

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP
John 14:15-17, 25-26
1 Corinthians 2:1-16
First Mennonite Church
May 3, 2009
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Grace and peace to you, this first Sunday in May. One year ago, I preached for the first time as your pastor. In selecting today's texts for our Holy Spirit series, I was mindful that the apostle Paul reflects upon his initial preaching and teaching in this second chapter of 1 Corinthians. And I recognized a common bond (not always the case for me with Paul). Paul admits that when he arrived in Corinth, he felt inadequate and was nervous. In his weakness, he was not able to impress "with polished speeches and the latest philosophy" (1 Corinthians 2:1).¹ He could only rely upon the Spirit to convey the Message--the simple truth of Jesus Christ and the wisdom of the cross.

By his own self-description, Paul lacked both eloquence and a pleasing appearance. Like some other prominent leaders tapped by God, he seemed an unlikely choice. The most violent oppressor of the fledgling Jesus movement sent out as its foremost missionary! On the surface, a risky, even ridiculous prospect. But "on the surface" is not where the Holy Spirit works. The Spirit operates at a deep level of relationship. Paul learned this in his own dramatic conversion and maturation as a believer - a spiritual maturation that enabled him to declare: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (NRSV, Galatians 2:20a).

Having focused last Sunday on rebirth and new life in the Spirit, we look today at formation in the Spirit, on how we grow and mature spiritually into Christ. The Scripture passages just read, in Eugene Peterson's fresh, colloquial language, emphasize that while the world does not perceive the Spirit, the Holy Spirit teaches believers what they need; and yes, Christ lives in us!

This sounds rather mysterious, doesn't it? If our image last week was jumping into the river to float with the current of God's love and care, the image this week might be taking a deep ocean dive. Unless you happen to be a strong swimmer (I'm not, by the way), this can be a disconcerting prospect. As Paul observes in his letter to the church at Corinth, we're asked to go deep, go below the surface and discover God's wisdom and ways of working. The Spirit is our friend, our guide and companion in this downward and inward journey.

The term "friend" is significant. Peterson chooses the English "friend" where other translations of John 14 use "Advocate." Jesus says, "I will talk to the Father, and he'll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you" (John 14:15). Listen again: "he'll provide you another Friend." Jesus claims himself as friend sent by the Father and introduces the Spirit as another friend whom he will ask the Father to send to those who love him. Jesus uses similar language about himself and about the Spirit in other close-by passages, saying about the Spirit whom the Father will send: "[He] will make everything plain to you. He will remind you of all the things I have told you" (John 14:25). And then about himself: "I've

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Unless otherwise indicated, the Scripture quotations are taken from The Message (NavPress Publishing Group, 2002).

named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the father" (John 15: 15). Thus there is a clear parallel between Jesus and the Spirit. Let's remind ourselves why.

Jesus comes into the world as Emmanuel, which means, God is with us (Matthew 1:23, *cf.* Isaiah 7:14). Jesus promises loving relationship with those who believe. He offers a unique, intimate friendship. His friendship is not bounded by time. As he says to the disciples: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). His friendship likewise transcends normal boundaries of space. His presence comes so close as to take up residence within us. The phrase I am *with* you always can also be translated I am *in* you always. In John 15, Jesus uses the analogy of the vine and branches to describe this vital indwelling: "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit" (NRSV, John 15:6a).

Jesus' death on the cross severs connection with the disciples for two traumatic, grief-filled days; but the resurrection confirms Jesus' availability and enduring presence. The evil powers of the world and even death itself are defeated. Jesus has risen! Jesus lives! Before he ascends to the Father, Jesus appears to the disciples in tangible bodily form. And he prepares them to receive the divine Spirit that will function for them as memory, teacher, advocate, guide, prophet, and friend. In this way, through the Spirit, they will continue to engage the mind and presence of Christ.

For contemporary believers, Jesus' promise of intimate relationship is fulfilled through the living Word of Scripture and through the presence of the Spirit, dwelling among us and in us, as individuals and as the body of Christ, the church. As our Mennonite Confession of Faith states: "The New Testament affirms that, since the resurrection, we are living in a new period of God's action in the world, the age of the Spirit. . . .By the Holy Spirit, the love of God is poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). We are adopted as children of God (Gal. 4:6-7) and experience new birth into the family of God. This presence of the Holy Spirit is connected with being 'in Christ,' being part of the body of Christ."

One of the ways Jesus describes the Spirit is as the Spirit of Truth. This apt description points to the revealing nature of the Spirit, to how it shows us the way of Christ as opposed to the way of the world.

Here's a little story Anthony De Mello tells about seeking the truth:

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the name of the Shop: THE TRUTH SHOP.

The saleswoman was very polite. What type of truth did I wish to purchase, partial and whole? The whole truth, of course. No deceptions for me, no defenses, no rationalizations. I wanted my truth plain and unadulterated. She waved me on to another side of the store.

The salesman there pointed me to the price tag. "The price is very high, sir," he said. "What is it?" I asked, determined to get the whole truth, no matter what it cost. "Your security, sir," he answered.

I came away with a heavy heart.

I still need the safety of my unquestioned beliefs.²

Do we recognize ourselves in this story? Do we dare to cast off the shackles of worldly thinking with its false claims of materialism as a path to happiness and violence as a route to redemption? Do we dare to dive down and commune with the Spirit to learn how things really are? Do we dare to confront the truth about our own fickle and cowardly hearts when God calls us to sacrifice our selfish desires and take up our cross?

