

**“The Holy Spirit Helps Us”**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, June 9, 2019  
The Day of Pentecost  
*John 14:8-17, 25-27*

Welcome to Pentecost, that Sunday when the church celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's our usual practice, on Pentecost, to focus upon Acts 2, that dramatic Pentecostal descent of the Holy Spirit on the first believers inducing them to hear strange things and to say strange things.

But this Pentecost, let's allow John's gospel to introduce us to John's take on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been called the “shy member of the Trinity.” We know who God the Father is and what the Father does. The Father is God the Creator, the one who fashioned heaven and earth out of nothing. We know God the Son, the divine Incarnation, God-with-us as Jesus Christ who taught and healed, suffered and died.

But God the Holy Spirit? What does the Spirit do? You'll find that question answered in this morning's gospel. You may note that we're using some of the gospel lesson from John that we used last Sunday. But this Sunday we will focus upon this text as John's rendition of Pentecost.

You can't be in any kind of relationship with someone whom you don't even know. Want to be friends with someone? Step one: Get to know the person.

Now, let's say you are here this morning because you want to get to know God. But that sort of personal knowledge is tough because God is God and you're not. In fact, John's gospel states upfront, “No one has ever seen God.”

“God is a Spirit,” seems like I recall someone teaching me that when I was a kid in Sunday school. “Invisible and intangible.”

John's statement, "No one has ever seen God," certainly held true through most of human history. And that means it's tough to know God. As we often say, "seeing is believing." It's difficult to believe in the reality of something you can't see and that means belief in God, sure knowledge about God the Invisible One, is difficult.

However, then John says, "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (1:18). That's the main point of Jesus, the Word made flesh, God with us, to make God fully known.

Think about all those times Jesus gave us a parable by saying, "The Kingdom of Heaven" (that place, that time where God is all in all) "is like....a woman making bread, a father waiting upon the return of his prodigal son, a farmer coming upon buried treasure,...." You can almost feel Jesus struggling to find just the right story, just the right words in order to reveal God to us. That's what any good teacher does: find just the right analogy or insight that will enable the students to understand and to know.

Jesus the teacher enables us, even us, to become friends with God by making God known. Through his parables, his sermons, his healings and his actions, Jesus was busy revealing God to us. All the way up to the very last days of his earthly ministry, that's what Jesus did: revealed the true nature of the true God to us.

Unfortunately, his teaching didn't work. No matter how hard Jesus tried to show us who God really is and what God's really up to in the world, we didn't get all that he had to teach and there was still more to be said about God, even after Jesus' inspired instruction. At least that's my impression from this Pentecost gospel toward the end of John's story of Jesus.

Jesus is coming to the end of the road, the road that shall end, in just a chapter or so, to the cross. And the night before he gathers with his disciples for a meal. During this last meal,

Jesus will give them his last will and testament. He will say again to them the most important things he has to say before he departs from them. While he is giving them his last lecture, Philip blurts out, “Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us. All we want is to know who God really is and what God means for us. Show us that, and this whole trip with you will be worthwhile.”

And you can hear the exasperation in the Teacher’s voice when he replies to Philip, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time?” Here it is, the night before the final exam and you are still clueless?

Then Jesus says, reassuringly, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I have spoken to you I don’t speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me does his works. Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

That’s taking teaching up a notch or two. This teacher, Jesus, isn’t just conveying facts and figures to his students, the disciples. Jesus isn’t just conveying subject matter; Jesus is the subject matter. He is God. Jesus, the Son of God is one with God the Father. “I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

You want to see God, to know God as God really is? Then look at Jesus, listen to Jesus. God the Son, Jesus, is one with God the Father.

That’s some really good news. It means, in the words of the great theologian, Thomas F. Torrance, that “there’s no God hiding behind Jesus.” When Torrance was attempting to offer pastoral care to a grieving woman whose son had been killed in the war, and in her grief asked her pastor something like, “Where is my son now? What can I hope for after his death?” Torrance replied that whatever she knew about Jesus, she knows about God. Jesus never turned

anyone away. Jesus embodied, in word and deed, pure love. Jesus didn't wait for people to come to him; he sought them out and welcomed and invited them to come to him in their need. It isn't like you have Jesus talking about God and then somewhere else there's God, lurking behind Jesus. When we see Jesus, we see God.

"I spent my first forty years of life thinking God was mad with me, thinking that I was on probation with God," a woman in my church said. "Then I met Jesus and thereby discovered the truth about God. God is in Christ therefore, God is love."

Philip's "show us the Father" is rather amazing. Here are the ones who have been with Jesus every step of the way, have heard his teaching and have seen him in action and yet, even after all that, here at the end, they're saying, "Come on Jesus! Don't hold anything back. Show us the Father."

