

“MISSING PERSON”
Acts 1:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
May 23, 2021

I once pastored a man who suffered from Alzheimer’s and had to go live in a special care facility. He was often a challenge to deal with. He routinely left his room, wandered the hallways, and entered the rooms of other patients uninvited. One day he was nowhere to be found; he had apparently wandered out of the building and not come back. His family was alerted to the problem and went searching for the man in the neighborhood of the nursing home. After coming up empty, they had to make the phone call to authorities that all of us dread making – to report a “missing person.” The man finally turned up at a McDonald’s a half-mile away from the nursing home; but in the meantime, his caregivers were overcome with anxiety and fear. You and I can understand why. Those two words – “missing person” – are enough to send chills down our spines.

On this Pentecost Sunday, it occurs to me that many Christians report a missing person in their spiritual lives. Our great hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” echoes the Nicene Creed by affirming one of the distinctive doctrines of Christianity. The hymn speaks of “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” Well, the person in the Godhead who is missing for many of us is the Holy Spirit. We relate easily to God the Father and God the Son, but God the Holy Spirit is like a distant relative we have never met, whom we know only by reputation, whom we are not really sure we want to get to know.

The liturgical color for Pentecost Sunday is red, symbolizing the fire of the Holy Spirit which descends on the disciples of Jesus who are gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Our sanctuary is wearing beautiful red paraments today; as a church, we are rolling out the red carpet for the Holy Spirit, welcoming the Spirit into our lives, one more time. Pentecost is one of the red-letter days of the Christian Year; we love the color red; we love to celebrate Pentecost. And yet, many of us are barely acquainted with the one we honor at this celebration. Of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the missing person. Is the problem that the Spirit is a bit slippery and elusive, or is the problem that we have loosened our grasp on the Spirit, if we ever had a grasp to being with?

To be fair to ourselves, there are good reasons why the Holy Spirit remains such a mystery to us. One of our difficulties is terminology. The New Testament indicates that the early Christians have an evolving experience of God and a growing understanding of God. They have always known God as their Creator who rules in the heavens. But God has now been revealed to them in new and surprising ways. In Jesus Christ, they encounter God in human flesh here on earth. After Jesus returns to the Father, they know God’s ongoing presence through a reality they call the Holy Spirit.

A few centuries later, theologians start trying to explain this experience of God in human terms. They use the language of their own time, which is heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. They speak of “one God in three persons,” which sounds very much like three distinct entities, and may sound to us today like gobbledygook. How can one be three and three be one? It’s no wonder that some Jews and Muslims have accused Christians of tri-theism, the belief in three gods. Even

good Christians find themselves confused by the concept of the Trinity. And make no mistake: it is the third person of the Trinity that causes the most confusion. We “get” the Father and the Son; but just who or what is the Holy Spirit? A separate god? A “holy ghost”? You and I may prefer to keep a distance from things we don’t understand.

Another difficulty is that some Christians go to the opposite extreme and make the Holy Spirit the centerpiece of their belief and practice. They exhibit what they call “Pentecostal power,” which often manifests itself in a highly emotional style of worship. Moreover, they claim to possess the Spirit in ways that other Christians do not. Because they speak in tongues or have an intense religion of the heart, they regard themselves as spiritually superior to others. As a consequence, we mainline Protestants suffer a kind of reticence about the Holy Spirit, a fear of inviting the Spirit into our lives at the risk of getting carried away with emotion or puffed up with spiritual pride.

And then, there is one other reason why the Holy Spirit may be a missing person in our Christian experience. Oddly enough, our shyness in talking about the person of the Holy Spirit is in synch with the Holy Spirit’s persona. Frederick Dale Bruner suggests that the Holy Spirit is the “shy member of the Trinity,” preferring to stay backstage, deferring to the glory of Jesus and the Father. The Spirit is like the stage director we never see but who makes the show unfold and keeps the stars in the bright lights, looking good. The Spirit is certainly not silent or absent, but the Spirit is often hidden and mysterious.

Put all this together, and the Holy Spirit is the missing person in the Trinity for many of us. And yet, the Book of Acts cites the day of Pentecost as the birthday of the Church. The coming of the Spirit on that day turns a band of dormant disciples into bold apostles who spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. The work of the Holy Spirit is all over the pages of our New Testament; the Spirit animates the faith and witness of the early believers. The Spirit is not a missing person to them. So, what are you and I missing if the Holy Spirit is a missing person to us?

Today’s Scripture lessons identify several gifts that the Spirit offers to believers, without which our spiritual lives are impoverished. In John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of the Spirit as our “Advocate” (John 15:26) – that is, our biggest supporter, the one who champions our cause before God and who stands up for us when other people oppose us for seeking to do the will of God. When you and I are up against it, we are comforted to know that someone “has our back,” and Jesus assures us that the Holy Spirit does! Jesus also speaks of the Spirit as the source of truth (v. 26), the one who knows that our human grasp of truth is incomplete and therefore promises to “guide [us] into all the truth” (v. 16:13a). How helpful this is during a time when so many people are speaking out of ignorance or speaking falsely, trying to create “truth” out of thin air to match their own biases and fantasies.

