

The Spirit Speaks

[John 15:26-27, 16:12-15](#)

Pentecost Sunday

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Sunday, May 15, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

Almighty God, may the Word that you've spoken from the beginning now speak to us. May we see Jesus, your Christ, your Son, as the Truth. May we hear your Holy Spirit speak out of your heart and your mind so that we see Jesus more clearly. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On this day during the church year, we celebrate Pentecost Sunday. We wear red on that day signifying the fire, passion, energy, warmth, and light of God. The Holy Spirit is given as a gift to the people who follow Jesus Christ so that the world might know Jesus more fully and clearly.

There are some reds that are not liturgical colors. Although we may worship in these great places, and we may worship with more passion than we do here, the Holy Spirit has invited us to be present today that we might invest all of our energy and passion in the presence and the development of the truth of who Jesus the Christ is.

It is a fascinating thing that we Presbyterians are sometimes called the "frozen chosen" and we get nervous on Pentecost Sunday. In the Bethlehem church they would particularly be nervous with me when I got up on Pentecost Sunday because they knew I was a Pentecostal in my background and they never knew when I would cut loose. God help you if I do.

This passage of scripture clearly teaches us that there are two great titles that the Holy Spirit carries from the teaching of Jesus. The first one is that he is the advocate, the paraclete; and the other is that he is the spirit of truth.

The spirit of truth sometimes haunts us in very concrete ways. When I was going through a very difficult time in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, I was frustrated, I was restless, I was angry. I was storing up a number of concerns that I had not vocalized. Sometimes I would get in the car, and I would drive a bit too fast, acting out. One morning the truth became visible in my rear view mirror in a flashing red light. The local policeman stopped me on the road that was normally a 35 mph speed zone and he said, "Did you know you were going 53? Do you have anything to say for yourself?" And being a little edgy that time, I said, "Maybe I'm dyslexic." He was not amused. The truth will find us out because the truth is a pervasive presence in this world of God's spirit who comes to show us clearly who Jesus the Christ is.

The Pentecost tradition is seen in two ways through scriptures. From the Old Testament perspective, there are fifty days between the Passover and the time that the people of God came to Sinai, the mountain of God, where God gave the law to Moses. So for them, the Pentecost event was a celebration that the Torah -- the law -- had come to them. The word had come to them to be among them. It was also a celebration of an offering, the offering of the first fruits. If God would give them such a wonderful gift of Torah, they would give God the best and the first of everything they had.

In the New Testament the Pentecost tradition changed a bit. Pentecost was the fifty days between the time Jesus died, was raised from the dead, and the day that the Holy Spirit came. And on that fiftieth day, the people of God gathered in one place, the Spirit fell upon them, and fire appeared. Fire appeared in what they said about Jesus. The Spirit speaks to ordinary people on the day of Pentecost. So red is the color of Pentecost. It represents the fire... the passion... the energy of proclamation... the Word of God.

The other name for spirit here is paraclete. Parakletos is the Greek word that is literally a wonderful image of the Spirit coming alongside us. The Spirit is not against us, the Spirit is not behind us -- the Spirit is alongside us. The paraclete. God is with us, like Jesus who is called "Immanuel, God with us." The Spirit is the one who comes along and encourages us, lifts us up and helps us along the way as guide and comforter. The Spirit is an advocate when we need someone to stand for us, when we are not living or speaking the truth. The Spirit confronts us and convicts us; the Spirit even prosecutes us at times when we neglect being truthful and living the truth.

Truth is an interesting question today in a postmodern time. It was during the modern time, the age of the enlightenment, that truth was about what we thought. Truth was about our scientific process and discovery. If we could prove it in science, it was truthful. But in the postmodern time, there's another dimension because we have become skeptical, if not cynical, about science. We no longer believe that science can solve all human problems. We are now looking for other sources that are points of truth. We have gone from physics to the metaphysical. We are now seeking beyond the mind of a person to the feeling experience. We have moved from an individual who thinks to an individual who feels and has an opinion and, literally, rules his or her own world. We have moved out of scientific discovery into the essence of the personality, the charisma, the style, and the talent. And here's the hardest news, in our postmodern culture we have made truth relative, so everyone has their own truth. And we treat all truth sources as equal.