Philip's incomprehension is rather typical of Jesus' followers in John's gospel. Everybody around Jesus, in the Fourth Gospel, seems amazingly dumb. Jesus teaches but nobody ever gets the point. Even his disciples, especially his disciples.

But before you condemn the disciples for being impossibly thick headed in not yet seeing God through Jesus, I submit to you that the problem may be that they thought they already knew about God. They knew for sure that God is all powerful, all knowing, unlimited, high and mighty. Then there came Jesus saying "I and the Father are one" and "when you have seen me, you have seen my Father." The problem there is that what they have seen of Jesus – as he is condemned and criticized by the scripture experts, as he is rejected by many of his hearers, and now as he goes to suffer and die – is that Jesus just doesn't match up with their preconceptions of God.

So perhaps Philip, in saying, "Show us the Father," is saying, "Okay Jesus, stop holding back. Come on. Act more like the God we expected. Match up to our definitions of God, if you and the Father are one."

Jesus responds to Philip by saying, "Philip, the good news is that when you have seen me, you have seen God. When you have been addressed by me, inviting you to follow me, you have been spoken to by God. When you have been loved by me, all the way through to the end, all the way to the cross, you have been loved by me. There's no God yet to be revealed, no God hiding behind me waiting to jump you later. I and the Father are one."

And then Jesus makes an astounding comment, particularly surprising considering Philip's incomprehension, "I assure you that whoever believes in me will do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than mine. I will do whatever you ask for in my name."

It's odd to hear Jesus make the statement that, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these. I will do whatever you ask in my name, I will do it" (John 14:12-14). Some interpreters say that when Jesus promises "greater works" he is talking quantity rather than its quality. Jesus has had, due to our rejection, only about three years but now he is giving us until the end of time to do good work.

Jesus has brought his disciples into the sheepfold but there are still "other sheep" to be brought in (John 10:16) and so he is giving them time to do that work. The work of Christ in the world has only begun. The work will be continued, expanded beyond the bounds of Judea. There will be millions more in the future who "believe in me through their word" (John 17:20).

Still, it's a bit of a jolt to hear Jesus say, "I will do whatever you ask" because, if we're honest, we know some of the ridiculous requests we might make of Jesus like, "Give me

prosperity. Give me lots of money – in a secret Swiss bank account. Give me a big car.” Or, “Jesus, hand me a pain-free, happy life without risk of sadness or difficulty.”

Perhaps Jesus is saying, “You can do as great or even greater good work than I do. If you need any help – doing good in behalf of others, or in loving others as I have commanded – all you ‘ve got to do is ask. I’ll give you help with the heavy lifting. Just ask.”

He says that he has done his good work and that we will be able to do *his* work (not necessarily our idea of work) too.

Maybe Jesus adds, “You know that I know you and love you. I don’t expect you to be a courageous, truthful witness, an unrestrained and generous giver, a forgiving, loving person on your own. All you’ve got to do is ask. Anything!”

And perhaps seeing that there’s still some work to be done among his own disciples like Philip, Jesus says, “I’m getting ready to depart, to return to my Father who sent me. I’ve tried to teach you all about the Father, but now I’ll send another teacher, the Advocate, who will continue to work with you, to explain things to you, and keep trying to show you the Father.”

Jesus promises to send "another Advocate." Jesus, Son of God, has already been speaking with his Father, advocating for the disciples. Now Jesus says, as he leaves, that he will send “another Advocate to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16f).

And that may be one of the most wonderful aspects of this Pentecost gospel. Jesus commands us to love. He says that through him we can know, really know, the truth about God. Yet he doesn’t expect us to do anything by ourselves.

“God helps those who help themselves,” wasn’t said by Jesus. It’s not in the Bible. Rather, Jesus loves us enough to leave us, not alone, not as orphans, but rather gives us his Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit, that “Advocate,” will continue Jesus’ teaching among us. There’s so

much to know about God, so many of our misconceptions about God, our confusion about just how it stands with us in God, that Jesus couldn't tell us everything in the three years he's had with us. So Jesus sends the Advocate to teach us.

What does the Holy Spirit do? That question finds its answer in today's gospel. The Holy Spirit teaches. And that's good news. When you are confronted with some difficult decision in which you ask, "What path does God want me to take?" or the old, WWJD, "What would Jesus do?" ask the Holy Spirit for help with the lifting.

When you come to some crossroads and ask, "Where is God now? What is the most loving thing for me to do in this case?" Remember, you are not in this alone.

It's Pentecost. We don't have to live, obey, or serve God on our own! Thanks be to God for the gift of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit who'll teach us everything we need to know.

—*William H. Willimon* © 2019