

6 Easter, Yr. C

May 1, 2016

Acts 16:9-15, John 14:23-29

As you know, Luke is the author of the Acts of the Apostles, as well as the Gospel that bears his name. Sometimes the two books together are called the gospel of the Holy Spirit – in the Gospel, it's the Holy Spirit acting through Jesus and in Acts, it's that same Holy Spirit, now acting through the church. So, even though Pentecost is several weeks away, the Holy Spirit is front and center in today's readings. It's sometimes hard to get a handle on what we're talking about when we talk about the Holy Spirit. I remember when I was young, it was the "Holy Ghost" – and THAT certainly didn't help! So let's look this morning at the readings from Acts and from John.

In John, you'll no doubt recognize the post-Easter readings which appear every year in the lectionary. But you'll remember that these readings are part of what's called Jesus' Farewell Discourse, which is being delivered to his disciples after the Last Supper and the foot-washing, on the eve of his death. And that makes this discussion about peace and about being without fear even more powerful, because Jesus knows what he's facing and he's trying to get them ready to face it, too. So he tells them that he's leaving them, but that that's OK, because his leaving will mean that the Holy Spirit will come to be with them – the Holy Spirit will teach and guide them and remind them of all he has said. So, he says, you can be at peace about everything that's going to happen, in fact you can be at peace about all of life. God has a plan and God's plan will be brought to fruition. There will be turmoil and disappointment and suffering but keep the faith and take courage, because you're in God's hands.

Many of you were at the retreat that the Bishop did for us in December. And, if you were, you'll remember that he talked about Julian of Norwich and about her vision in which she saw a hazelnut in the hand of God. And that small little nut represented the entire world, resting securely in God's hand, in God's protection. I still have mine and I remember the bishop saying that he took hope and courage from remembering that vision every time he held that little hazelnut. So maybe that's the first thing we need to hear – that we're safe in God's hands. Knowing that, we can hear the rest. We can hear that Jesus is leaving us, but that the Holy Spirit will be with us.

The text doesn't say this, but I'm wondering if, when the disciples heard Jesus say he was leaving, surely someone must have said what they all were thinking: WAIT, DON'T LEAVE US, YOU CAN'T GO, WHAT WILL WE DO WITHOUT YOU? YOU CAN'T LEAVE US BEHIND! That's the setting in which Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. The Greek term is sometimes translated Paraclete and it means someone who will be with you when things get tough, someone who will stand at your side. Originally it seems to have had a legal connotation – someone who would testify for you, or plead your case. One commentator said it's like the one you call upon for help when you're hauled into court on false charges, or when you're being persecuted by the school bully. It's that someone you can depend upon to defend you, to rescue you, to comfort you, to give you strength and courage.

The Holy Spirit – what do we mean by that? I think the easiest way to think about this is to remember that, in his humanity, Jesus was limited by time and space. He could teach and preach and heal – but he could only be at one place at a time. If he was in Galilee, he couldn't be in Jerusalem. So if we think about the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus, we can get that now he's not limited. And now the spirit, the life that animated Jesus is available to everyone all the time. We're never without him. This always puts me in mind of the movie ET – when ET was leaving and saying good-bye to a tearful Elliott. You'll remember that ET reaches out and touches Elliott's heart with his finger and says, "I'll be right here." And, as I recall, you can, at that moment, see both of their hearts beating. That's what Jesus is saying: I'll be right here. My spirit is here with you, in your hearts and minds. And THAT fact, that presence, is why he can say the next thing: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. Because I'm RIGHT HERE WITH YOU. Because the simple truth is that there's LOTS of stuff to frighten us – I saw a cartoon where a fellow was lying on his psychiatrist's couch listing his worries: the stock market, the Middle East, ISIS, China, (we could probably add the election season to his list). In the second frame, the psychiatrist has gone over to the couch saying, "Shut up and move over!" We know this world is full of trouble, but what we have to rely on is this conviction, this rock solid truth, that God is with us, that he holds us in his hand, just like he holds that hazelnut in the vision. So we live in peace and hope. But that doesn't mean that we are idle. Two things here:

The first is that even the small things we do have infinite value. Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic said:

"Be as sure of it as you are that God lives: at the least good deed done here in this world, the least bit of good will, the least good desire, all the saints in heaven and on earth rejoice, and together with the angels their joy is such that all the joy in this world can't be compared. But the joy of them all together amounts to as little as a bean when compared to the joy of God over good deeds. For truly, God laughs and plays." So, not to be frightened by the turmoil in the world, not to be paralyzed and overwhelmed with suffering and evil, not to be disappointed at our impotence or with our small contributions, but to be as joyful as God even with the small good that we can do.

The second thing I'd like to share with you comes out of the Thursday a.m. study. We're doing a study on Embracing Forgiveness led by an Episcopal priest, Barbara Crafton. In the last session she was talking about how hard it is to forgive – that really we can't do it without God's help. And she relayed the story about two guys, one of whom, Irwin, was completely undone by Joe – she said it was like he was having a spiritual allergic reaction to Joe. She advised him, whenever he prayed, to simply say Joe's name. Not to hang more words around it, not to tell God what to do, just to say Joe's name in prayer. Do that, she told Irwin and you will be changed and so will the situation. Well that's what happened, which was interesting enough, but it was when she started talking about the power of prayer that I really sat up and took notice.

She went back to the Big Bang, back to the creation of the world in Genesis and pointed out that there was no contradiction between science and religion. They tell the story in a slightly

different way, but Genesis says that in the beginning God, desiring to create a world out of sheer love, said, LET THERE BE LIGHT and she said, practically levitating off her chair in her excitement, and there it was, the light, the power, the energy of God's creative love, coursing into the void, rushing to fill the void that would become the universe, coalescing in the sun, the moon, the planets, and eventually, each one of us. So, you can call it God's light, or God's energy, or God's creative Spirit – it's what it's all made of, including each one of us. Somewhere I read that matter, the stuff each of us is made of, is nothing more than momentarily arrested light. It reminded me of Thomas Merton saying that each of us is walking around shining like the sun, only we don't see it – if only we could, we would live so differently! So, prayer, Mtr. Crafton continued, is somehow acting as a conduit of this energy, or spirit, or love – and not blocking it. That, when you pray, you're opening your heart to this Spirit, and that somehow that frees this loving energy of God. Can you think of anything more hopeful, more reassuring, more joyful? That's what Paul's talking about when he talks about the peace that passes all understanding. That's the peace the collect is pointing to when it reminds us that God has prepared for those of us who love him such good things as surpass our understanding. Amen. Or maybe we would be better to say, Thanks be to God.