

*The Spirit of Truth*

**John 14:8-27**

John Breon

Today is Pentecost, the fiftieth day after Easter. The Jews also celebrated it as the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of Harvest or the day of firstfruits (*NIV Study Bible* on Acts 2:1). We often use Acts 2 as we observe this birthday of the church. That account of the first Christian Pentecost shows the first followers of Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit. It includes powerful signs like a rushing mighty wind, tongues of fire, being enabled by the Holy Spirit to speak in unlearned languages. We see the apostle Peter's powerful sermon to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem. We see 3000 people becoming followers of Jesus and being baptized.

That dramatic and powerful scene is part of our heritage and part of our call to be the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. We need what Luke describes. There are times for open displays of the Holy Spirit's power, for taking the gospel public, for sweeping movements of the Spirit when many people come to Christ.

But that's not the only way the Spirit of God works. We don't live constantly in dramatic displays like that. Sometimes the Spirit speaks quietly and gently. There are days of just walking in Christ. There are seasons of learning and steady growth. Like one Pentecostal saint said, "It's not how loud you shout or how high you jump, but how you walk when you come down."

Alyce McKenzie, who teaches preaching at Perkins School of Theology, describes going with her family some years ago to visit the Biblical Arts Center in Dallas and seeing the massive 124-by-20 foot oil painting entitled "Miracle at Pentecost." The museum was gutted by fire and the painting was destroyed in 2005. But she describes it as a panoramic visual depiction of the scene in Acts 2. Then she goes on to say that this text in John could be shown in a portrait rather than a panorama. In the intimate setting of the meal in the upper room, Jesus is teaching his closest disciples about the Holy Spirit. McKenzie says, "We know the panoramic, pyrotechnic Pentecost that comes around every spring. Do we understand

that there is also an internal Pentecost that involves audience participation?" (<http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Intimate-Pentecost-Alyce-McKenzie-05-10-2013.html>)

Let's look closer at what Jesus says here. Let's see what he tells us about the Holy Spirit so we can participate in the experience and relationship with God that Jesus describes. While we recognize the contrast between the descriptions of the Holy Spirit's work by John and Luke, we're not choosing one or the other. We need both-and, not either-or. But today we'll focus on Jesus' words in John's Gospel.

Chapters 13-17 of John show Jesus and his disciples on the last night before his crucifixion. They include what we call Jesus' "farewell discourse." Four times here, a disciple asks Jesus a question and he responds. Two of those questions and answers are in the section we're reading today. We are also looking at two statements by Jesus specifically about the Holy Spirit. Those are what we want to focus on.

Jesus says,

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

A little later, Jesus says,

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

Here we see the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, as an advocate like Jesus and as one who teaches and reminds disciples of Jesus' word.

Let's look first at the unusual word Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit here: *Paraclete*. This Greek word gets translated in various ways: Comforter, Counselor, Helper, Advocate, Companion. It can have several meanings: "one called alongside to help," like an advocate or defense attorney; an

intercessor or someone who speaks on behalf of another. It's also related to another word that describes encouragement. One insight here is that *God is for us*. God is not against us, but for us. One long-time pastor was asked what the biggest challenge was that he faced in all his years of ministry. He said the biggest challenge was people who thought that God was mad at them. God is not mad at us. God is mad at sin. But God is for us. God is at work to teach us, help us, strengthen us, and encourage us.

In the context of greater works, answered prayer, love, and obedience, Jesus says that the Father will give another advocate to be with us forever. Jesus was about to leave the disciples. But he told them that when the Spirit of truth came to them, they would know that Jesus was still with them.

They would recognize the Spirit from having seen Jesus' ministry, which the Spirit would carry on. When Jesus talks about his followers doing greater works than he did, he's talking about the Holy Spirit continuing to do the works of Jesus through the disciples. The Spirit does through us works that are greater in scope than what Jesus did during the days of his earthly ministry. The Holy Spirit is not limited to one time and place, but can now work through all of God's people everywhere.

Also, the Spirit was already with them through their contact with Jesus. But later the Spirit would be in them. The difference between with and within is like if you're carrying a sack lunch. It's with you, but when you get hungry, you need it within you, not just with you.

Notice what's going on here with the Spirit's living in disciples. In verses 15-17, *the Holy Spirit* comes to dwell within the disciples. In verses 18-21, it's *Jesus* who will come to dwell within the disciples. And, in verses 23-24, it's *the Father* who will come along with Jesus to make a dwelling place within the disciples (see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Anchor Bible*). Whoever loves and obeys Jesus experiences God's love. God the Father and Jesus come and make their home with those who love and obey Jesus, that is, his disciples. Through the Holy Spirit's presence, we experience the life of the Trinity coming into us, filling our lives. We get to participate in the community that God is. We get to share in the love that is

among the three Persons who are God. And that leads us to real community with others who share in God's community of life.

It's also interesting that Jesus here calls the Spirit "the Spirit of truth." *Truth* is a theme in John's Gospel.

"Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

In his conversation with the Samaritan woman by the well, Jesus says, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (4:24). That's not referring to any certain style of worship or to the level of enthusiasm we have. It's saying that we truly worship the true and living God as the Holy Spirit guides and inspires our worship. We worship in truth as the Spirit of truth empowers our worship and reveals Jesus, who is the truth.

In a dispute with a crowd, Jesus says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (8:31-32). Truth is more than accumulated facts, but sometimes we tend to go too far in separating truth from fact. Indiana Jones says he deals in facts, while the philosophy professor down the hall deals with truth (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*). In this Gospel, to know Jesus is to know the truth. And that involves knowing some things about Jesus. The Spirit of truth enables us to know the truth that sets us free from bondage to sin and death.

Just a few verses before our text, Thomas interrupts Jesus, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus replies, "I am the way and the truth and the life." Here is the clearest identification of Jesus as the truth. He shows us reality. Jesus gives us the truth about God and about ourselves. The Spirit of truth helps us know Jesus. He is the Spirit of Jesus, the "other advocate" (Jesus has been their advocate) who takes the place of Jesus after he leaves.

During his trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus says, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Pilate retorts, "What is truth?" John often uses this kind of irony. Pilate is looking at and talking with the truth, and he doesn't recognize it. But if we're committed to truth, the Spirit of truth helps us hear truth as we listen to Jesus. That's what Jesus promised the disciples. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth would teach them all things

(probably, all things about Jesus) and remind them of everything Jesus had said. (As an aside, that gives us confidence in their witness about Jesus that we have in the Gospels.)

But that night the disciples may have wondered who will teach them after Jesus is gone? Who will explain what Jesus' words mean? So often, the disciples did not understand what Jesus said and did.

Again, the Spirit of truth will continue Jesus' ministry in them. The Spirit comes in the name of Jesus because the Spirit reveals the meaning of Jesus for people. The Spirit will do this as he teaches the disciples and reminds them of all that Jesus said to them.

The Holy Spirit is a teacher who reminds us of what Jesus taught. Who are the best teachers you've had? The ones who infected you with their passion for the subject they taught? The ones who motivated you to learn more? You remember what they taught because you remember them—they made such an impression on you. Great as those teachers are, Jesus is greater. Jesus is our Teacher as well as our Savior and Lord. The Holy Spirit continues the teaching ministry of Jesus in us—helping us remember Jesus' words at just the right time, helping us understand what Jesus is saying, helping us apply what Jesus teaches.

The Spirit's teaching is not something new and different from Jesus' teaching. Anything the Holy Spirit makes known to us is rooted in Jesus' words and gives us fuller understanding of what Jesus said. Just because someone claims the Holy Spirit's inspiration doesn't make them right. We have to use Scripture to check out what people say. The Spirit of God won't reveal something contrary to the Word of God. At the same time, the words of Jesus are not locked in the past. The Holy Spirit shows how what Jesus said relates to where we are now. The Holy Spirit shows the meaning of God's word for living today. Sometimes that may come as we pray the Scriptures and ask God to do for us and others what we read about in the Bible. It may come as we talk with someone—the Spirit reminds us of something in Scripture or shows us how Scripture applies to a situation.

Fred Craddock tells about being in a group of preachers, pastors, and seminary professors who were gathered in front of a crowd of students and laypeople and were asked to say who was the most influential person apart

from their parents in the formation of their lives and their movement toward ministry. Even with two or three weeks' notice, Fred found that it was difficult. Finally, when his turn came, he stood up and gave a name they no one there had heard of. He said, "Miss Emma Sloan."

Fred says that when he was a child, they called all women "Miss." Miss Emma Sloan was an elderly woman, single. She taught in the primary Sunday School department. Then, since there was no one to teach that class when they were promoted, she went right on with them, and taught them for years. She gave Fred a Bible and wrote in the front: "May this be a light to your feet, a lamp for your path. Emma Sloan." She taught them to memorize the Bible. She didn't try to interpret it or explain it. She said, "Just put it in your heart, just put it in your heart."

She used the alphabet, and they'd go around the room saying verses. A—A soft answer turns away wrath. B—Be ye kind, one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, as God also in Christ has forgiven you. C—Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden. D—Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. E—Every good and perfect gift.... F—For God so loves the world.... And so on.

Fred says he still remembers all that. They learned from the King James Bible all those verses. He said to those students and church folk gathered that day, "I can't think of anything, anything in all my life that has made such a radical difference as those verses. The Spirit of God brings them to my mind appropriately, time and time and time again" (*Craddock Stories* 33-34).

If we want the Holy Spirit to remind us and teach us, we need to give the Spirit something to work with. Get to know the Scriptures. Memorize verses. Read the stories. Get familiar with the Bible. And see how the Spirit of truth will remind us of the truth, and teach us about the truth, and apply the truth to our lives.

In light of all that, there's a prayer for use in public worship that I also like to pray occasionally in my personal devotional time:

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that, as the Scriptures are read and your word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. (*UM Hymnal* 6)

What is God saying to you today? How will you respond?