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John 14:15-21

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And 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.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me, and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

A few weeks ago, leading up to his sermon on the Holy Spirit, Doug McPherson asked to meet with me. He shared that he wanted some feedback on how his sermon was coming along - in part because in a prior Sunday morning conversation, Doug felt I had poured cold water on a sermon idea centered on the Holy Spirit.

My first feeling was guilt - had I really discouraged someone from sharing deeply from their conviction? I apologized to Doug, and assured him that he was on the right track with his current plan. Cold water was now just water under the bridge. I didn't remember the conversation in question, so I began to wonder when it had happened - was it a morning when I was scrambling to make sure aspects of the service were in order, or still going over my mental notes for my own sermon?

And what might I have impulsively and misguidedly said in that moment, when a fellow believer was looking for conversation or affirmation?

I thought more about that this week, a few weeks away from Pentecost, while preparing to offer a sermon of my own about the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps my hesitation was that of the three persons who make up the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit really feels like the hardest bit to categorize and quantify. It's true that Mennonites tend to lean into Spirit-driven *community* processes, and are a bit more skeptical about singular or individual experiences of the Spirit.

Maybe that was it? I didn't want Doug to stray too far from a broader understanding of the Spirit as a collective one.

It is also true that we spend more of our time focusing on Jesus here at University Mennonite Church, emphasizing his teachings, his upside-down kingdom, his wrestling with the powers and principalities of the world. We have an entire month-plus where we spend our Sunday mornings preparing to celebrate his sacred birth, and another six Sundays when we move toward his death and resurrection, following that up with the resurrected Jesus moving toward Pentecost. When we zoom out, a full fifth, perhaps as much of a quarter of the annual worship calendar year, is set aside for Jesus-centered seasons like Lent and Advent.

God the Father is a bit less concrete in our conceptions, but we often lean into this part of the trinity when we pray, when we spend time in the Old Testament, when we talk about creation of the world, or even our place in it. Our focus on a one true God, traditionally categorizes Christians - as well as our Jewish, Muslim, and Bahai siblings as monotheists - faith traditions who believe in a singular, and all-powerful deity. God the Father, sometimes called Creator God, is also where we credit all the wonderful and miraculous elements of the unknown spiritual and metaphysical aspects of our human experience.

But the Spirit? Whew, that's a tricky one.

As service participants met earlier this week, we noted that it's often easier to explain what something complicated like the Holy Spirit *isn't* than what it actually is. Consider historic works of art that have tried to depict the three distinctives of the Trinity - often it looks sort of like this (SLIDE) - two white kingly dudes with a dove. Does that ring true for you? (SLIDE) Here's one where the Spirit dove is a bit more like a diving fighter jet. (SLIDE) Or this stained glass? Hand of God, flag-flying Jesus lamb, and a slightly different dive-bombing dove. There are plenty of triangular images that feel a little like a school teacher trying to explain a problem up on the blackboard. But in doing so they tend to remove the visual feeling from the process. (SLIDE) I also found several examples like these two of a proud God the Father, aligned with his crucified son, again, with that peaceful dove hovering between - it almost feels like an artistic afterthought. We have clear concepts of the Father and Son, but not so much the Spirit.

Most of the time the Holy Spirit is depicted as a dove, but occasionally as flames or fire. (SLIDE) You can see the image here that Karl shared in the mid-week newsletter, and another of when a bird and fire get combined into a kind of fiery dove. None of these feel quite satisfying to me.

And then there's the challenge of how we name it. I was a bit surprised I didn't find any ghost or phantom-like images. It feels a bit more dated now, but Holy Ghost is still a term that is used, and that name is a lyric in some of the hymns we sing. But perhaps ghosts are a bit too spooky for a sacred comforter.

So then what *really* is the Spirit?

Our Mennonite Confession of Faith, a document created in the mid-90s as Mennonite Church USA was being formed, uses its first three articles to explain the Trinity: God in Article 1, Jesus in Article 2, and the Holy Spirit in Article 3. The article on the Holy Spirit is just five paragraphs long, but in those paragraphs I counted at least 40 attributes of the Holy Spirit. (SLIDE) The footnotes and scripture references to this article are longer than the actual article itself. Clearly, there is a lot to be said about the Holy Spirit. If you stick around for the second hour, I've got a print out with all forty traits on it - perhaps we can dig in a bit deeper to our denominational theology during that time.

Is the Holy Spirit just a feeling, or perhaps something more? Is it a magical genie that we can call on in a time of need, or more of a comforter that wraps us in a warm embrace? Is it inside of us, or all around us? Is it as simple as God's presence, or Jesus walking alongside? But if that were true, why do we make it a distinct person in the trinity? It's complicated.

