

“The Helping Spirit”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, May 20, 2018

John 15:26-27

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.

Romans 8:22-27

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Gracious and loving God, open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to You, and to the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray that You would take all that we have within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from scripture and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the Living Word of Jesus Christ. And let that Word do its work within us, among us, and through us. Let that Word encourage us. Let that Word challenge us. Let that Word invite us to serve, and may it always remind us that we are forgiven and loved and welcomed here. We ask this in the faithful name of Christ, who is our Lord now and forever. Amen.

Traditionally, on Pentecost, we read from the book of Acts. "Where the community is gathered together, there is the sound of rushing wind, and it appears as though tongues of fire land on each person--a manifestation of the Spirit. And they begin speaking to one another, even though they are from different lands and speak different languages, they are able to talk and communicate and understand what each other are saying." Or we talk about the idea that this is the birthday of the Church. That at Pentecost, the Spirit of God was democratized, if you will. It was poured out upon the people, and all of a sudden, the Church began to sprout up, much like those flowers that are blossoming in our yards this week. But today, rather than reading from the traditional passages for Pentecost, I've decided to focus on the Epistle reading in relation to the Gospel reading, because I want to focus on the real aspect of what it means to be an embodiment of God's spirit in this world. Often Pentecost or Pentecostals get a bad name. Because, I don't know about you, but I don't speak in tongues. I don't have amazing powers of foreseeing the future. I cannot pray for someone to be healed and touch them, and then boom, there they are - they're healed and made new. And that might be a stereotype of what this day is about, but often those stereotypes color how we understand what it means for us to be bearers of the Spirit of God. But in the Gospel lesson, and in this Epistle lesson, I believe there's a word for today. And it's a living word, and it's contemporary. And I think about the message that these two readings bring to us in the midst of spewing volcanoes, and yet another school shooting, and a royal wedding, and two baptisms, and an anthem that can make our Director of Music cry. And I think about all the graduations that are happening. In the whole swirl of all that life gives us, the highest highs and the lowest lows, we have this simple message to offer to the world. A message that's contained or encapsulated if you will, in these two readings. In the Gospel reading, the promise is for an advocate, someone to advocate for us. And we often think about this in the sense of advocating for us between ourselves and God. But I tend to think about it as more something that happens inside my head, more often than not. When the voices start to ramp

up, and the message that often plays starts to get going, that I'm not good enough, or I'm not fast enough, or I'm not pretty enough, or I'm not this, that, or the other enough, that there is an advocate who can say to all those voices within, "Be quiet." And then can say, "David, you are the beloved. Do not be afraid."

Now that may sound overly churchy, to think that there's a presence within each of us that knows us by name and can speak to us and say, "You are my beloved. Do not be afraid." But last night, I was sitting at the dinner table with my wife and Anna, my daughter, and Anthony, my son-in-law, and Anna's best friend from high school on Bainbridge Island, Lynn Anderson. She's currently getting her MBA at Northwestern University, just north of Chicago and she had an opportunity to come down for the weekend and have dinner with us. And as she and Anna were talking through most of the meal, the message that I heard was how each of them, at the start of their careers, are thinking about what they want to do, are trying to figure out how to balance all that they are supposed to do with all that they want to do. Lynn was surprised that at Northwestern in the MBA program, the social life was as important as the academic life. The expectation is that each of the students will go to every gathering that's offered, every mixer, every networking opportunity, even every concert that the two bands that are there will provide. She said, "It's so hard to find the balance." And Anna talked about wanting to be successful in her career, and the invitation or the message that she just needs to keep working harder and harder and longer and longer, and that at some point out there in the future, she'll make it. When I finally pried the wine glass from my lips [laughter], I checked what I wanted to say, which was, "Get behind me, Satan." And I said, "You need to be careful that you are not worshipping a lie. Because being busier or being more successful is not all that life has to offer." I said, "You need to not find balance in the midst of craziness, you need to find a rhythm that cultivates the kind of life you want to have. You need to listen to that voice inside of you, the advocate that says 'This is crazy.' I don't need to work an extra two hours every night, and be available on the weekends, and have evening meetings. I don't need to do all of that to be successful if you define success as being a good person, imbued with the Holy Spirit, able to love God, yourself, and your neighbor. The message of the world is more, more, more, and the message of the Gospel is whoa, whoa, whoa. We have all that we need within us right now. We don't need more, we need less. We need less stuff, and less time, and less commitments, in order to be the kind of people that God truly wants us to be." And then I shared with them that some of the best advice I ever got was to be a barely adequate Pastor [laughter].

Was that you, Joel? It came from over there somewhere. Thank you for not saying "Amen," [laughter] just for-- it elicited sort of the same response from the two of them. Two young women, who again, are trying to sort through the early stages of their professional lives. And Lynn looked at me and said, "What?" And I said the advice I got as I was already married with two small children and headed to seminary, was to be barely adequate. And then the person continued, "Because if you're barely adequate, I pretty much can guarantee that you'll still be married, and your children will love you and not despise you at the end of your career." Now I hope I've raised up to the notch or the bar just a little bit, beyond barely adequate. But I believe that the invitation is correct. To not let the outside world define who we are or what access means for each of us. But to allow the Gospel of Jesus Christ to do so. Because this whole striving for success often in life, comes up against some hard boundaries. And this is where I believe the second part of the message today or the readings for today, the Romans passage, comes into play.

We want the best for our kids. We want all for them. We want them to be successful, and happy, and to have good and productive lives. But what do we do when those things don't work out? What do we do when our darkest fears become a reality? What do we do when our plans for a long-lived retirement fall apart, or our plans for a comfortable retirement fall apart, or our plans for a healthy, fun time with grandchildren falls apart? You name it, life is full of challenges. Things do not always work out the way they're supposed to, or the way that we want them to. And here the reading shares with us that, even when we are in our weakest spot as a human being, God's spirit is with us, sighing and praying when we do not know what to say. Even in our weakest moments, the Spirit of God is with us. In our sighs and our prayers, when we're unable to utter a single word.

If some of you have noticed I've been down a little bit lately, the last couple of weeks, it's because English Premier League soccer is over [laughter]. It's not about any surgery or anything coming up, it's just about the fact that my beloved Liverpool is not playing every Saturday morning anymore. I don't know why, but I love Liverpool Football Club. It's like an obsession. I've thought about getting my next car a specialized license plate, LFCFAN#1. And then it's like, "Well, of course, it needs to be red and fast, because that's their nickname, the Reds, and they're really fast." And Jani's like, "Yeah, nice try, David," [laughter]. But this week, I did something that I've never done before. I

went and looked at their logo. And I thought that it was just some kind of strange bird with big tail feathers and says LFC underneath it. But their official logo was almost like a coat of arms, a symbol that's obvious, and then above it there's all kinds of frilly things and a saying right across the top that I'd never noticed before. I'd seen it during games, but it never clicked as to why people were sort of holding up these banners. But it's part of their identity, and it simply says, "You will never walk alone." I've yet to determine the history of that statement, but I daresay that it sums up both of our readings on this Pentecost beautifully.

Brothers and sisters, you will never walk alone. Amen.