

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 30, 2010
Trinity Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 29
Revelation 4:1-11
John 16:5-15

Our lesson from John's Gospel this morning is the fifth and final statement on the Holy Spirit by Jesus to his disciples in what have come to be known as Jesus' farewell discourses. (cf. John 14:1-16:33)

In these farewell materials, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the Holy Spirit, where he affirms at least five things about the Spirit and its activity:

First, Jesus will ask the Father to send the Spirit of truth as another Counselor to be with the disciples forever. At one point his words to them are that he will not abandon them as orphans.

Second, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will be sent from God in Jesus' name to teach and to remind the disciples of Jesus' words. In other words, the Spirit's activity and ministry will be in direct continuity with Jesus' activity and ministry.

Third, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will bear witness to Jesus.

Fourth, Jesus says that upon his departure, he will send the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. This is the promise contained in our reading this morning.

In the fifth saying, which comes near the end of our Gospel lesson today, Jesus reveals some things about the Holy Spirit that relate directly to Trinity Sunday, and are worth our attention today.

For starters, Jesus says, “there is so much more I want to tell you, but you can’t bear it now.”

This tells us that the words of the historical Jesus did not address every human question or need or problem that might arise. For example, Jesus left no instruction about what to do when one spouse converted to Christianity and the other spouse remained an unbeliever. The apostle Paul faced just such a situation at Corinth, however, and had to try to discern God’s will in that situation (cf. I Corinthians 7:12-16). In concluding his comments on divorce and remarriage, Paul makes a telling statement. He says, “I think I am giving you counsel from God’s Spirit when I say this.” (I Cor. 7:40)

Because Jesus cannot address every conceivable need or problem with his disciples, he tells them that the Spirit, when he comes, will guide them into all truth (v. 13)

This is a frightening promise. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock shows why, when he says, “it can be used to bless every new notion and to footnote with authority all manner of behavior, [whether it be] the time of the [end of the world] or the certain will of God in every crisis.” [PCY, C, p.283.]

But in spite of this danger, Craddock warns us that we should not abandon the conviction that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church today. If we abandon that conviction, we deny that the present is as much God's time as was the past.

But it is in vv. 14-15 where Jesus' words about the Spirit bear directly on the occasion of Trinity Sunday which we celebrate today.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will not speak or act independently, but rather will glorify Christ and will reveal only that which comes from Christ and from God. So, on the one hand, we affirm that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in the present day, because Jesus' teachings could not possibly address every conceivable need that might arise.

1 But on the other hand, we also affirm that the Spirit's guidance of the Church is in direct continuity with what we know of Jesus and of God the Father.

So, if we believe that the Holy Spirit guides the Church of today, how can we test or measure whether the spirit by which any person or group speaks is really the Holy Spirit?

That is a difficult question to answer. But for starters, we begin with this answer: Are that person or group's actions and words in accordance with what we know of Jesus of Nazareth and of God, as historically revealed in the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church?

This criteria is not always applied easily, but it's a good starting place.

As we gather today to celebrate the mystery of God's being and all that it means for us to worship One God in Three Persons, we are reminded again that just as Jesus was not a maverick who acted in isolation from the Father, so the Holy Spirit is not a maverick who operates in isolation from Jesus and his earthly ministry.

I think it is significant that Jesus says of the Spirit that he will lead and guide his followers into all truth by reminding them of Jesus' teachings and life. In other words, I don't think the role of the Spirit is to invent or produce "new" truth, but to give us fuller insight and understanding of the truth as it has been revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth.

When I was a student at MidAmerica Nazarene University, Connie and I attended College Church of the Nazarene where Paul Cunningham was pastor. College church was typically filled with between 3,000-4,000 worshipers on any given Sunday.

Connie and I frequently sat down near the front just to the right of center. In that particular section of the church, the first few pews of that section were reserved for deaf persons. Throughout the service, an interpreter was seated in the front of that section, and as the service progressed the interpreter would be there, signing the words of text and music to those who were present but could not hear.

That's the role of the Holy Spirit, brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit as our paraclete stands along side us, constantly "signing" for us the words and will of Jesus as we encounter the needs of a new day.

As we come to the Lord's Table today, we do not do so with a complete intellectual understanding of the Trinity and its mysteries. But we *do* come with the conviction that our faith is a Trinitarian faith, and that the Father, Son, and Spirit are actively at work to make us what God wants us to be and to enable us to fulfill our mission to the world. So come with gratitude and joy. Feast on manna from heaven today. Then go forth with the assurance that the Comforter and Counselor is with us.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.