

“God at Your Side – The Holy Spirit”

based on John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15, Romans 8:14-25 (and Acts 2:1-21)

Delivered on May 23, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, one of our most treasured holy days, when around 1950 years ago, some 120 disciples of Jesus in a crowded room. This feels very strange to consider nowadays, but they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring good news to the whole world.

That good news, or gospel, was that the one True God of Israel, had come down to the people in Jesus, to share in our humanity, to live as we live, and die as we die, and rise again for us. And on that first Pentecost, God came down again, in the Holy Spirit to dwell in and among them, to be again, and always be, Emmanuel. Yes, God came down to be and always be, God with us.

And so, it is a fitting day for us then to receive Nicholas and Kwame into our church. They have been marked out by God since their baptism in the church as infants, but today, they will profess their faith and become full members of the church. They will be recognized as active and vital parts of this community of faith, just as those first disciples professed their faith two millennia ago and embarked on God’s mission of reconciliation to bring the whole world to knowledge of God, the one true God, the God of Israel, fully revealed to us now as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Yet, as much as we want to make this day special for these two future church leaders, I want to emphasize the key element of the good news that is present in this day. Namely, we do not serve a God who is distant, or separate from us, but rather, that by our baptism and our profession of faith, all of us, regardless of our sins and our faith tradition are loved and made one in and through the Holy Spirit of God.

Yes, the significance of this day goes far beyond the establishment of the church. It is perhaps better phrased as the confirmation or commissioning of the church. It is about our perceptions of God and of God’s presence in our lives. The good news, or gospel, is truly good news because of this truth: Our value, our worth, and indeed our worthiness before God, has nothing to do with our striving to be like God, but that God delights in us, as God does all creation. Except that each and every single one of us, Nicholas, Kwame and all of you, have been made in God’s image.

The failure or sin of humanity, as revealed in Adam and Eve, is in our perception of God. Even though human beings are made in the image of God to reflect God in this world, and even though we are given God’s most precious gifts – love and freedom – we are not content to merely dwell with God and have God’s image in us. Rather, we think we have to be God, to define what is good and evil. We bind ourselves to our own authority, sometimes well meaning, but instead we become captives to idolatry, which brings death, by worshiping ourselves, our ideologies and other created things.

The good news is that rather than achieving perfection in order to be with God, we are called instead to recognize that God does not expect us to be perfect. God longs for us to recognize

that rather than climbing up to him, God has come down to us, to Abraham and Sarah and to all of Israel, and then through them, to the world, as one of their children. Through the life and death of Jesus, God in our flesh, whose death on that cross frees us from sin, and whose resurrection reveals to us, reveals that sin's greatest power – Death – is powerless because of him.

But there is more – the good news of God with us did not end when Jesus ascended. No, the good news of God with us became even more powerful and present after. You see, as the prophet Joel foretold, God's Spirit on Pentecost, was poured out on all humanity. It was not just the select few as before, but on all people – man and woman, from every nation, young and old, slave and free – yes, all of humanity. For as the prophet said, which Peter and Paul repeated, *"Everyone who call on the name of the Lord, shall be saved."*

In today's reading from John, we find Jesus still physically present with his disciples. This is in his farewell discourse and he is preparing them for his leaving – telling them that they will soon no longer see him with them. He says to them, *'It is an asset for you that I should go away, for if I do not go away, the intercessor will not come to you.'*

We might ask ourselves, how is Jesus leaving an asset? How is it, as the Greek word *'symphero,'* is also translated, 'How is it expedient'? How is it an 'advantage'? How is it 'better'? 'Profitable'? Wouldn't a physically present Jesus be best? Isn't Jesus's return something we hope for?

The easy answer is to just say – well the Holy Spirit is coming – and assume we understand it. But do we understand it? Think for a moment about how you perceive God with you. Often in the church, we use words like omniscient – all knowing – and omnipotent – all powerful – to describe God and so I think we have some perceptions of God rooted in these things. But have you contemplated how God is all knowing or all powerful? And with this, contemplated how God is also all loving? There are some who argue these three things cannot be held together.

I think we tend to gravitate toward perceptions of God we understand from our humanity. First, there is the Father. If God is a father, then perhaps God is all knowing because he looks down upon us, from high in heaven, with the powerful vision needed to see us individually. God our Father then is our source, our Creator, who loves us, and gazes upon us with delight, as I do when looking at my kids. I can understand that image.

And certainly, we gravitate toward the idea of the Son, because we know what this is too. We know what it is to be a child, and so, if Jesus shared in that experience for us, then we know that God has an understanding of our limits, our experience. And so there is a memory in that, there is a solidarity in Jesus, the Son, the Word of God made flesh, who humbled himself, and became one of us, to live, die and rise for us, returning to the Father to share that telescopic vision from above.

