

sermon-6/3/07 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Led by the Spirit to Love”
John 16:12-15

When preparing for this sermon I suddenly realized my first sermon with you back in June of 2004 was on this very same text in John. The lectionary is on a three year cycle. That means I have been with you for one complete cycle. We begin a second round today. It is always interesting to me to see what grabs me when I approach the same text years later. We all change and grow. We all have different ears, so to speak, to listen for God’s Word as the years march by. Let’s listen again this year to this rich text.

This is Trinity Sunday in the church calendar. Last time my sermon tried to deal with the mystery of the Trinity. This time, it was the words on the Spirit that grabbed my attention. We are told by Jesus that the Spirit will guide us into all truth. Just how the Spirit guides us and into what truth we are guided are both interesting points to ponder.

We know, up until now in the gospel, the disciples had Jesus to guide them. But, in John’s gospel, Jesus is preparing the disciples for the time that is fast approaching when they will no longer have him with them in the flesh. They could feel left adrift. What are we going to do without the one on whom we have relied for focus and direction?

As one commentator noted, now the disciples will need to find the truth within themselves and corporately in their ongoing relationships in the community of faith. It is there where they will hear the voice of the Spirit reminding them of what they have learned from Jesus.

But, how do we know we are listening to the voice of the Spirit inside us or in our community? There’s the rub. Some might suggest the Spirit is free as the wind. It can lead us into new truths, even seemingly contradictory truths to what we have known in Jesus. They seem to be saying we can’t be tethered to the past, chained to tradition and the way we have always done and thought about things.

While there is some truth to that perspective, there is also some potential serious problems as well. The biblical perspective on the Spirit as teacher goes in a little different direction.

One commentator says the Bible tells us the Spirit does not give us new information at all. Rather, the Spirit is more about “fresh discernment, better focused eyes with which to read the signs of the times.” There is a difference between fresh discernment and new, possibly even contradictory information.

Another scholar puts it this way. “What John is appealing for is a dynamic interpretation, inspired by the Holy Spirit, of a single and unchanging revelation.” The truth does not change, just our understanding of it. That is what we are to be about in the community of faith. We are to try and interpret the scriptures, earnestly listening for what God is saying to us personally and corporately.

That same scholar goes on to say this is hard work. We have no way of knowing if our interpretation is absolutely correct or complete. That should not stop us. We are, he says, to live “faithfully and imaginatively.” We are to give our lives to the scriptures and to the hard work of interpretation because that is where we learn how to live fully and meaningfully. To do that hard work is to stake our very lives on the scriptures.

Interpretation is not an exact science. It is, rather, as this scholar put it, an “experiment of hope.” It is a journey into truth. What an adventure! What I have found in this journey is that the truths I can stake my life on are not so much about doctrinal assertions, facts about theology or explanations about the trinity. Rather my journey into the truth is a whole lot more about a journey into a deeper relationship with God. Relationships are more life giving than facts.

One of our Presbyterian seminary professors, John McClure, who teaches at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, says one of the major truths the Spirit helps us see and understand is the pattern of self-giving love revealed in the cross. This love is for all humanity, not just those in our crowd.

The Spirit, in other words, teaches us that if we want to live a meaningful life, a life filled with adventure and purpose, it will involve living in relationships where we can express this pattern of self-giving love. That is the way to God. When Jesus says in John’s gospel that he is the way, the truth and the life, he is saying that this way is all about self-giving love. That kind of way is the only way to God. That is true for Christianity. It is also true for many of the enduring religious traditions.

So, this Sunday when we celebrate the Trinity, we can give thanks for the role of the Spirit in our lives. It is our teacher. It is our guide into all truth. Some have said the Spirit is like a guide book for dummies we find in the packaging when we buy a new piece of electronic equipment. The Spirit gives us help in understanding this great puzzle of buttons, switches and connections that feels like such a mystery to those of us electronically challenged.

That is not a bad metaphor of the Spirit as it guides us into the truth hidden in the mystery of our lives. But I much prefer the metaphor G.K. Chesterton, that much loved Christian scholar of the last century, used. Chesterton said the Spirit is like a fairy tale. Fairy tales, he said, open us to a deeper, more expansive reality than mere facts. So, too, the Spirit opens the world, our lives, and especially our spiritual lives, to a much more expansive reality than facts can reveal.

To open ourselves to this expansive reality we have to let go of being in control and let the Spirit blow us where it will. It is a journey of hope. As we partake of this symbolic meal, a meal that reminds us of Jesus’ self-giving love, a meal whose meaning is so much deeper than words can capture, let us commit ourselves to go on this journey into all truth as we led by the Spirit. Amen