

John 15:26-27, 16:4-15 (NRSV)

"When the Advocate 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. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless 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. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When 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. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

At Saint Nicholas, Pentecost Sunday is Confirmation Sunday and because we are so attached to our children, the Confirmation part of the service gets most of the attention. However, this emphasis can lead us to overlook the common theme of the readings – all of the readings focus on the neglected third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Pentecost Sunday is really Holy Spirit Sunday.

The church has spent millennia trying to domesticate the Holy Spirit, without much success. The early church focused on the Holy Spirit as the person of the Trinity who sustained and empowered the church, and this is certainly true – look at our first reading from the book of Acts. Here the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples and those gathered around them to reverse the ancient curse of the Tower of Babel. Now all the peoples of the earth can communicate with each other directly. “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia ...” lands we know from our history and geography studies and other lands we have never heard of, all these people hear about God’s works of power in their own languages.

But, as amazing as this feat of simultaneous translation is, it doesn’t exhaust the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the reading from John, we hear that Jesus will send an Advocate to testify to the world on behalf of Jesus. The Advocate, the Spirit of Truth will, as Jesus says, prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. Is the Advocate in John the same as the Holy Spirit in Acts? We don’t really know, of course – most scholars would probably guess that the Advocate is an aspect of the Holy Spirit in the same way that the Spirit that allows all people to communicate with each other in their own languages is an aspect of the Holy Spirit. This, of course, raises the question of what other aspects the Spirit might have.

The Spirit, of course has been around a very long time – since Genesis, Chapter 1, verse 2 at least. Here we learn that the Spirit of God swept over the waters. The Spirit is a wind, ruach in Hebrew, and the wind goes and the wind blows whither it will. So even in this first moment, as creation begins, the Spirit like a great wind sweeps, unpredictable, over the face of the deep. Hebrew tradition has it that the Spirit is the spirit of wisdom, traditionally a female counterpart to the Creator God, although other theologians identify the Holy Spirit as a “he.” Remember what we’ve been saying about the use of metaphorical language -- neither the Creator God nor the Spirit is really either male or female in the ways that you and I think of it.

Paul in the reading from Romans tells us that the Spirit has a cosmic role, groaning with us as we, the first fruits of God's project of redemption, await our adoption as children of God. And the Spirit intercedes for us, we who are so confused and so bereft don't even know how to pray or what to pray for, the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

So, what do we have from the readings? Who is this Holy Spirit and what does she do? The Spirit has been present from the first instant of creation and before, the Spirit in one aspect advocates for Jesus and for and with us to the world on behalf of Jesus to tell the world about its waywardness and alienation and God's dream of reconciliation. And the Spirit intercedes for us, the first fruits who have received the promise of this reconciliation and remain in the world but not of it, changed but not yet completely transformed. And the Spirit overcomes our alienation from one another, our inability to communicate, the curse of Babel, the Spirit overcomes this and allows us to speak to one another in ways we all can understand.

A theologian, Sarah Coakley¹ has given some thought to the role of the Holy Spirit. She sees the Holy Spirit as the personal manifestation of the divine whose distinctive role is to incorporate the creation into the life of God, to reconcile the elements of discord and ignorance and alienation and return to God that which belongs to God, to unify and reconcile and unite creation within God. I like this idea very much.

I've been reading – this is always trouble – I've been reading a book by Daniel Quinn, called *Ishmael*. Kathy Danguin recommended it. The book is a good and challenging exploration of how humanity went astray. We went astray, Quinn thinks, from the moment that we became convinced that we were somehow different from and in fact better than the rest of creation, that we were somehow granted special knowledge or dispensation to order creation to suit our needs. Once

¹ See her contribution to *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine: Essays in Honour of Maurice Wiles*, cited in *Christian Century*, January 17, 1996, p. 48.

we became convinced of this, and Quinn blames religion for this at least in part – once we became convinced of our special status in creation, we became alienated, estranged from the rest of creation. The parts of creation that we feared or hated, we began to kill – the lions and the wolves and the sharks and snakes. The parts of creation that we needed we began to subdue and enslave – the animals that could be domesticated, crops that could be planted and harvested. The parts of creation that were inconvenient, we began to change – the woodlands, the wetlands, the wilds, we cut and drained and domesticated.

And, Quinn says, we come now to these latter days and discover that this creation that we have decimated and enslaved and altered will no longer support us in the style to which we have become accustomed. We discover that we are not better than or different from creation but rather completely dependent upon it and upon the God who created it and sustains and ultimately who orders it and us. And creation groans in anticipation of our redemption, our adoption not as masters of creation but as children of God, not as separate from the world but as a vital and obedient part of it.

And so the Spirit intercedes for us, with groans too deep for words, teaching us to pray, praying we will learn, teaching us humility and purpose and reconciliation. And teaching us one other thing – the God who created us and orders our lives is not a God that *we* can order or control or even completely predict. This God moves whither and when God wills, to God's own plan and schedule in God's good time. God works in and through the church and in and through anyone or anything else God chooses and those choices are not for us to regulate or critique, to approve or modify.

Holy Spirit Sunday reminds us that God in the Spirit guides and empowers the church in its prayer, in its ministries and in its life together. Holy Spirit Sunday reminds us that God in the Spirit is alive and loose in the world, inspiring dreams and visions where we least expect them and most need them. Holy Spirit Sunday reminds

us of the unity that we share in and through the church and beyond it, that we of the church are witnesses for and with Christ and our Advocate, witnesses to our vocation not as masters of creation but as children of God. So, Happy Holy Spirit Sunday, the birthday of the church in the world.

Amen.