



What the Spirit is Saying

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Romans 8:12-17

Trinity Sunday

May 31, 2015

Opening Sentences

Reading from John's gospel, hear this word about the Holy Spirit:

²⁶ "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."¹

Let us worship the God Who comes to us as the Advocate, the Spirit of truth.

Trinity Sunday Introduction

Trinity Sunday is the one day that Christians are called to celebrate a theological idea. What a concept! Not the Trinity itself, but celebrating a theological idea — *there's* a concept! It kind of reminds me of Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where our younger son attended; they have a Celebrate the Properties of Nitrogen Day! They breathe nitrous oxide, and freeze roses in liquid nitrogen and smash them. Maybe Trinity Sunday isn't quite as much fun — but we'll see.

Trinity Sunday calls attention to theology as an art. The text from John with which we opened the service was this: "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." The Trinity is a symbol for God as Advocate, Father, and Jesus: God as all of these three and still one. That is poetry more than science; that is the nature of theological *and* of meaningful human discourse.

Serious theologians understand that in speaking of God, we are engaging in subtle art. Augustine talks about how *our language is stretched out, pulled out, stretched like a string on an instrument, as tight as you can get, and then... God touches it.*² We are talking about going to the edge of words, where language points but doesn't intrude. Rowan Williams says that "*what we're trying to do in an adequate doctrinal statement is to keep the maximum amount of stuff on the table.*"³ And that is true not only of theology, but of all meaningful human communication. Today's text from Romans is about God's giving us deeply meaningful language.

Scripture

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — ¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you

¹ John 15:26.

² Interview with Rowan Williams — <http://www.theothinktank.co.uk/comment/2014/10/20/its-intelligence-all-the-way-down#sthash.PfOGvnF1.dpuf>

³ *Ibid.*

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have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!”¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.⁴

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The finger points to the moon. Woe to the one who confuses the finger with the moon. That old Japanese saying is a warning about words, about their getting between us and reality. The edge of words, where words point without distraction – that’s where the truth is living. That’s where life is lurking, at the edge of words.

I’m going to *talk* for the next twenty minutes or so with words. I’m sure I’ll gesture and wave my arms around and stuff. Gestures are really just another language, but I’m basically going to use words and not much else. Sometimes words just get in the way. *And sometimes* they are the *key to connecting*. My conviction is that, when we pay attention to the edge of words, where we can neither be glib nor facile about their rightness, we are better able both to reveal ourselves and to hear others.

Trinity Sunday calls attention to our theology itself, our words about God. And because the love of God and love of neighbor are intertwined phenomena, I’m not just talking about theology. I’m talking about how we connect one to another as well. Theology is art. Rather than talking about doctrine with supreme confidence, today I emphasize that often the experience of being at a loss for words is a deeply spiritual one.

You know what it’s like. My friend and I had had a minor argument, and we hadn’t talked since. And each of us entered a kind of depression and self-doubt and alienation. We needed to talk, to try to find the words, to connect. But talk is sometimes challenging, even for experts.

I’ve spoken before of the work of psychotherapist and author Irvin Yalom. He describes the therapeutic relationship with one of his clients named Elva. A number of years before their work together, Elva’s husband had died. He had been a caretaker for her, a fixer, who handled the difficulties and challenges of their lives. His death was very hard on her. And yet over the years, although she had been deeply depressed after his death, she had reclaimed her ability to relate to others. She was beginning to bring both family and new friends into her life. But then, as she was going out for lunch one day, her purse was snatched, and it decimated her. Although the purse itself was recovered, the contents were all gone. And in that robbery that she simply never thought would happen, her vulnerability without her supportive husband had been radically exposed. And she had become increasingly depressed, isolated, and unable to connect with anyone.

Dr. Yalom, in his honest way, talked about his own struggles to relate to Elva. He didn’t like her much. Her manner and mannerisms were a constant distraction in the therapy sessions. She was

⁴ Romans 8:12–17.

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full of anger, anger that brought up Yalom's own issues with his mother's anger. He needed to work hard to stay compassionate, and focused, and even awake. Sometimes in these self-disclosures, Yalom speaks of repeating his "professional rosary." He says to himself, "It's the relationship that heals. It's the relationship that heals." But he struggled with Elva. Yalom was a professional connector with words, with talk therapy, and yet he struggled to find in the words the means of connecting. He was at a loss.