Both of these perceptions of God are good, but still, these are incomplete, and God is so much more. This is where our readings today give us a more complete understanding of God. Jesus promises his followers an 'intercessor,' as I have translated it, but also, an 'advocate,' a

'comforter,' a 'lawyer,' a 'friend,' as others translate it. Here the Holy Spirit is described by Jesus as the *'Paraclete.'* This middle sentence in John, Chapter 16, verse 7, is central to understanding who the Holy Spirit is, and we struggle to understand it in English, because these two Greek words, *'symphero'* and *'paraclete,'* cannot be translated fully, into the English language. It's frustrating.

Now, you might wonder then, why would God allow such words to be untranslatable? Why are they so hard to understand. Here's the thing: That's where our reading from Romans comes in, where Paul translates these two words as they relate to the Spirit, and he never even uses those words by expressing them in his description of the Spirit. You see, *'symphero'* combines the prefix *'sym'* meaning 'together with,' like we have in 'symphony' meaning sounds together. It is attached it to *'phero'* meaning to 'carry' or to 'bear' something. And so, something that is *'symphero'* is then literally, 'something you can carry together with you.'

Likewise, the word *'paraclete'* is a compound word, with the first part a prefix, *'para,'* which means 'close with' or 'alongside.' Think of our words 'parallel' and 'paragraph,' which describe things close together. This is then combined with the verb *'kaleo'* meaning to 'call' or 'summon.' And so, the word *'paraclete'* then as a noun is *'one who calls out alongside you.'* Intercessor, advocate, comforter, lawyer and friend, are each only part of this.

And so, to understand this sentence in John, I want us to look closely at Paul in Romans. This reading starts with Paul describing the Spirit as what makes us God's children. The Spirit is first our identification with God that we carry with us, for it is by the Spirit that we share in Christ, who is the true temple. He is the meeting place of heaven and earth, where God and creation dwell together. And so by his death and resurrection, we are made temples, forgiven to be temples, both individually and corporately as the church, to have God's Spirit dwell in our created bodies. So then, as children adopted by the Spirit, we become heirs with the Messiah, so when we suffer with him, we share in his life, and his glory.

We have been through a lot as a church in the past few years, bearing witness to many loved ones whom we have lost, both in the church, and also in our immediate and extended families, among our closest friends. We had several deaths close to our church last week that certainly make us mourn. Likewise, we have seen a great deal of change in our communities, in our culture, and in our church, all accelerated for sure, by this pandemic and the threat of COVID-19. We have seen the evils of racism rise up in new ways, while the depravity of this world rages on. In it all, it is easy to start to question: 'Where is God in all of this?'

But the truth is that God is with us – for the world has always been broken. It has always been turning from away God. I think when we focus too much on our vision of God as Father, as beautiful as it is, we tend to say, 'Why aren't you fixing it?' And when we focus on Jesus the Son, as I perhaps often do, we remember that he paid it all, so we question, how can this all be allowed to continue happening? Or we decide it isn't worth fixing now, since it will be fixed in the end.

But God in three means the Holy Spirit is part of this as well. And yes, our hope is that God our Father will make it all right, and that Jesus has done the necessary heavy lift, but in the Holy Spirit we see God wanting to include us in this important work. Just as in the Trinity, the Father & Son love each other in and through the Spirit, all co-equal, so then, God has made it so that we are called to love God and neighbor, and like the Trinity, we are called to do so in and through the Spirit.

What we suffer in the present time, Paul tells us, isn't even worth comparing to the glory of God, the glory that will be unveiled for us. This world is not how it is meant to be, God knows that, we know that, creation knows that. But even as creation is on edge – tiptoeing – and we are too, waiting for all things to be made new, we have a '*paraclete*' in the Holy Spirit, God is calling out for change with us. This is change in us and around us. The entire creation is groaning in labor pains, birthing a new creation, and if we look out, we see that since the death and resurrection of Jesus, as hard as it may be to believe, the world is truly on a road to something better, God's Kingdom. If we look at the ancient world before the church that Jesus was born into, the world is an awful place.

As believers, we are given the first fruits of this, we are given the fruits of the Spirit in us. And so, we must not let go of this truth that we are called to be the preview of the fullness of God's Kingdom now. We are called to reveal the Spirit calling out by our side, from within us, and among us, for the Spirit groans with us in our suffering, in our frustrations in this life, and it empowers us to see the world not as it is, but as it should be. It empowers us to go out in this world and love our neighbor and love our God to transform it for God's will.

Change comes by using the gifts God has given us, in the holy confidence, that we have God with us, that we are forgiven. As crazy as it sounds when we want God to just fix it all, we are called to share in God's work, the ministry of reconciliation, of love, of repairing the breach between us and our faithful loving God.

And so today, I want to say to Nick and Kwame – you are called by God to this ministry. But you are not alone in this calling – the Holy Spirit is with you, by your side. You are each a child of God, an heir to Christ, a temple for the Holy Spirit. But this message is not just for or about you. This message is for all of you – the Spirit is in this church. The Spirit is in the hearts of the faithful whom you worship with. The Spirit is that which all in this church carries with it – an identity in Christ alone. The Spirit calls out with you, sharing in your life still, for truly it is good news to say, God is with us. Amen.