The Spirit of God comes from Jesus the Christ, precedes from God the Father, to articulate clearly to us that all truth is not equal. There is a primary truth that makes all other truth subservient to it. It is the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord. The Spirit of God proclaims that in definitive and unique ways and keeps affirming it day after day throughout life; so we will not see that all people with all opinions and views of reality and all religions are equal. The Spirit of God identifies Jesus as the Truth. We do not accept that equality of all sources of truth as if every individual can create their own view of reality. No, in the modern sense, or in the postmodern sense, we go beyond all that, back to the ancient affirmation that God sends the Spirit who gives truth to all human beings.

There are some in history who have said this Spirit is a domesticated spirit because it is a spirit who lived in the human being Jesus, who walked on the earth. It is a spirit who understands humanity and our vulnerability. It is a spirit who stands with us as Jesus stands with us and walks along the way.

There has been some tension in history between the eastern orthodox view and the western orthodox view of how the Spirit exists. From the eastern understanding there was a view that the Spirit is sent from the Father to the Son and then the Son sends the Spirit to people. The western view is the Father and Son stand together and send the Spirit to the people. We say today: What difference does it make? The Spirit has been sent. The Spirit has been the point of controversy of the church for centuries and continues to be the point of controversy even today. The Spirit does not speak of itself; the Spirit is the invisible presence of God who continually points to who Jesus is. The Spirit wants us to be sent on the mission that Jesus started in this world so all who live into the Spirit are following the mission of Jesus Christ into the world.

The Spirit not only reflects our individual understanding of who God is but more so reflects our communal understanding of who God is. The Spirit speaks and communicates not only in words, but in actions and attitudes. There is the message that is spoken and then there is the meta-message that is lived out. The Spirit is present in all of those things. The Spirit, according to Jesus' teaching here, will say things to us that we cannot bear today. But we can bear them tomorrow because the Spirit never gives up speaking the truth to us. And hopefully we grow in our receptivity to the truth. The Spirit has many more things to say to us that we can possibly understand, and so the Spirit will keep teaching us even to the other side of death and into heaven. The Spirit wants to guide us into everything that's truthful. While Jesus is the center of truth and the epitome and being of truth, all truth is given by God to be understood by the Spirit.

We in the Presbyterian tradition affirm that there is not only a special revelation in scripture and in Jesus Christ, there is also the general revelation of who God is in all of creation and in science. The Spirit anticipates what is coming, not because the Spirit is so much interested in giving us the future but because the Spirit wants us to live well in the present and be prepared for the future. But, most of all, the Spirit acts as translator for us in relationship to Jesus. If we do not understand what God is trying to say to us, if we do not understand scripture, if we do not understand Jesus' teaching, the Spirit keeps working with us until we come to some understanding later. The Spirit often prays for us when we cannot even pray for ourselves.

The Spirit is truly our paraclete, our advocate, when we cannot articulate our own words about God. In the Reformed tradition, the Spirit not only speaks through individuals like the preacher and the person who prays or the person who is a counselor and a quiet advocate, the Spirit also speaks through the community. We of all traditions have a most strong accent on the Spirit meeting us and speaking through us. When we gather as leaders prayerfully and carefully, we listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church.

This is why today we are going to elect a pastor nominating committee. A group of nine people who will prayerfully and carefully select associate pastors. Because we believe that God's Spirit speaks in the community of responsible leaders. We see this also in our leadership as trustees, elders, and deacons. The Spirit speaks when we are gathered together and gives wisdom to the communities that listen together to what the Spirit has to say.