In our text today, Paul refers to the Spirit giving us words. I opened the service today, with another passage where the Spirit gives us the words: "When the Advocate comes..., the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf."⁵

When John speaks of the Holy Spirit, he uses the Greek term *paraclete*. Here it's translated *advocate*, because *paraclete* is a term for an interlocutor. This advocate role is close to what Paul is talking about: one who gives us words. This is just like Luke 21, which says *you will be brought before kings and governors This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom....*⁶ The concept is the same, you'll be given the words – a gift of the Holy Spirit.

I had an experience something like that once. Long before our denomination had affirmed the full status of LGBTQ persons in the church, I participated in the ordination of a woman who was an "out" lesbian. It's a long story, but even though there was in fact nothing in that ordination contrary to the church's constitution, I was charged with ecclesiastical disobedience. Suddenly, I had an attorney for the first time in my life. His name was Tim Cahn. He was a saint, a true advocate. There was to be a hearing. Tim said, "Chandler, I don't want you to go." Why? I was itching for a fight. "Because you are itching for a fight, and you will say things that will get you in trouble, perhaps even intentionally. And there is no reason for that." I objected. He said, "I'm your attorney. Sh." He said, "Tell me what you *would* say. I will report it to them; I'll say, 'Were Rev. Stokes here, he would say...'" So you can say what you need to say and remain out of trouble, where you belong." I wasn't sure about that, but I demurred. And for the next few hours, I poured out my heart to Tim. I talked about the unjust, short-sighted, and self-serving way that the denomination was reading Scripture. I talked Old Testament vocabulary, and New Testament hermeneutics, and parallels with slavery and the status of women, the meaning of our ordination vows and... I was all over the place, and I went on and on.

A couple days later, Tim sent me a transcript of the deposition. When I read what he wrote, it made me cry. It was me; it was the inside of me. Tim had heard me. Tim had taken what I'd felt, what I'd had inside of me in the privacy of my isolated mind, and given it voice. My first thought after wiping my eyes, was, "This is why they call the Holy Spirit the Advocate." Tim had given me the words.

⁵ John 15:26.

⁶ Luke 21:12-15.

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How *do* we actually connect to one another? How do we come to understand each other? We are individuals. We are separate bodies. It is part of our reality that we are isolated from one another. Our minds are our own, solely. We don't really get underneath the skin of others. We don't get inside their minds, except through a very tenuous process of building trust and for the most part through the awkward, imperfect medium of words. Sometimes there are other symbols, such as gifts, for example, involved in communicating and connecting. There is a role for physical objects, but it is their symbolic, language-related function that has them serve as connectors. How do we truly overcome the inherent isolation of our solitary lives?

Paul is talking here about the way that God, as the Holy Spirit, enters our isolation and puts us in relationship. This is the center of the passage: *all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ... you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God...* Even trimmed down, that passage is a little dense. The Spirit gives us language (Abba, Father) to express the relationship we have with God. It leads us into the relationship, giving us the words to speak the relationship. "Abba, Father" is the language. It is, first and foremost, powerfully intimate language. *Abba* is the word that Jesus uses in the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father." It's the Aramaic word for "papa" or "daddy" – and the *intimacy* is the thrust of the metaphor, not the *masculine*. It's about being known and close, not about God's gender.

Let me be clear about this. For a couple thousand years the church has used primarily masculine language for God, but we can't confuse that repeated use with some absolute truth about God. From Genesis – "let us make them *male and female* in our image" – to Jesus referring to himself as a *hen*: "O how I have longed to gather you under my wings" – that's no rooster! – biblical images of God are *both* masculine *and* feminine. The use of *Father* for God doesn't even come into use until Israel has been around for a good five hundred years. When Jesus uses the term *Abba*, it is intended to communicate intimacy, not gender. *Mama* would be a superior translation to "Oh, our ever-masculine deity." Now theology is either theory, that is, experimental, heuristic, suggestive, or it is idolatry, that is, fixed, permanent, and usurping the place of the living God Who is at the edge of words, not in them; theology is only a finger pointing to the reality of God. Woe to the one who confuses them. *Father* is one of many biblical metaphors for God.