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul describes the Spirit as one who “helps us in our weakness” and “intercedes for us” when we are clueless about how or what to pray (Romans 8:26). How many times during the pandemic have you and I been unable to verbalize a prayer, but could only muster a groan or a sigh? Paul tells us that when we let out a sigh in weariness or despair, this is actually God’s Spirit praying in us. Surely we wouldn’t want to miss out on that.

However, I want to focus this morning on our reading from the Book of Acts – the account of the Spirit’s coming on the day of Pentecost. This story suggests us that when the Holy Spirit is a missing person in our lives, what we are missing is our primary source of spiritual power. Before Jesus ascends to heaven, he instructs his disciples to remain in Jerusalem and wait for the Father’s promise to be fulfilled. He tells them, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The disciples have been given a message to proclaim and a mandate to proclaim it. They have been told to “go . . . and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). What they lack is the get-up-and-go to actually go. They lack energy; they lack power.

I know the feeling, and I’ll bet you do, too. For fourteen months, we as a church have been largely stuck in neutral, waiting for the pandemic to end so we can gather again as a congregation and get on with our mission to the community. At times we’ve felt tired, discouraged, even fearful about our future. Like the disciples, we have a message that could make a difference in the lives of our neighbors. But, in such depressing circumstances, who has the energy to proclaim this message? Who has the vitality and drive to climb out of their bunkers and connect with the outside world? It’s been slow going for many of us. You and I are not lacking purpose; what we are lacking is power.

The great Danish Christian, Soren Kierkegaard, told a parable about a little town of ducks. Every Sunday the ducks waddle out of their houses and waddle down Main Street to their church. They waddle into the sanctuary and squat in their proper pews. The duck choir waddles in and takes its place, then the duck minister comes forward and opens the duck Bible. (Ducks, like all other creatures on earth, seem to have their own special version of the Scriptures.) The minister reads to them: “Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fences can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings, and you can fly like birds!” All the ducks shouted “Amen!” And they all waddled home.

Of course, the ducks are easy to criticize for being lethargic and apathetic. But in their defense, it occurs to me that there is one important element that is missing in this parable. Yes, ducks have wings to fly with, but what good are wings without wind? Ducks need a lift, a source of power to launch them into the sky.

So does the Church in the 1st Century, and so does the Church in the 21st Century. Christian congregations already have wings; what we need is something we can’t supply on our own – wind! Yes, we are struggling to fly during these abnormal times, when our church activity is necessarily limited. But during normal times, we are busy ducks. We do our homework and then do a lot of grunt work. We meet and study and discuss and strategize; we even implement some of our best-laid plans, as if everything depends on us and our efforts. Then we wait for the desired results – more people in the pews, more money to invest in our ministry, a wider scope of mission to our community.

It’s interesting that Jesus himself tells us to wait – but not for the perfect plan or the perfect outcome. He tells us to wait for the coming of the Spirit, for the wind beneath our wings to lift us skyward. He tells us not to rely only on our own power, but to accept the help of a Higher Power.

We see this happening dramatically on the day of Pentecost. The specific power the early Christians lack is the power to communicate. They encounter pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world, from towns and regions whose names are hard to pronounce, who speak in all those languages birthed at the Tower of Babel which make for confusion and division. And what happens on Pentecost? The ill effects of Babel are reversed. The disciples are able to speak in the native language of each pilgrim, creating understanding and unity. And how does this happen? Do the disciples hold a committee meeting and devise a strategy for communication? No, they wait for the appointed time; then they are assaulted by tongues of fire, blown into the streets by the wind of the Spirit, and given the power to communicate from a Power beyond themselves.

Today, you and I ask how we can find the language to speak to people out there who are not religious. Church jargon surely won't work; neither will judgmental pronouncements. How do we talk about the best news ever to people who hear nothing but awful news and are jaded and cynical? Well, as a pastor I find it helpful to read books and tune in to webinars about how to reach the unchurched. I get excited when I discover new techniques and technologies that I can lead a congregation to implement. I try to take charge, be in control, and make things happen on my own. What I find it harder to do is to look outside myself for direction, to pray for the Spirit's leading, to wait for the Spirit's power.

If the first Christian Pentecost is any indication, this is exactly what I need to do, and what we need to do. Over the next six weeks, you as a church will be waiting to receive a new pastor, and I'll be waiting for another church to receive me as their new pastor. We will prepare as best we can for the unknown, each of us in our own way. We'll develop a flight plan; we'll have wings to fly with; but these tools are useless without wind, and without our willingness to let the wind blow where it will.

One more time: what are we missing when the Holy Spirit is a missing person in our lives? We are missing power; we have lots of ideas but little energy to execute them; we have wings but no wind. To take liberties with the lyrics of a popular Christmas song: "We need a little Pentecost, right this very minute . . . For we've grown a little leaner, grown a little colder, grown a little sadder, grown a little older, and we need tongues of fire sitting on our shoulder. We need a little Pentecost now."