

Pentecost Year C
John 14:8-17 (25-27)

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Problem in the Gospel

Today's Gospel reading from St. John puts as the proverbial fly on the wall at the Last Supper as Jesus tried to tell his disciples what to expect in the days and weeks to come. Scandalized by Jesus, who stooped to wash their feet, Judas Iscariot had just left the room into the dark of night. Jesus knew that he has only an hour or two left to be with his disciples. Jesus knew the guards were on their way, that he would be humiliated and stand trial and even die a painful death on the cross. Jesus was trying one more time to prepare his friends and even reassure them. But what Jesus said about where he is going, about God, and about the way to the Father was incomprehensible to the group gathered around the table. We get a sense of the confusion among the disciples when "Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." We also get a sense of Jesus' frustration when he replies, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?" "All this time." Think of the years spent in ministry with Jesus, witnessing miracles – even the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which Phillip experienced.

"All this time" spent together. It seems to me as if a fog had covered the disciples, the stress and fear forming a dark cloud which sent not only Judas into the darkness but the disciples' hearts into the darkness as well. It feels as if the disciples had already begun to mourn Jesus' death. They were already moving on to places of despair and uncertainty. They could not take in what Jesus was telling them. Philip spoke to the certainty and proof they each wanted – "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Somehow, in that moment, Jesus wasn't enough to allay their fear and doubt.

Problem in the World

In many ways, we are no different from the disciples. I get the sense that when we are at our lowest – in depression, in doubt, in fear, in sorrow – that these are times when we might want proof, solid tangible certainty that our faith is based on something real. "Show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." We want proof that God is real and present in our lives. Last week I had an opportunity to hear an address by the Rt. Revd. Paul Bayes, the Bishop of Liverpool. He was the first speaker at the Diocese of Virginia's spring conference for clergy, spouses, and lay workers. He spoke to us about the issues he found we shared in common in both the context of the Church of England and that of the Episcopal Church. Europe has experienced the rise of secularism, and we are seeing it in the US. You have probably heard of the numbers are rising of "nones" (N_O_N_E_S), people who check the "none" box when asked in polls to what religion they belong. These are people who have no religious belief or who might describe themselves as "spiritual, not religious." Bishop Paul called these latter, the "spi-no-rels." "Spinorels" would say they believe in something, a higher power, even God, but they do not attend church. They do not want to affiliate with any public expression of faith or tie themselves to what they perceive as a corrupt or simply unnecessary obsolete institution. They may believe in God, but they do not find Christ or his church relevant to their lives.

Where do we find Christ? We can talk about "nones" and "spinorels" and maybe feel they are not us, but have you asked a child or teen lately what they think about church? Remember the phrase from Pogo, "we have seen the enemy, and it is us?" Well, we have seen the nones and spinorels and they are us. I've got some of these heathens in my home... They ask us, "Where is your proof that you have seen God?" They in essence are echoing Philip, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied." What have you experienced lately that you could turn to your spouse, your friend, or child and say, "I know God because..." Or are you someone who may be wrestling with doubts? Doubt is a very real and tangible presence in the world – and it is much easier to hold onto than belief in a Lord who says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" as the guards march to haul him away for humiliation, trial, and crucifixion. Doubt and skepticism is far easier to grasp than faith.

Grace in the Text

This day we mark Pentecost, the day when we read from Acts how “the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Today we also remember that Jesus assured his disciples the Advocate would come, when he said at the Last Supper, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." The Advocate surprised them, rushing into the room and causing them to speak in many languages. Witnesses would testify that these men, disciples of Jesus who were simple fishermen and without educations, were suddenly able to speak fluently in the many languages of the breadth of the Roman Empire.

The disciples were proclaiming the gospel to all in their known world. The witnesses to this preaching knew God was somehow present to them in this Holy Spirit moving among them and proclaiming to them through the disciples. The power of the Spirit propelled the disciples and the apostles into the world without fear and with complete confidence in everything Jesus had promised them. The fearlessness of the disciples, the apostles, and then the martyrs came from their experience of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit present with them. *Parakletos*, the Greek word for Advocate or helper, literally means “called alongside” or “called to one’s side.” It meant someone who would come to your aid, defend you, a counsellor. When the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, the disciples knew with certainty that they could trust in Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, “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.” As they went into the world proclaiming the Gospel, these new Christians felt this Advocate alongside them.

Grace in the World

I’m wondering if the “spiritual-not-religious” people feel this presence but do not know its name. Something is calling to them as they go about life but they do not make the connection. What could we do to help them break through and begin to engage in the on-going story of God’s presence among us? We also get caught up in our lives and forget that we do not need to be afraid. Jesus was not just speaking to the disciples at the Last Supper. He was and is speaking to us. We ask as Philip did, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." I think we know the Father in the person of Jesus, in his acts of healing and teaching and sacrificial love we encounter in the Gospel. We encounter the Father and the Son in the way the Holy Spirit moves through the world – around and among us, in acts of healing, teaching, and sacrificial love we encounter in this community.

We should keep our eyes open to witness these encounters and to proclaim them as God present and active in the world. Take a look at the photo board as you head to the parking lot – a new series of shots of Grace Church captured in fellowship, in ministry, in worship have just gone up. Friends, family, and new members all captured in Spirit-filled moments. Think of all of the quiet moments that are not caught on film – laying on of hands in prayer at a hospital bedside; someone handing a bag of groceries to a person in need; a Godly Play gospel story told to a three year old for the first time (I wonder how small is a mustard seed?)

We need to keep inviting the spi-no-rels in to experience God active and relevant in the world through the Church. When we are acting as Church (healing, sharing, teaching, worshipping, in fellowship) we experience the Holy Spirit.

We see and know the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and we are satisfied.

Amen.