The language the Holy Spirit gives is not an abstract understanding of God; it is a means of creating intimacy and connection with God and with one another. Paul is describing the way that the Holy Spirit works to facilitate intimacy by helping us say what reaches across the gulf between us and God. The Spirit names our relationship as that of children, God's children – we are close. We are *allowed* to be close. We are *invited* to be close. We are *intended* to be close. We *are* close, like a child to a parent: perhaps the frightened child, running into God's arms and rubbing his runny nose all over Papa's shoulder, or the grown child standing up in her best faithfulness and strength at her graduation, looking over to her proud and beaming Mama. That close. That known. That comforted and empowered. The language the Spirit gives is the language of close relationship.

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Intimate relationship with God – *and* with one another; again, love of God and of neighbor are inseparable. Love is the relationship both with the Parent and with the Sibling.

And these words, these symbols, these signs, given by the Spirit are often how God seeks to overcome isolation and create intimacy, that we may be known and able to express ourselves. Like my attorney Tim's knowing me and providing language that went to the edge of words to forge genuine communication between siblings, neighbors.

So Dr. Yalom struggled both to hear Elva and connect with her, but he was able finally to disentangle his feelings about his own mother from his feelings about Elva and began to warm to her. Slowly, her trust in him also increased. Then in one session, there was a very honest exchange between them. She said something funny about beating her nephew at golf, and Yalom laughed uproariously and genuinely at her humor. And in that moment he had an inspiration; he saw at her side her purse that had previously been snatched, emptied, and recovered. He teased her about how big it was. She said, "It's not that big, and besides, I need everything in there." "You've got to be kidding!" Eventually, he enticed her to show him what was inside, inside her purse and tell him why she needed those things.

Each piece she pulled out they quarreled over: three empty doggie bags – "in case the first two aren't enough?" – three packets of Kleenex, twelve pens and two pencil stubs, two bottles of cologne, three hairbrushes, a large flashlight, bulky notepads – it was a *big* purse – a huge sheaf of photographs, a roll of fifty dimes, a plastic bag of old orange peels – "you never know, Elva, when these will come in handy" – three bags of candies, a bunch of knitting needles, three pairs of sunglasses, a small stapler – "Elva, this is crazy" – half of a Stephen King novel – she threw out the pages she'd read; "I don't need 'em *now*" – and then assorted coins, paper clips, nail clippers, pieces of emery board, and what looked like lint.

Yalom said: "When the great bag had finally yielded all, Elva and I stared in wonderment at the contents set out in rows on my table. We were sorry the bag was empty and that the emptying was over. She turned and smiled, and we looked tenderly at each other. It was an extraordinarily intimate moment. In a way no patient had ever done before, she showed me everything. And I had accepted everything and asked even for more. I followed her into every nook and crevice [inside], awed that one old woman's purse could serve as a vehicle for both isolation and intimacy: the absolute isolation that is integral to existence and the intimacy that dispels the dread, if not the fact, of isolation.

"That was a transforming hour. Our time of intimacy – call it love... was redemptive. In that one hour, Elva moved from a position of forsakenness to one of trust. She came alive and was persuaded, once more, of her capacity for intimacy."⁷

I did get to talk to my friend last week – the argument dissolved. We listened. We fumbled for words. We stretched the language between us, and God touched the string. We connected again. It felt miraculous.

⁷ Irvin Yalom, *Love's Executioner* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), pp. 141-148.

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If I understand what Paul is saying here, if I understand the movement of the Holy Spirit, it is the means by which we come to understand and to be understood. It is the gift that overcomes the inherent isolation in being a separate mind, that allows us to love and to be loved. You see, if the Spirit is the one that makes it clear that God is our Mama, our Papa, then, the Spirit also makes it clear that we're sisters and brothers. Remember, that's how Paul begins, "Brothers and sisters..." He meant it.

These words we employ, they're all imperfect. They're gestures – a finger trying to point. They're orange peels, lint in our purses. We stretch the language, push past our being at a loss for words, and pray God touches the string that others may hear and see inside.

And we give our best to listening and searching inside the other's purse with reverence and humor, inviting them out, trying to *keep the maximum amount of stuff on the table* so that we might truly hear and see the other.

It is God, God in the Spirit, who leads us into intimate relationship with God, our Abba and who connects us with our sisters and brothers, so that by the Spirit we may live. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Spirit. Amen.