

John Rohrs
Christ Church Sermons
6 Easter, April 27, 2008
John 14:15-21

The Spirit Within

I have to start this morning with a bit of a disclaimer. I don't know if you can see it, but about ten days ago I came down with Bell's Palsy. It's a temporary condition where the nerves and muscles on one side of the face stop working, usually just for a few weeks. I know it sounds weird, but it's really not that bad. Mostly it means I can only manage half a smile right now, and I have a heck of a time brushing my teeth. But I wanted to tell you about it, because I did want to warn you about one thing, and that's that I can't close my right eye. I can't even blink it.

Knowing I had to preach this morning, at first I was feeling self-conscious about that, thinking you all would be like, "man, what is wrong with his eye!" But then I had an idea. I figured here I am with this crazy eye, and I ought to take advantage of it. I could give a real hellfire and brimstone sermon, and I could just stare each one of you down, looking deep inside your souls at what lurks below. I'd be like Mad Eye Moody in the Harry Potter books. No sin, however small, would escape the gaze of my unblinking eye.

Well, you can relax, because Bell's Palsy doesn't come with x-ray vision, and really I'm not much for hellfire and brimstone anyway. Besides, I am quite confident that what lies deepest in each of you, if I could look in there, is not sin at all, but rather the Spirit of God. And that brings us to our gospel story.

Today's passage from John's gospel has Jesus preparing the disciples for his departure, his ascension into heaven. Up to this point, the disciples have been kind of basking in the joy of the resurrection. Their Messiah and friend had conquered death and had returned to them. But then, as we heard last week, Jesus sprung the news that he was about to leave. He had to travel on ahead, he told them, to prepare a place for them in heaven.

Of course, the disciples aren't liking the sound of this, and anxiety quickly sets in. "Where are you going?" they cry. "We don't know the way! We don't know what to do without you!"

This is a critical moment. It is here, in the echo of these desperate pleas, that we find one of the biggest transition points in the whole Christian narrative. Here, the disciples begin to realize that Jesus is moving on, and that they have to take up his mantle. They can no longer live simply as Jesus' followers, cheering on his miracles, listening at his feet. Now, they have to become leaders themselves. It's up to them to spread the gospel, to keep the commandments, to share the love of God. They are now the teachers, the healers, the peacemakers. The mission is theirs.

Jesus knows that this is a tall order for his motley crew, so he promises them some help – one final gift for the journey ahead. “I will ask the Father,” he says, “and he will give you an Advocate, to be with you forever. It is the Spirit of truth. You know him, because he abides within you.”

So the Spirit, God’s own Spirit, will guide them in their mission. We’ll hear a lot more about that in a few weeks, as we celebrate the Day of Pentecost. Today, I want you to notice that Jesus tells his disciples that the Spirit abides in them already. In other words, they already had this gift, this capacity, within them. The power and presence of God was already living deep in their souls. The Spirit had been there all along.

But they had forgotten. And so do we. It is the central tragedy of the human story. We are created in the divine image of God, breathed full of the Holy Spirit, but we deny it. We turn against our true selves and we seek other identities. In fact, one way to understand Jesus’ whole mission – the whole meaning and purpose of salvation – is that he is God’s response to this problem. God came to live among us in the person of Jesus in order to remind us who we really are. To reveal to us our true identities, our deepest selves. To open our hearts to the Spirit within. Jesus does this by demonstrating a life lived in the Spirit, a life of true compassion, unconditional love, and perfect sacrifice. He shows us the image of our best selves, the image of God’s true creation, and he call us to become again who we were meant to be.

That is the journey that we’re on, the journey of discipleship. As we travel, we are guided by the Spirit of God, and that itself is both a comfort and a challenge. A comfort, because the Spirit is always with us, guiding us. We are never alone. A challenge, because that same Spirit, if we listen, is unceasingly urging us to get on with it. The world is full of pain and possibility, and there is so much healing and loving to be done. The need is great, and the task is clear. The mantle is ours, and in the words of the poet June Jordan, “we are the ones we have been waiting for.” Amen.