

June 4, 2017

"The Spirit of Truth"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 13: 33-37; 14: Selected verses

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

The early rabbis used to argue a number of deep spiritual and philosophical questions. One of those questions had to do with the difference between a robber and a thief. The robber, they reasoned, operates in broad daylight and doesn't care who sees him, which shows he has no respect for either the human beings he robs, or for God who sees what he is doing. The thief, on the other hand, tries to be more cunning. He works under the cover of darkness at night, to avoid discovery by people. But he takes no precautions against God, believing that God neither hears nor sees him. And while this also shows a lack of respect for human beings, it shows an even greater lack of respect for God. So great an insult is this, said those rabbis, that it makes the thief more punishable than the robber. Now that's an interesting assertion, don't you think? But one in which there's probably some truth. And it makes me wonder how they may have been led to that truth.

Because, in fact, we live in a world today where the truth is very hard to come by... and, where so many people have a lack of respect for both other human beings and God. There are so many mixed messages, so many talking heads giving their "expert" opinions, and so much "fake news" out there, that the question we have to constantly ask ourselves is what's real, what's true? How can we be sure all the life and death decisions we have to make are based on what's right? It's definitely a thought that can make us anxious. So what's the answer? Well, let's look at today's Scripture. Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples and he's told them that soon he will no longer be with them. It's just a few hours before his crucifixion and death. And look what happens. Jesus calls them "little children," and then he tells them they are to love one another and not to worry and that he will make sure there is someone to look after them. That, to me is interesting. Here are eleven grown, strong, hardened men, who've weathered many tough times together, and Jesus calls them, "little children." But as they sit there listening, I can only imagine the love and care and concern that must have exuded from Jesus as he tried to explain and reassure them. It reminds me of the first few times our little grandchildren were toddlers and we came to babysit. As their parents were leaving, Cora and Ollie would get all anxious, and ask, "Where you going?" "When will you be back?" "Who's going to stay with us?" The parents would answer, "We're going out for a while, and Mimi and Opa will stay with you until we get back. They'll take care of you. Now be good little children." Sounds like another way of saying, don't worry and "love one another," and you'll be take care of, don't you think?

But let's get back to the disciples. Even though Jesus tries to calm them, they were definitely worried and concerned. Peter puts up a brave front and asks the question, "Lord, why can't I follow you now?" Thomas said, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" And Philip especially, wants even more assurances from Jesus when he asks, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Just show us that God is real and we'll be okay. I can imagine the frustration Jesus must have felt at that comment, by the way he answers Philip. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still don't know me? Where were you when Lazarus came out of the tomb? Where were you when the blind man saw? Where were you when the hungry crowd was fed? How can you say, 'Show us the Father?' Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? But, I will ask the Father, and he will give you an Advocate, to be with you (and take care of you). This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him." The Spirit of truth. The Holy Spirit.

Now we all know the Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And there are volumes written about God and about Christ, but for some reason, the Holy Spirit seems to get shortchanged. Why? I think it's because the concept of the Holy Spirit is more difficult for many to grasp. We look at God as the great "I Am", the infinite being, the Creator. We look at Jesus Christ as the human embodiment of God who walked the earth, our Lord and Savior. But the Holy Spirit is more mystical, more difficult to wrap our heads around. Well, I like to think of it by saying the Holy Spirit is to our spiritual life what our breath is to our physical life. You can't see our breath, can't hold on to it, can't really describe it, and yet our breath is the vital force, the power that fills us, as we inhale the oxygen that is needed to give us life! To stay physically alive. And if we are to stay spiritually alive, then we need that vital force, that power of the Holy Spirit, to fill us. That's why I start our worship services by having you "breathe in and breathe out, breathe in and breathe out." Because doesn't that put you in a place where you feel a divine presence within yourself. We heard Jesus say today, "The Spirit of truth, your Advocate, will abide with you and in you, and will teach you everything." Basically telling us, "I will be there with you in Spirit. To care for you and to guide you."

Because Jesus knew we would need help. As pastor and professor, Barbara Lundblad writes, "Jesus was saying: You don't know everything. You have more to learn. In every generation you will be faced with new questions and perplexities. Does the sun revolve around the earth or is it the other way around? Should nuclear weapons ever be used against an enemy? Is welfare the best way to bear one

another's burdens? Jesus knew there are many questions in this life that require deep thinking, reasoning, discerning. And so he said, "The Spirit will be your tutor, guiding you into the truth (and all that is right)."¹

And isn't this what we need? We live in a complex world and difficult times, where we can easily become confused, anxious, fearful for the future. All that we hear and see and read paints a pessimistic picture of this wonderful life God has given us. And it becomes very easy for us to turn away and follow the ways of the world, rather than doing what is right. And when we do this, aren't we essentially, like the thief, hiding from God. But is that really what we want? That's why we need the Holy Spirit abiding in us, so that we are led in the right direction, able to discern the difference between the world and the truth of God. For instance, after the death and destruction caused by tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, the world says, why would a loving God let this happen. The Spirit of Truth says, "All creation has been groaning with pain as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time and until the day it will join God's children in freedom from death and decay." The world says do everything necessary to have it all and to have it right now. The Spirit of Truth says, "Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings as eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." The world tells us the best way to handle all the pressures and stresses in our lives is by turning to drugs or alcohol. The Spirit of Truth says, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." The world says to pay back those who have harmed you, those who perpetrate evil. The Spirit of Truth says, "Treat others the way you want to be treated, do not repay evil for evil. Judgment is mine." You see, the Holy Spirit replaces our fears with faith, the Holy Spirit replaces our resentment with forgiveness, the Holy Spirit replaces our doubt with hope, the Holy Spirit replaces our anger with love, the Holy Spirit replaces our brokenness with wholeness. God's Holy Spirit, the power of God within us, filling us and shaping us and giving us life.

Now, "little children," let me end by telling you a story. When I was a kid, I used to play hide and seek with my friends. You probably played the game, too, right? Someone in the group is "it." All the others hide while "it" counts to one hundred. "It" then announces, "Ready or not, here I come." Then "it" goes in search of the other kids, all who are hiding. The first one found now becomes the new "it." When I played the game, I was pretty good. I was usually well hidden. Under the porch, behind the barn, up in a good climbing tree, behind the corn crib. "It" would search round and round. "It" would

¹ Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad, sermon "I Will Not Leave You Orphaned."

pass by me again and again. But after a while, I had this revelation. So I stuck out my foot a little, or stuck out my head a little. You're "it," you're "it." "I found you," my friend would say. Because you see, what I realized is this – what do little children want when they play this game? To stay hidden? Well, maybe for awhile. But what do they really want? They want to be found... just like every person in this room.²

And so let us all breathe in and breathe out. Breathe in and breath out. That the Holy Spirit may find us and fill us. Amen

² Excerpts from "Everything You Wanted to Know", Fred Craddock