

Pentecost 2015

May 24

Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair

David Noble

“Movin’ In Our Hearts”

John 15:26, 27 - 16:4-15

²⁶“When the Advocate (Paraclete) comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; ¹¹about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. ¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

A

The Resurrection was amazing, but hold on to your hats, because Pentecost is here.

I mean here. Not just in an old Bible story that is told fifty days after Easter every spring. A story about Peter and the disciples who were visited in an upper room by the Holy Spirit and then able to preach to the multilingual crowds in the streets of Jerusalem who could understand them because their language differences were miraculously overcome that day. Yes, Pentecost happened many years in the past on the other side of the world from us here in Montclair.

But I’m telling you, Pentecost is here right now and it makes a difference.

Christian faith is too often stuck in what happened and not able to relate to what is happening. Christian faith can easily become more about looking back and celebrating people and events of the past. We can talk about Jesus’ life for instance, about how he went out to heal and preach and challenge, but not necessarily feel that we are commissioned to do the same, or better, today. And Easter can be a celebration of a Sunday in the past when an incredible resurrection from the dead broke all the rules about what is possible and what is not, and yet we may not know we can embrace the resurrection life today and every day.

So we come to Pentecost and Jesus tells his disciples he is going away, going back to the right hand of the Father in heaven, but not to worry, he says. Jesus is sending someone who will keep the story going, someone who will continue to teach what Jesus has already taught and what he has not had time to start teaching.

Christian faith, according to Jesus at that first Pentecost, is not static, not stuck, not always looking back. Today is rich with possibility. Jesus has promised that every today is another day for him to connect with what is happening in our lives.

B

Once again, Jesus describes faith as relationship. Jesus is sending a “who”, not a “what.”

When I teach a confirmation class I usually ask the youth to write a statement of faith. For them it’s pretty easy to describe God and Jesus from what they’ve learned in church. But when it comes time to write about the Holy Spirit, their eyes glaze over and their pencils screech to a halt, and they honestly can’t say if the Holy Spirit is a “who” or a “what.” And they definitely haven’t felt as though they’ve been developing a relationship with this Spirit.

We use the word “Spirit” and that may be a problem. “Spirit” seems impersonal and fuzzy. How do you relate to a spirit? But when it comes to John’s gospel today, it doesn’t really use the words “Holy Spirit.” It uses a unique word- “Paraclete.” Jesus sends us the Paraclete, John’s gospel says in the original. And the name “Paraclete” is two words stuck together. The words “alongside” and “called.” This companion Jesus sends has been called alongside both the world and us to continue what Jesus had begun.

The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, has been called alongside the world to reveal how its relationship with God is messed up and how relationships between people are often no better. And the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, is called alongside the church to help us talk about those problems with the world and bring some light into those troubled relationships.

The Spirit reveals the truth about the world and equips us to name that truth and grapple with it, following in Jesus’ steps. Pentecost is today.

C

So if Pentecost is about relationship, about the Holy Spirit coming alongside us, how do we handle that relationship?

How do we handle any relationship? Sharing could be one answer. Friends share time with one another. And feelings and experiences. Partners share hopes and dreams. All relationships share communication back and forth- both sides speaking and listening.

Our relationship with the Holy Spirit is no different- it takes time, it involves sharing, it involves us speaking to the Spirit and the Spirit speaking to us. And if Jesus intends this Spirit to guide us, to have some authority in our lives, then we seek the Spirit’s involvement in our lives individually and together.

So when Christians are confronted with a decision about what to do, it’s no longer possible to say, “Well we considered that option but decided it wasn’t for us, it wasn’t something we wanted to do.” Christians instead would say, “We talked that over with one another and the Holy Spirit and did not feel the Spirit leading us to do that.”

That’s definitely a new practice for many Presbyterians. I believe the Holy Spirit has been called alongside our elders to guide them in their leadership. I’ve been asking our Session to develop a way to

conduct meetings that allows some quiet time to listen for and to feel the Holy Spirit's guidance in our decisions.

This is exciting to me. If Jesus means that he's sending us a companion who wants to be engaged with our individual as well as our congregational life, then he is saying we may be pushed beyond what we can imagine on our own toward something greater. A growing imagination and ministry might simply need a more intentional relationship with Jesus' Spirit, the Paraclete.

D

What a relief to have Jesus' Spirit with us. We don't have to figure everything out from scratch.

Jesus, as well as the Spirit he sends in his name, care about what's happening in the world. Over the last few months there has been growing concern over broken relationships in many communities. Citizens and police have been at odds, violence has taken lives and destroyed property. Hatred, disrespect, aggression, cruelty—all that is sinful. According to both the Old Testament and Jesus we are to love God and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. These violent, disrespectful situations break those commandments and I believe the Holy Spirit is at work focusing the world's attention and showing it is not right.

And equally true, I believe, that same Spirit is coming alongside Christians to challenge us and equip us and send us to be involved in those situations so that respect and dignity and peace will be established and neighbors will learn how to live together as God means for them to do. The Paraclete is working in world and church.

The single most right thing that ever happened in this world was the whole life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. In him we have the vision of what should be. We have a clue about what is missing in the world by comparison. The Spirit continues to teach us about Jesus, and strengthens us to live like him and to share that with the world.

Over the last few weeks a number of people from this congregation have been out walking the neighborhoods around the church. We are learning more and more what makes each neighborhood unique. We want to understand how we can serve our neighbors.

I believe that is the Holy Spirit motivating people to walk and look and learn. It is the Holy Spirit preparing us for whatever Jesus is going to call us to be and do.

E

And, when the Spirit comes alongside, things often get interesting.

When the Spirit came down on Jesus at his baptism, what happened? The Spirit drove him, pushed Jesus, into the wilderness where he confronted his temptor. When the Spirit came upon the disciples in the upper room they suddenly began preaching in the streets, confronting their community's lack of trust in God, and thousands immediately repented and became followers of Jesus.

Most of us have been baptized. And on that day the Spirit-Jesus-sends came alongside us to begin teaching us and guiding us. And I believe that same Spirit is itching for an opportunity to send us out to help our community know and experience what is so right and so just and so healing and so loving and so hopeful about Jesus and his gospel.

I believe the Spirit seeks to be at work in you and me and to work in the world through us.

Yes, Pentecost was an amazing day way back then, but Pentecost is now. It is here. It is you and me and the Spirit. Hold on to your hats.