I say, Yes! We do dare to seek God's wisdom and truth! We dare *because* we believe that God is alive and active in the world and touches our lives with love and compassion. We dare *because* God has drawn near us in the persons of Jesus and the Spirit. We dare because God's channels of love serve as channels for our learning and growth.

We must listen with our hearts, listen for the instruction and confirmation of the Spirit. As you recognize God's persistent presence, relax with joy into the sense of being embraced by God. Begin to pay attention to God moments, which is what some of us call amazing coincidences. Begin to appreciate the nudges to take action or make contact with someone or reprioritize the day's agenda.

I say that we listen with our hearts because this channel of spiritual communication and connection operates at a deeper level than language. I must use language to talk about it, but the experience itself is beyond words. As Paul says: "we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual" (NRSV, 1 Corinthians 2:13).

On this one-year anniversary of beginning my pastoral call, I want to share the story of my very first visit to our congregation. It was a Sunday in Advent 2005. I had started my seminary studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in northern Indiana that fall and was listening eagerly for how God was preparing me to serve the church. After many years of living in the Pacific Northwest, I was appreciating the proximity to central Illinois, since it meant more opportunities to visit my mother and other family. When I visited Champaign-Urbana, my usual habit was to worship with mother at her United Methodist church. But this particular Sunday morning in December, I found myself very restless. I felt a strong pull to visit First Mennonite, to connect with my Mennonite sisters and brothers. So I dropped mother off at her church and made it here just in time for the start of the worship service. I sat on the west side of the sanctuary, next to a cordial elderly woman whom I now know was Verna Birkey. I was introduced to others, including Jill Schreiber, with whom I later had several seminary classes. I left worship that morning with a very positive impression of the congregation and with a sense of having been guided by the Spirit. I now believe God had shown me a glimpse of a possibility, even before Pastor Larry publicly announced his retirement. The next time I walked into this building was two years later, fall 2007, when I had my initial meeting with the pastoral search committee.

I didn't doubt the nudge to visit that December and I didn't doubt the call to patient and prayerful waiting while the call process unfolded and while both FMC and I

²Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 88.

tested other options. Knowing the Spirit was in the process gave me the confidence to take each step very seriously yet hold the outcome lightly.

I believe that God's Spirit is already now preparing the way for our new Associate Pastor. As before, our role will be to listen well to each other and to the Spirit, confident that God has good plans for us to witness to God's healing and hope in this time and place.

To be instructed in the Spirit is humbling. Like a true friend, the Spirit not only celebrates with us but points out our flaws and missteps. Think of how your friends, those you would name true friends, both support and challenge you. Superficial friends always say the socially acceptable things--stock phrases of congratulations, for example, Hallmark-card-style. Jesus modeled a loving friendship that challenged the disciples and pointed out their shortcomings. It is the same "person-to-person" learning that Paul describes continuing in the Spirit and being modeled in the church. Christian friendship is not sentimental, as Rodney Clapp points out: "The promise of Christian friendship is not it will always be easy or enjoyable but that it will never be less than friendship."³

When we think about our friendships, we recognize, too, that our relationships evolve and deepen over time, if they are sustained and cultivated. Yet they wither if we fail to cultivate them. Recently, I experienced the great joy of hearing from a long-lost friend. How she got my new address I have no idea, but my heart sang at the sight of her handwriting on the envelope! More and more research is being done on the value of friendships. Recently the *New York Times* carried a report on the health and long-time survival benefits of maintaining close friendships.⁴

If this is true of our human friendships, how much more true of our friendship with God? In God's plan, we grow in the Spirit as we grow in friendship with one another in the Body of Christ and as we cultivate our friendship with the Spirit. In this regard, Paul had a real challenge on his hands with the church at Corinth. Speaking into a fractured situation, with the congregation split into camps and marred by jealousies, he appealed to the need for the church body to be unified in the Spirit: "Do you not know that you [all] are God's Temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you [all]?" (NRSV, 1 Corinthians 3:16).

Our Master Teacher instructs us also through the image and example of the Trinity, which expresses to us the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Spirit. One of the most famous visual depictions of the Trinity is an icon showing three persons seated around a table, turned affectionately toward each other, creating a circle of relationship.⁵ John O'Donohue offers the following word picture of the Trinity: "Friendship is the nature of God. The Christian concept of god as Trinity is the most sublime articulation of otherness and intimacy, an eternal interflow of friendship. This perspective discloses the beautiful fulfillment of our immortal longing in the words of Jesus, who said, Behold, I call you friends. . . . In friendship with him, we

³David Wright shared with me this apt quote from Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People* (1996).

⁴"What are Friends for? A Longer Life," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2009, D1.

⁵Andrei Rublev, "The Old Testament Trinity," can be viewed on the website of The Transnational Institute.

enter the tender beauty and affection of the Trinity.” O’Donohue goes on to say, “Love is the threshold where divine and human presence ebb and flow into each other.”⁶

May we daily commit to listen with our hearts, to listen with love. May we daily open ourselves to deep spiritual communion with our God. In the words of Psalm 42:7-8:

Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows have gone over me.
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
And at night his song is with me,
A prayer to the God of my life.

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⁶John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (NY: HarperCollins, 1997), 15.