And perhaps making things even more complicated, John's Gospel is the only one of the four Gospel accounts to promise this spiritual *Paraclete* - the NRSV translation that we read this morning uses the word *Advocate*, but other translations use Helper or Counselor. John's Gospel also spends the most time preparing the disciples for a time after Jesus departs from the world, and so much of our post-Jesus understanding of the Spirit comes from John's Gospel account.

The pastoral search and candidating process has given me ample time to consider my own understanding of the Spirit, and I've shared some of that with you all over the past two weeks in formal and informal settings. But Meredith pointed out this week that there was one aspect that I hadn't spent much time talking about: the pace and timing of the Holy Spirit. (SLIDE) She's right, of course, and I think considering the Spirit's timing helps me gain a deeper understanding of what the Spirit means to me.

During moments of anxiety or discernment, our desire is often for immediate intervention of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We have traditions like intercessory prayer, often calling for swift action and immediate change. Our passage from this morning names the Spirit of truth, but it doesn't promise a fast speed. I'm not sure about you, but a slower and more contemplative pace tracks with my actual experience of the Spirit. In fact, when faced with some of our biggest life questions, Meredith and I have often tried to slow down enough to remind ourselves to let the Spirit speak amid the journey.

While sharing about our journey, I have shared about our decision to move across the country for seminary, and then back across the country for my first pastoral call. (SLIDE) There is an image of our sending Sunday at Pasadena Mennonite Church, and one of our final ones at Salford Mennonite Church where I baptized one of my high school youth. Both decisions were not made in an instant, but intentionally drawn out to allow the Spirit to speak to us over time. Same goes for when we were considering the transition to State College. (SLIDE) Meredith and I would ask when we were not sure, "does this feel like the right decision to make? Let's see how the Spirit speaks to us during the process." We would remind ourselves to pay attention to whether doors were opening or closing. We would pay attention to whether we sensed something meaningful in the transition time, and how that was affirmed or discouraged by our community of faith along the way.

Another pastor friend was recently talking about a decision facing his congregation. "It's a faith community," he explained, "so it's going to take us a while. And given that we're a Mennonite Church," he continued, "it's going to take us even longer. It takes time to hear what God is actually telling us."

Despite our desire for things to happen now, if not yesterday, there is something beautiful about being intentionally slow enough for the Spirit to move and speak in our midst. (SLIDE) Not just to feel that the decision being made is the best one, but to feel that it is a decision rooted in the nudging of God's spiritual presence in our lives. The old adage that hindsight is 20/20 applies pretty well to the Spirit's presence in our lives. I often only notice a divine comfort until reflecting back on a particular time or moment.

Often when I'm feeling my most urgent sense of need for something to happen quickly and right away, the best gift from the Spirit is not a sense of which direction to take, but a reminder that the Spirit of the living God will go with me regardless of which direction I choose, or feel compelled to take.

And as an aside, and perhaps I'm preaching to myself this morning as we await the final pastoral candidate vote results, there is something so reassuring when the Spirit reminds me that regardless of which path is taken, God is with me there.

A commentary reflection from Professor Yung Suk Kim on the WorkingPreacher.org website reminded me this week that a good litmus test for the Spirit's presence with us is love. Kim writes, "This love transcends self-interest and prejudice; it embraces all people and creation. For Jesus, true religion is practical and tangible, expressed through acts of love that mirror God's own. Friends, if we truly believe that God is love, then love is an easy way to measure if the Spirit's presence is real and alive as we continue on the journey.

So, what does this mean for us today? One aspect might mean shifting our expectations from immediate clarity to loving companionship - the Spirit's embrace, but also the embrace from our community. (SLIDE) Our scripture passage from this morning reminds us that Jesus promised he would not leave his disciples orphaned. Perhaps on this Mother's Day, we might encourage each other to think of the Spirit as a loving mother. Carmen shared with me this week that Gloria has encouraged her to rename the Holy Spirit, the Holy *Mothering* Spirit. Jesus assured his followers of a present advocate - a Paraclete who would be with them forever, dwelling with them. The work of the Holy Spirit, then, is less about a magical lightning bolt of direction, and more about cultivating a deep, abiding assurance that as we intentionally slow down, we are walking forward

wrapped in the love of God and the revealed presence of Jesus himself. I think most of us would agree that the best memories of our mothers are the ones where we felt deeply loved and known.

The message of our scripture today is a comfort for the journey: we are not asked to *earn* God's love by choosing the perfect path, but that we will be continually loved as we strive to follow the way of Jesus.

Friends, as we leave this space and return to our own day to day... decisions, anxieties, and at times an overwhelming sense of urgency, let us remember the warm and loving embrace of the Spirit of our living God. May we trust that the one who lives in us is also the one who walks with us, guiding our feet not with a sudden rush, but with a beautiful, intentional slowness, confident in the eternal presence that will never leave us orphaned.

May it be so, Amen.