

A Mystical Exercise in Trust

In Protestant mainline churches like ours, the Holy Spirit doesn't get a whole lot of attention. We basically have Pentecost Sunday where we give a nod to the Holy Spirit and then sort of set the Spirit aside for the rest of the year. There are reasons why we rarely hear sermons on the Holy Spirit. We don't quite know what to do with or think about the third person of the Trinity.

As mainline Protestants, we tend to intellectualize our faith. We like to think about God. We like rational, logical, and linear arguments. And don't get me wrong. I think there is great value in thinking about our faith. In preparing for every sermon I preach, I read the work of Biblical scholars and theologians. I want you to understand the historical context and the literary genre of our Scripture. I think that deepens our understanding of who God is and how God is working among us.

But if we only experience faith as an intellectual exercise, then we will miss profound encounters with God that don't easily fit into logical or rational categories because the Holy Spirit is anything but linear and logical. The Spirit is mysterious. Earlier in the gospel of John, Jesus says, "the wind^[e] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

In a way, the Holy Spirit invites us to embrace an exercise of trust. The Spirit asks us to accept our limits – that there are things about God and eternity and even life that we won't fully understand or even, at times, understand at all. The work of the Holy Spirit is about trusting that God is, in fact, trustworthy, even when we don't understand what's going on.

This passage is a continuation of what we read last week. It's part of Jesus' farewell discourse in the Gospel of John that takes up 4 whole chapters. This is Jesus' last night with the disciples before he will be arrested and crucified. The underlying question behind everything Jesus is saying to the disciples in this chapter is, "What final message do the disciples need to hear before it feels like their whole world is falling apart around them?" And not surprisingly, everything Jesus says to them in these four chapters has a foundation of love.

First, Jesus wants them to know that he loves them, that God loves them. He even washed their feet to show them.

Then, he asks them to love one another. He says, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another just as I have loved you."

Finally, he asks them to demonstrate their love for him by following his commands. But interestingly, in the gospel of John, Jesus only gives one commandment – it's what we've already said, "Love one another as I have loved you." When Jesus says, "if you love me, you'll follow my commands," what he means is, "if you love me, you'll love each other."

So, to summarize Jesus' last message to the disciples, there are three core points:

I love you.

Love each other.

When you love each other, you are showing your love for me.

But Jesus also understands that this is all easier said than done. That's true when we're just going through the daily routines of life. I mean, it's hard to live out of a reality of love when you're stuck in a traffic jam and someone blows their horn at you for the seventh time or when you have that co-worker who knows how to push every button you have or when you just can't deal with one more tantrum from your child.

But as hard as it is to live out of the reality of love in the daily course of life, it's that much harder when it seems that hatred and violence are so prevalent around us.

When we hear about mass shooting after mass shooting and nothing changes, it's hard to trust that love is the way.

When we see the images of bombs falling over Kyiv that indiscriminately kill soldiers and civilians alike, it's hard to trust that love is the way.

Or we could point to any number of examples.

The same was true for the disciples when the full weight of the Roman empire was about to arrest, torture and crucify their leader, it was hard to trust that love is the way.

And when that same empire, would later arrest, torture, and kill many of those same disciples, it was hard to trust that love is the way.

Jesus knew that the disciples couldn't do it alone. He knows that we can't do it alone. So he says,

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,^[1] to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth... he abides with you, and he will be^[1] in^[1] you. I will not leave you orphaned.”

John's gospel calls the Spirit the parakletos which is translated as the Advocate, a term for someone who is called to one's side as a source of help. In modern contexts someone may serve as an advocate in the court system, in the health care network, or in an educational institution, while other advocates may press the government officials to act on behalf of a certain cause. It's easy to think, then, that in the gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is our Advocate bringing our case up before God...you know, sort of pleading with God to love us, pleading with God to forgive us.

But here the direction is the opposite.

Remember that Jesus has already established his love for us, God's love for us. He washed the disciples feet before he gave them the commandment to love others. God's love for us is not and never has been in question. It is unconditional. Rather, the Holy Spirit is advocating for God to us. The Holy Spirit is saying to us, “You really can trust God. You really can trust in the way of

love. Even when it doesn't make sense." The Holy Spirit is the Advocate who brings the truth of God's love and life to us in a way that makes faith possible.

The Holy Spirit is why Jesus says we are not left orphaned. It is Jesus' ongoing presence with us. But the gospel writer goes even a step further. It's not only that the Holy Spirit is with us but it's that the Spirit is within us. And here the gospel of John makes the most radical claim yet about the Trinitarian God. It's not just that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer bound in mystical and mysterious union that we get to observe from a distance. It's that we are actually a part of that mystical union too.

At the end of Jesus' farewell discourse to the disciples, he prays, "As you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[1] so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one."

The Spirit is the mysterious, ongoing, abiding presence of God that is not only with us but also within us that empowers us to live out of the reality of love and participate in the work of the Triune God. The Spirit's presence in us is why we can carry on the work that Jesus began. The Spirit is why we can actually follow Jesus' commandment to love one another. The Spirit is why we can actually love Jesus in the way he calls us to.

And yet, I need to end my sermon by saying that I worry that I've done the very thing I said we shouldn't do. By preaching a sermon about the Holy Spirit, I've attempted to explain that which is not explainable. I do believe the Holy Spirit is what I've claimed in this sermon, but the Holy Spirit is so much more than that. The Spirit cannot be contained and no sermon, no preacher, no human can ever fully encapsulate what the Spirit is. The Spirit is wild and mysterious and, in a way, cannot be explained but only experienced.

So let me encourage us to do something this week that gets us out of our head. Go get lost in the woods or wonder through a garden. Read a collection of poetry or go to the art museum. Marvel at a spider or just sit and watch three year old's play. Pray and meditate. Or for that matter, sign up for Joe and Paula's small group because it is all about finding ways to experience the Holy Spirit among us. Take a risk on loving people. And whatever it is you do, don't overthink it, let go of trying to control it, and just trust.

