

Leacock Presbyterian Church
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister sharing in the sermon
Trinity Sunday, May 26, 2013

On the Holy Spirit: Which Truth?

The young man challenged me with a very pointed question in the seminar about the Holy Spirit. “Why do we need the Spirit?” he asked. “What’s the difference between saying that God is with us and saying that the Spirit of God is with us?” Interesting question.

In his life and ministry and most especially in his suffering, humiliation, and death, Jesus represented and embodied God fully to us while, at the same time, representing and embodying us fully to God. He died apparently God-forsaken in solidarity with all the people in this world who find themselves apparently God-forsaken. He suffered *for us*, it’s true, but he also suffered *with us*. I have come to believe that God sees you and me in both our sin and our suffering as united with Jesus, God’s own beloved Son. I believe God does not look at you without seeing Jesus also. God’s Son stands united with the outcast and rejected, the scorned and overlooked, the powerless and undeserving.

The pointed question for us, then, is, *Can we learn to see, as God sees, Jesus standing in solidarity with other people, including those we don’t like and with whom we feel no kinship?* We believe that Jesus represents God to us as God truly is toward us. That’s crucial! Jesus never turns away in disgust from sin-stained or life-battered people. He gets angry when comfortable people are hardhearted, smug, and dismissive, but he does not dismiss people or reduce their worth to God. Like God the Father, Jesus grieves over the harm people do to each other and to themselves, and also like the Father, Jesus refuses to abandon them and, instead, takes their guilt, shame, and suffering to himself.

The Holy Spirit represents God to us and teaches us the concerns, priorities, and ways of God so we learn to resonate with them ourselves and so come to think and even feel differently, in a better harmony with God. At the same time, the Spirit represents us to God—Paul says, in ways too deep for us to understand or express in words. God knows what you experience and feel, knows it personally and deeply, and God cares. The Spirit is the living agent of God’s empathy with us and our new, emerging empathy with God.

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of truth.” Biblically truth is a relational concept, rather in the sense that we ourselves use the word when we call someone a “true friend” or a “true teacher” or “real parent.” It’s about love and commitment, dependability and compassion.

We live in a world of stridently competing truths as well as loudly clashing falsehoods. The truth of which Jesus speaks is not the skeletal truth of the fact checker, although neither is it the phony truth of the liar. It is neither the comfortable truth of power, prestige, and assumed privilege nor the convenient truth of “whatever works” for me. It is the truth of self-giving, self-sacrificing love. It is the way of the teacher in Oklahoma who lies on top of the children to protect them from the tornado, who abandons personal safety to save them, without regard for which children are the best behaved or have the highest test scores. Our world mocks Jesus’ kind of truth regularly, but what about the church? Imagine a Christianity that would rather be wrong in empathy with and compassion for people judged as sinners than “right” in hardhearted, dismissive self-righteousness.

As the Servant of God, Jesus sacrifices himself for the unworthy and ungrateful. The ideologue, including the Christian ideologue, sacrifices others for the sake of his or her own rightness and purity. As Americans, we have in our tradition, whatever we may think of it personally, the notion that whatever works for us is right for us. The Spirit teaches us to believe, rather, that what resonates with the heart of God is right for us to think and do. As Jesus suggests, we still have much more to learn, but the Spirit stays with us. Amen.