

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Acts 10:44-48

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

It is a fact that the nature of God is a mystery to our finite human minds, and yet the mysteriousness of God does not stop us from wanting to understand God. For the past two thousand years, one of the most important means by which the church has understood God has been through the doctrine of the Trinity: it acknowledges that we experience as One the God who creates and rules the world in sovereign love AND the God who draws near to us in Jesus of Nazareth AND the God who is everywhere the giver and renewer of life; our one God is at the same time Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer; God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Of the three persons of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is probably the hardest to grasp. On this Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. The second chapter of the Book of Acts tells the story. On the fiftieth day after the resurrection, Jesus' friends were all together in one place in Jerusalem.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.¹

Those are wonderful images of the Holy Spirit: flames, tongues of fire and the rush of a mighty wind. They connote light and energy. A more contemporary way to think of the Holy Spirit might be to say that when the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to the church, the community of faith becomes wired to carry the current of life. That is not to say that the church has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it chooses. You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going."²

We have spent several Sundays since Easter in a most eloquent passage in the gospel of John, the Farewell Discourse, where Jesus prepares his followers to cope with his absence. In it, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit. He acknowledges that just as there has been a conflict between him and the world, there will be conflict between his followers and the world. He goes on to assure them that they will not be left with only their own resources to rely on. He is going to send someone else, whom he calls the Advocate. "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the spirit of truth who comes from the Father, will testify on my behalf."³ What a striking metaphor for the

¹ Acts 2:1-4.

² John 3:8.

³ John 14:16.

Spirit of God: an expert witness who testifies to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Is there anything more elusive in our world today than truth?

The problem is captured wryly by the comedian Steven Colbert, who uses the word, “truthiness,” to satirize the use of appeal to emotion and “gut feeling” in today’s world of politics and culture. Truthiness describes things that someone claims to know intuitively or “from the gut” without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts. Colbert says.

It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that’s not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It’s certainty. People love politicians, commentators, radio talk show hosts who believe strongly that they are right and advocate forceful action, even if the facts that would back that up don’t seem to exist. It’s the fact that they’re certain that is very appealing to a certain section of the country. I really feel a dichotomy in the American populace. What is important? What you want to be true, or what is true?...⁴

The Lord God lamented to Jeremiah in the seventh century before Christ, “The truth has perished; it has been cut from the peoples’ lips.”⁵ His too, you see, was a time of fake news and alternative facts. We are loaded these days with information, but truth is in short supply. Jesus said, “When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you in all truth.” God will be your Advocate, God will be the defender of the truth. God will be your Counselor, who will argue your case, stand beside you in every trial of life, and give you the gift of discernment between that which is real and that which is false.

Do you remember Lee Atwater? He died young thirty years ago, but had been one of the most prominent political operatives of the 1980s. He was known for twisting facts to suit his purposes and barring no holds when it came to getting his clients elected. Many trace the nastiness that infects modern politics to Atwater’s techniques. At top of his profession and not yet forty years old, Atwater was diagnosed with brain cancer. Not long before he died, he said in *Life* magazine,

My illness helped me perceive what is missing in our society, and...what was missing in our society was missing in me. A little heart, a lot of brotherhood. We’re about acquiring in our society. Acquiring wealth, power, prestige. But you can acquire all you want and still be empty. . . It took a deadly illness to bring me eye to eye with that truth. But it is a truth that a country caught up in ruthless ambition and moral decay can learn in my dying. [Whoever will lead us into the future] must be made to speak to the spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society.⁶

This is the truth Lee Atwater learned.

⁴ “Truthiness,” *Wikipedia* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>), accessed May 30, 2009.

⁵ Jeremiah 7:28.

