



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

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THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 21, 2017

Let us pray: Ever-living and gracious God, by your Spirit we are not left orphaned, but are numbered among your beloved daughters and sons. In being more like Jesus, by embodying his love to the needy, in advocating for justice and peace, may we see the Holy Spirit working through us; in Jesus' Name. Amen.

So, what does the Holy Spirit look like? If you had paper and colored pencils in front of you right now, how would you depict the Spirit of God? Countless works of art picture scenes from Christ's life: quelling storms and walking on the water on the Sea of Galilee, feeding the 5,000, sharing his Last Supper with the disciples, hanging on the cross, greeting Mary Magdalene at Easter's sunrise, and, oh yes, there are those myriad pictures of Mary, the Virgin, holding her infant Son, as cattle, donkeys and lambs look on! Even God the Father gets pictured. I think of Michelangelo's renowned fresco in the Sistine Chapel ceiling, showing God creating Adam; God the Creator portrayed as a strong but kindly Father with a magnificent grey beard and shock of hair. The Holy Spirit, though, is much more challenging to portray, a dove, perhaps, or flames of fire, that's about it.

And here's the thing, what's true of Christian art is true, also, of Christian preaching. The Spirit occupies but a tiny corner in a preacher's year of sermons. When it comes to the Trinity, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Spirit is called the "shy" member of the Trinity, inexplicable, difficult to describe and picture, at the margins of faith. We don't quite know what to do with, or think about, the Holy Spirit. Except...

Except that in today's Gospel reading we receive two vivid and helpful clues, which together offer a pretty good portrait of just what the Holy Spirit looks like. Clue # 1: The Holy Spirit looks like an Advocate---the one who stands beside you when you are so alone, the one who lends you a helping hand, the one who will never turn away from you when you're down and out, the one who advocates for justice and mercy.

Clue # 2: The Holy Spirit looks like Jesus. The Spirit is called "another advocate" because our first advocate is Jesus. And so, when we are sure of Jesus' divinity and lordship; when we believe with heart, and mind, and soul that Jesus is the Son of God, the way, truth, and life; when Jesus is real and alive for us, this is the Spirit's work within us.

The Holy Spirit is as visible as the water I will pour from that font back there in the name of God upon the heads of five of our children as they are baptized by the Spirit and become God's children two weeks from today. So too, the Spirit is as visible and real as the bread we are about to hold and the wine into which we are about to dip it, or sip it, as the Spirit channels Jesus' love and forgiveness into us as we eat and drink the Supper of Christ.

We've actually seen the Holy Spirit lots of times. Anytime in fact a follower of Jesus acts like him, anytime we bear the love of Christ to another, anytime we stand up for Jesus by defending our faith in him, anytime we advocate for the dignity and worth of every human being, every time we seek our neighbor's welfare, we are doing the Spirit's work.

Fifty-two years ago this past March, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called on religious leaders across this nation to join with him in a peaceful, non-violent march for freedom and racial equality from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital in Montgomery. Dr. King's appeal came in the wake of the first march on "Bloody Sunday," when, on the Edmund Pettis Bridge state troopers attacked the peaceful marchers with clubs, tear gas, and snarling police dogs. Seven Episcopal priests here in Delaware answered Dr. King's call to go. I hope and pray that you are as proud, as I certainly am, that The Rev. Laurence H. Miller, who was the priest here at St. John the Baptist, was one of those marchers. On March 9, 1965, Father Miller and six other Episcopal priests from Delaware flew to Selma for the march where Dr. King led 2,000 advocates for racial equality and the right to vote. In order to avoid more brutality and bloodshed, the marches went as far as the Edmund Pettis Bridge, knelt to pray, and then marched back to Selma. The marchers' restraint in not going all the way to Montgomery so impressed President Lyndon Johnson that he promised he would introduce a voting rights bill to Congress within days, which, in fact, the President did on March 17. Father Laurence Miller of this Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist showed us what the Holy Spirit looks like, how the Holy Spirit works, or should I say how the Spirit marches! Equality in this land is the beneficiary of that march. We must not march backward.

In our time, monuments that symbolize for countless of our citizens past divisions, civil strife, human denigration, the denial of human rights, indeed, human bondage are, one by one, being dismantled and carried away from public squares. Their disappearance is, for me, yet another picture of the Holy Spirit's work, the Spirit who affirms that in God's eyes all of us are God's equal creations.

Or what about the pursuit of truth? Truth in all its manifestations is the Spirit's work. Every citizen of our great country should, I believe, be committed to the search for the truth. For people of faith the pursuit of truth is not a Republican thing or a Democratic thing, it is God's thing! For the God we worship includes the Spirit of truth, as today's Gospel testifies. Truth is always of God, so when truth emerges we see a picture of the Holy Spirit's work.

And, does the Spirit of the risen Christ care if 24 million Americans lose their healthcare, or ten million, or one million, or even one person, for that matter? I believe, most certainly yes, the Spirit cares deeply! But, if the answer is "no," the Spirit doesn't care, my question becomes: what kind of God is that? Where is the love, the mercy, the compassion, his desire that every person have the best quality of life possible, this God who in God's Son devoted so much of his earthly ministry to healing the sick? Keeping bodies, minds, and souls healthy is the Spirit's work, another picture of what the Holy Spirit looks like.

Feeding hungry mouths, whether it be through the school lunch program filling the empty stomachs of school children living in poverty, or the Meals on Wheels ministry delivering food to the vulnerable elderly, or our strong and vital support of the Milton Community Food Bank, doing all it possibly can to make sure no one in our community goes to bed hungry, this is the Holy Spirit's work, my friends. This is what the Holy Spirit looks like!

I could go on to talk about protecting the environment, God's creation; or providing a haven for refugees, God's children; or the pursuit of peace, God's dream; or caring deeply about one another in the family of faith here at St. John the Baptist, God's call...all of it the Spirit's work, all portraits of the Holy Spirit! When this world is more peaceful, better cared for, more civil, more equal, more compassionate, more connected, more caring, and shares more, the Holy Spirit is at work...visible and real!

In closing, therefore, it's no wonder that Jesus in our Gospel says of the Spirit, "You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." You see, the Holy Spirit many times looks a lot like you, even a lot like me, a lot like each of us and a lot like all God's people as we do the works of Jesus. We are the Spirit's eyes, ears, voice, feet, hands, and heart!

So what about that mirror in the hallway?! Well, I have a favor to ask you. As you leave Mass and this sanctuary today, and pass through that hallway into the parish hall for fellowship, stop and look at yourself in that mirror on the easel there. As you do, tell yourself, "So I am what the Holy Spirit looks like!" Not all the time, of course, but as

you and I speak the words of Jesus and do the works of Jesus, each of us is painting an exquisite portrait of what the Holy Spirit looks like! And as you depart the parish hall to go out into the world, look into that mirror one more time, and reflect on how the Holy Spirit is at work in you and through you for the blessing of God's world!

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