take one shuddering look and veer sharply away for surely the Spirit of Truth could not look like that, the last thing we would ever want to be true! I know I want the Spirit of Truth to be shining with light, to be beautiful and inspiring and heck – why not comforting as well! Don't you want that too? It's so challenging when that Spirit, that Truth thing turns out to be the very thing I've been avoiding and doesn't look the least bit attractive. Or endearing. No, it doesn't look lovely in any way at all. It is not what I hope Truth will look like. In fact I think it has a lot in common with Real. Remember Real? I'm thinking of The Velveteen Rabbit, that children's classic by Margery Williams. The rabbit has just asked the Skin Horse what real is...

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. (There's an important question!)

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt." (Hmm... the Skin Horse seems to have more than a bit of the Spirit of Truth in him)

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Real and Truth - neither of them are ugly... except to people who don't understand. Neither of them are necessarily beautiful. And both of them are grounded in love. Because that is the ground of being we can rely on in our relationship with God, isn't it. The Ground of Being is love. The foundation of our faith is love. The heart of Christ is love. And to help us stay rooted into that Truth, God sends the Spirit. The paraclete. The breath of God. The flame of life. Which abides in us as we may abide in it. And we may *lean* into it. Oh indeed, we may lean into it as much as we need to!

So what does that mean? I think it means we have access to something deeply sustaining and reassuring when we come face-to-face with new realities which might seem very threatening indeed. Like a post-pandemic world. Like the new normal which awaits us once this virus subsides. Subsides temporarily anyway... It means when our world is not the one we know, not the one we loved previously, not the one we hope for... we have somewhere to turn. We have the Spirit. We have a solid truth to rest into. When we encounter things that are new, things that are unfamiliar, unwanted, and threatening we can turn inwards to that breath of the Spirit. We can turn inwards to that light of the world that is Christ. We can root down into that ground of being, that love that is God. And we can remember - we will never be abandoned. Because the Spirit will abide in us and we will abide in it. And God loves us. Surely we are blessed.