⁶ Lee Atwater and T. Brewster, “Lee Atwater's Last Campaign,” *Life Magazine*, February 1991,

I believe that the Holy Spirit is alive and well in the world, teaching people of every political persuasion, at some point or another, the value of truth. If the Christian church has any role in contemporary American society, surely it is to be stewards of the truth. We must let the power of the truth come through us. We must testify to the truth, not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of the larger society of which we are a part and to whom we are called, as Jesus said, to be light and salt.⁷

If the doctrine of the Holy Spirit has anything to teach us, it is that the God who spoke through the prophets and the apostles long ago is acting and speaking here and now in the present tense. The question is: what do you think the Spirit is saying to the church and through the church? What is the testimony that we are to make? What is the word that the Spirit wants to put into our ear? Whose case is God pleading?

I imagine many of you are familiar with Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A small-town southern lawyer, Atticus Finch, comes to the defense of a black man accused of raping a white woman. One night before the trial begins, Atticus sits in his rocking chair, reading the evening paper, the Mobile Press. He puts it on the floor and reaches out his arms to his daughter Scout, who comes to sit on his lap. They talk quietly, the father's arms around the daughter. He knew there would be trouble for her ahead, that her classmates would taunt her. He knew the community hated what he was doing, and he tried to help her understand why he simply had to do what he was about to do—testifying to the truth.

“Scout, when summer comes, you’ll have to keep your head...it’s not fair for you and [your brother] Jem, I know that, but sometimes we have to make the best of things, and the way we conduct ourselves when the chips are down—well, all I can say is, when you and Jem are grown, maybe you’ll look back at this with some compassion and some feeling that I didn’t let you down. This case, Tom Robinson’s case goes to the essence of a man’s conscience. . . I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man.”

[Scout answers,] “Atticus, you must be wrong...”

“How’s that?”

“Well, most folks seem to think they’re right and you’re wrong...”

“They’re...entitled to think [whatever they want], but...I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is the person’s conscience.”⁸

When the Holy Spirit, when the Advocate comes, the Advocate will lead you in the truth. Atticus went on to try the case, and, he lost, but his character remained intact, and the conscience of the town was never the same again.

Then, there was the day that Atticus, the advocate, talked with his son about the proper use of the air rifle Jem had been given as a gift.

⁷ Matthew 4:13-16.

⁸ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1960), 113-114.

“Son, I’d rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you’re going to go after the birds. [Just remember, Jem,] it’s a sin to kill a mocking bird. . . They don’t eat people’s gardens; don’t nest in the corn cribs; they don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us.”⁹

Advocacy for the innocent. Is that not something that should be on the job description of the church of Jesus Christ? The church that is filled with the current of life and with the Spirit of truth? Advocacy for the innocent is as much a part of our Christian calling as anything I know. We are to be active in the world, looking out for the innocent, speaking up for the little ones and the excluded ones, and the unjustly treated ones in our society.

I believe in a simple test to determine whether or not a faith community is Spirit-filled, in the sense that the Gospels understand. It is not whether we speak in tongues and wave our hands in the air, but whom are we standing up for? What are we saying no to? What are we saying yes to? In what ways do the values of the Christian gospel challenge the values of American society—the society of which we are a part—that is marked by so much greed, ambition and lust for power?

The Presbyterian “Brief Statement of Faith” has this beautiful line in it: “We trust in God, the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver of life.” And in the Gospel of John, there is the wonderful association of the Spirit of life with the Spirit of truth. I trust that the current of life is pulsating through this community and through your heart and mind and the hearts and minds of people of good will everywhere, lifting up a new generation that will want to make it a part of their calling of faith to plead the case of the powerless.

Pentecost Sunday is a good day for us at Union Church to ask ourselves what we stand for. We are, after all, completing a mission study and preparing to call a new permanent pastor to lead the congregation vigorously into God’s future for this church. What brave work might God be calling us to do now? Whatever it is, let us take comfort in the assurance that God is with us in power, and in truth, as much with us—no, even with us more—than when Jesus himself walked the earth. Listen to what Jesus said, “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.”¹⁰ And so he did. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit who is wind, who is fire, who is truth, whose “bright wings are never still.”¹¹

All authority and power and dominion to the name that is above all names—Jesus Christ our Lord—now and in the age to come. Amen.

⁹ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 98.

¹⁰ John 16:7.

¹¹ A phrase used by Frederick Buechner.