

## The Spirit of Truth & Love

May 17, 2020

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A family was sitting in church listening to a sermon when their youngest daughter tugged on her Mother's dress. Mom leaned to her side and the little girl whispered, "I know who the Father and the Son are, but what's the Holy Spearmint?" Indeed...what, or who, is the Holy Spearmint? Today's text helps shed some light on this child's pertinent question. But first, let's put today's scripture in its literary context.

John 14:15-21 appears in what is known as Jesus's Farewell Discourse that takes place at the Last Supper... a discourse that takes up no less than three chapters- John 14, 15 and 16. (The Farewell Discourse has been likened to The Last Lecture Series in colleges where a distinguished Professor is invited to speak knowing it is their last chance to lecture.) (1) Reclining at meal, Jesus tells of his impending death and departure to his disciples. And that causes great consternation and alarm.

Now, I like the way Fred Craddock, a specialist on John's Gospel, envisions the scene. (2) Picture a family living room with children playing on the floor. Noticing their parents putting on their jackets, ready to leave the house, the children jump up and immediately ask questions: Where are you going? Can we go with you? Then who's going to stay with us while you're away?

Indeed, those are the very questions the disciples ask Jesus! And the answer? Jesus reassures them, "I will not leave you orphaned."

The closest I've ever come to feeling orphaned was at age 5, when my missionary parents put me kicking and screaming into the back of a WW II Power Wagon pickup truck - with total strangers - and sent me off to a Boarding School for missionary children. It was a two day trip on dirt roads through the African bush - 400 miles away to Guinea, W. Africa. At times I still feel the deep emotional pain of that separation 60 years later.

Just like children today, the disciples did not want to be abandoned...left alone...isolated by Jesus. Their burning question? “Who’s going to stay with us?” Jesus’s answer: “I will not leave you orphaned. I will send you the Paraclete...the Holy Spirit.”

Gail O’Day, in her commentary notes that the noun Paraclete, “derives from the verb *parakalew* which has a wide range of meanings that include ‘to exhort and encourage,’ ‘to comfort or console,’ ‘to call upon for help,’ and ‘to appeal.’ (3) The noun form can mean ‘the one who exhorts,’ ‘the one who comforts,’ ‘the one who makes appeals on one’s behalf.’ English translations include the words ‘Comforter,’ ‘Counselor,’ or ‘Advocate.’” Quite literally, the verb *parakalew* means “to call alongside of.” Thus, Jesus calls someone to come alongside his disciples in his absence, to help them.

Who is this Paraclete? Or, as the little girl in church asked her Mother, “What is the Spearmint?” For starters, vs. 16 informs us that the Paraclete is “the Spirit of Truth.” Truth is so stabilizing! Truth is so grounding! As my mentor Rev. Jim McDonald reminded me often, “The truth is always the safest place to be.” We certainly know that, don’t we, in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic! When daily the earth seems to shift beneath our feet, we need the truth—especially from our leaders—political leaders, public health leaders and scientists. What we don’t need are mixed messages! Vacillating interpretations! Whims and wishful thinking! The truth is the safest place to be!

The first century readers of John’s Gospel lived in extremely dangerous and chaotic times politically, religiously and socially. Most scholars date the writing of John’s Gospel around 100CE. Seventy years AFTER Jesus’s death and resurrection! It’s important to realize that the Gospel of John was written to the third generation of Jesus followers...followers who were not eye-witnesses and had never seen the historical Jesus. Followers who faced persecution and death by the Roman state...had been beaten and thrown out of Jewish synagogues for believing that Jesus was the divine Messiah...socially ostracized as a weird cult that supposedly drank their founder’s blood and ate his flesh in secretive meetings. In addition, there were tensions among different, sometimes competing, Jesus movements scattered across the Roman Empire. Talk about chaos and disruption!

So...in the midst of turmoil and fear, that 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of Jesus followers (known as John's community—the Johannine faith community) found great comfort...great courage...great assurance knowing that they had indeed received the Spirit who lived in them and came alongside them, leading them into the Truth. Leading them into, and sustaining them in the truth of God's love...a truth that was far more experiential than doctrinal...the truth of a very profound and real encounter and relationship with God and the Risen Christ.

So...what or who is the Holy Spearmint? It's the Paraclete...the Spirit who comes alongside us, and dwells within us to help us...to help us know and experience the Truth!

Second, the Paraclete is also the Spirit of Love! How do we know that? Because the first Paraclete was Jesus. Close readers realize that in Jesus's absence from his disciples, God sends whom? Another Paraclete, in the form of the Spirit, who comes alongside us and helps us not only know the Truth...but helps us be like Jesus! And if there's one word that sums up Jesus's life, teaching, death and resurrection, it's the word LOVE. More than any other Gospel, John emphasizes love. In fact, today's passage begins and ends with LOVE. "If you love me, you will obey my command...Whoever has my commands and obeys them, loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."

So, back to our original question: What is the Holy Spearmint? What does the Spirit look like? My good friend Prof. David Lose puts it this way. "The Holy Spirit looks like one who stands up for you when you need it, the one who speaks on your behalf, who lends you a helping hand, takes your side and won't leave you while you're down. The Holy Spirit looks like Jesus! The Spirit is 'another advocate' because Jesus was the first. In short, *the Holy Spirit is an advocate that looks a whole lot like Jesus*...Which means that we've actually seen the Spirit lots of times. Anytime, in fact, someone stands up for another. Anytime someone acts like Jesus. Anytime someone bears the love of Christ to another...we have seen the Holy Spirit." (4) The Spirit of Love.

**In fact, I believe that the Holy Spirit at one time or another has looked like you. And me. Whenever we stand up for others...whenever we try to be more like Jesus...whenever we carry Christ's love into the world! That's when others see the Holy Spirit! Amen.**

- (1) Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad, "I Will Not Leave You Orphaned," Day 1@75 blog, Sunday, May 1, 2005.
- (2) Fred B. Craddock. *John Knox Preaching Guides*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982.
- (3) Gail O'Day, *Commentary on John*, New International Bible Commentary Series, Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 747.
- (4) David Lose, "What the Holy Spirit Really Looks Like," *Working Preacher*, May 22, 2011

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