Desmond Tutu in his most recent book, *God Has a Dream*, gives us a wonderful, image of the way of the Spirit. Imagine yourself, he says, in front of a fire and you're feeling cold and damp. The longer you bask in front of the heat of that fire you begin to absorb the qualities of the fire into your life. If you live in the Spirit, the Spirit begins to transform you into the very passionate character of Jesus the Christ. When we take time to be in God's presence, the qualities of God are transformed to us. Now it doesn't just stop there for our personal sense of Spirit. In fact it cannot stop there, for the Spirit always is driving us into mission. The Spirit is always driving us outside our comfort zones and outside ourselves to engage other people in the world on behalf of Jesus. And so Tutu goes on to talk about how the Spirit will drive people into mission, as he was driven into mission, to confront apartheid in South Africa. Together, the people who prayerfully said "No" to apartheid, were the ones who listened to the Spirit and said that this evil cannot stand. The Spirit will say "No" to the lie; the Spirit will say "No" to the evil; and the Spirit will "Yes" to life that Jesus models.

In the Presbyterian tradition, a call is not heard just by an individual. You can say, 'I have a call from God to go and do such and such.' But in our Presbyterian tradition, we affirm that that call is not sustained until the community of people around you affirm it and confirm it. No individual has the right to declare himself or herself alone to be the one who is in touch with what God is saying. It is how the Spirit speaks to the individual in the community that makes a difference. Sometimes this confronts our rugged individualism in America because we have such a strong sense of individual rights and individual proclamations. But in the biblical sense the Spirit always has the accountability of community.

Jesus came full of grace and truth; the Spirit brings the gracious pattern of life so that people can receive the truth. Sometimes people use the truth as a hammer but the Spirit never uses truth as hammer. Like Jesus, the Spirit calls us to be gracious people who bring the truth along with us. So the truth is in the context of humility, kindness and patience. The truth is not edgy nor irritable; the truth is full of love and grace. Sometimes people want to say, "I want to tell you the truth!" And I want to say back to them, "I'm going to listen to your perspective and your opinion about the truth." Some people would like to rise higher than God as authority or prophet. No -- the Spirit speaks through the community of people and there's a soft voice whenever the Spirit speaks.

There is a little technique that's used in our communal processes in small group disciplines; it's called the johari window that gives us a full perspective of what the Spirit does. The johari window is an exotic name because two men, Joe and Harry created it. It is a double axis window that says: not only will you know the truth because you can speak the truth about yourself, you can disclose the truth about yourself, but you will finally find the complete truth when you will allow other people to give you feedback about who you are. Now that's something in our American culture we resist -- the thing about feedback. I don't mind telling you all the good things that I think about myself but I don't want you to give me feedback about what you see -- unless, it's good. In the johari window, the reality is that we can only know the truth if we have our view of it, and we have other peoples' view of it. I would add a third axis there: only if we have God's view of it. The Spirit is in the conversation, in ourselves, between us, and from God's

perspective.

Sometimes we resist the truth that other people want to say to us. I worked with a staff person in another church for many years who was a wonderful servant of God. This person started out in their work in the church as a gracious and kind and servant-oriented person but over the years became more grumpy and grouchy, more opinionated, more angry, and more vindictive. Finally people said, "We need to have a conversation with this particular person. There was a gathering of officers of the church and they said, "Do you realize that you are becoming a grumpy, old person. We love you too much to allow you to keep going in this direction of self-destruction and you are taking several of us down with you." "Oh no I'm not. I know myself better than that. I'm in control of things. I never get so upset that I get out of hand or out of touch with my reality." He resisted the feedback. We said, "Well, take some time and prayerfully consider it. Take some time off and think about it." He came back off of vacation and he said, "You know, I think it's time for me to retire. I didn't realize how out of touch I was getting until I got the feedback. It's time for me to go." It's hard for us to hear the truth when the truth moves us in a direction that we might resist or might be hurtful.

The truth is what Jesus wants to speak to us today. The truth about myself... the truth about yourselves... the truth about who we are as a church... the truth about who we are as a nation... the truth about who we are as a world... comes because Jesus is in our midst and the Spirit wants to speak to us. Scripture says "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Jesus is the truth. Jesus will set you free. Jesus sends the Spirit, which is his Spirit, to be able to persuade you to listen so that you will be free indeed. On this Pentecost day are you listening to the Spirit who's speaking to you? Amen.