

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Communion Service on Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2010
Lessons: Isaiah 32:6-18 and John 14:15-28

NOT BY MIGHT NOR BY POWER

. . . until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest

Some of my life is a fruitful field, but other parts are wilderness. The same is true of my very self, my soul: some is a fertile and cultivated field ready for new growth, but some is overworked ground, tired and nearly worn out, and some is a tangle of vines and weeds.

The same could be said also of any faith community including this church. We may disagree, however, in our assessments of which plots are overworked and depleted because we have planted the same crops there year after year. Some find the old and familiar comforting, while others find the repetition tedious and note the diminishing returns. Some people welcome innovations and reasonable risks, eager to try something new; others find change unsettling and move to restore the familiar as quickly as possible. Here lies the challenge to our Visioning Team and the temptation to discouragement. The Bible's cynic comments, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun."

To such cynicism, dismissing hope and mocking curiosity, my life and my soul cry out, "No! That's wrong. It has to be wrong." My life is new to me each day, and I am not ready to be weary of living it. No one else sees the world from where I stand or has walked just the same paths I have traveled to this point. No one else can tell my story or yours. Neither you nor I can be summarized, categorized, labeled, numbered, and filed. You are not a typical anything because you are neither a type nor a thing. You are a person, a "who" never a "what." Against all the systems and authorities that with their formulas, assessments, and checklists, try to make you a thing and a type of thing, the Spirit of God confirms you are always and forever a "who," a distinct and very much loved person to God.

Well then, if I protest for myself being regarded as a thing, a type, a function, am I not bound to stop speaking and thinking of other people that way? Surely, I am not the only one on this earth known personally and loved by God.

The Holy Spirit affirms not only that I am a person to God and so are you, but also that God is Person to me – not idea, not power, not principle, not thing. God is “who” not “what.” God has a story, a very turbulent, disturbing, and passionate story of relentless self-giving love for a world that resists being loved. The Holy Spirit is the unseen embodiment – and I know that sounds funny, to speak of spirit as embodiment, but I don’t know how else to put it – is the present, personal embodiment of God’s need to be connected with us and, also, of our need to be reconnected with God and with each other.

The Spirit is our Advocate. Do we realize what that means? It’s a very courtroom word used in John’s gospel – our attorney, the advocate who represents us better than we could represent ourselves. Hear, hear! God, who sees us clearly, knows us much better than we know ourselves, is not fooled by the games we play or the masks we wear to fool ourselves and each other, and understands us even at our most irrational and distressed, is present for us as deeply as present can be — as our Advocate! Not our judge, but our representative, our attorney in the court of life. Even before what we have come to call “final judgment,” we have an attorney to represent us, and our attorney is the Spirit of God.

Now, before we get comfortable to the point of complacency because God’s Spirit is on our side, we need to realize that our Advocate with God and with the terrible judge of our own conscience is no pushover or mollycoddle. Who can control the Spirit of God? “The wind blows where it will,” Jesus says, picking up on the linguistic fact that spirit and wind are the same word in the biblical languages. And the very Spirit who affirms our belonging with Jesus to God also sets the word of God against all the powers of this world. Christ’s church is not an infant being cuddled nor a toddler being indulged, but a prophet called by the Spirit to stand both against and for the people and their society. Precisely because the Spirit insists everybody is a person to God, the Holy Spirit is the enemy of all injustices, of every exploitation of the vulnerable or neglect of the disadvantaged. Every power and authority that dehumanizes people, consuming their lives and then discarding them, is the enemy of the Spirit. Though Jesus promises the Spirit will dwell among us and even within us, God’s Spirit can never be possessed or domesticated by any believer, church, or system of doctrine. God did not send the Spirit so Christians could feel superior to others, show off, or get high “on Jesus.” God’s Spirit is not a drug to give Christians a religious rush. The Holy Spirit is God with us, on our side, but on our side in ways we will not always like or welcome. Who is my own worst enemy? You know the answer: I am. So, to be on my side, the Spirit may need to work against me and my will, disturbing my comfort and unsettling my long-settled conclusions about God, life, and other people. A good lawyer does not always tell her client what that client wants to hear but confronts the client with the truth. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of truth.”

God is patient and often gentle, even if the Spirit is gentle in the way the ocean's tides may come in gently but still be very hard to stand against and resist. Even when to be on our side faithfully, God must take a position against us, God still loves us and shows it even more because then love takes the harder course and hurts itself for our sake. The parent who always takes the child's side on the child's terms is not being a good father or mother. But the parent who backs off, emotionally disowning the child who has brought shame to the family, thereby leaving the child to stand alone under judgment, is not being good father or mother, either. The Spirit is our guarantor that God will not do that to us – will not disown us when we bring trouble or shame upon ourselves but will stand with us in whatever trouble, distress, fault, or shame it is.

The Holy Spirit is the living “embodiment” of our belonging to and relationship with God, the living presence of Jesus Christ with us. This world needs to be redeemed for God. But as followers of Jesus, we are not called to take over the world to order it and run it according to the book. Christ has not put us in charge. We are sent into the world to stand with it even though caring often means standing against its authorities and powers. We are servants and advocates, not rulers or judges. I believe that what the prophet Zechariah delivers as God's word to the governor of Judah trying to rebuild ruined Jerusalem and its fallen temple applies to us as well, as we seek justice, reconciliation, and redemption in a fractured world:

Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts.

Amen.