

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 25, 2014
Mary Hinkle

For the Easter season—the 50 Days of Fabulous, as Forward Movement is calling them this year—I’ve been doing extra daily devotional reading. I noticed this morning that we’ve reached day 36—which means we’re getting very close to our celebration of Pentecost, our annual commemoration of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus’ disciples. And the approach of Pentecost is mirrored in our Scripture readings.

I want to address two of our lessons today, the Gospel and the passage from Acts, and it may not be immediately apparent how they fit together. So please stay with me, and I’ll let you know when we get to a turn in the road.

In today’s Gospel passage from John, Jesus tells his disciples about the Holy Spirit. This isn’t the first appearance of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, of course. The Hebrew Scriptures in which Jesus was so well versed are replete with references to the Spirit as active and present in the world; in Numbers, for example, God’s Spirit rests upon 70 elders, and they prophesy. And in John’s Gospel, Jesus has referred to the Holy Spirit twice before: in Chapter 3 Jesus explains to Nicodemus the idea of rebirth in the Spirit, and in Chapter 6 he says it is the Holy Spirit that gives life.

But in today’s passage the descent of the Spirit is previewed and explained as a gift from Jesus to his followers, a gift the Father will send in Jesus’ name. To quote Floyd Filson in *The Layman’s Bible Commentary*:

“All earlier work of the Spirit pales into insignificance before the powerful and effective work of the Spirit in interpreting and continuing Jesus’ work. The Christian will always know the Spirit as the gift of the risen Christ or, to put it in other words, as the gift of the Father at the request of the risen Christ. Jesus will be taken from the disciples after a rather brief ministry, but the Spirit will remain with them and dwell in them so that they never have to face life alone.”

Jesus tells the disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned.” Jesus will go away from them but will be followed by the Holy Spirit, whom he calls the Advocate. The Greek word literally means a legal helper. Other translations of this text use the word Counselor or Comforter. So, to quote Filson again, “the work of the Spirit [is] that of an adviser and helper, an encourager, comforter, and inspirer, a constant companion of the believer.” Jesus goes on to say that the Holy Spirit will teach the disciples and remind them of all Jesus has said to them. He also calls it “the spirit of truth,” which, Filson says, “is not merely true and honest but teaches the truth and guides believers to know, witness to, and express in life the truth about God and [God’s] Son Jesus Christ.”

Now, here we come to the turn in the road; hold those thoughts about the Holy Spirit, and I promise we’ll come back to it in a few minutes. But first I want to look at the text from Acts. In the verses just preceding today’s passage, we see Paul visiting Athens, well past its glory days but still the center of Greek culture. He walks around the city, which is filled with temples and statues and other reminders of its great past. He takes note of the daily debates among philosophers, and he begins to take part, addressing the Jews in their synagogue each Sabbath and speaking in the marketplace on other days. And eventually his encounter with local philosophers draws a crowd.

In today's passage, Paul is hauled before the Athenian court for an investigation of his teaching. And there in his defense he essentially preaches a sermon. He mentions seeing an altar dedicated to "an unknown god" and argues that, despite the numerous shrines and temples in their city, despite their obvious depth of religious feeling, the Athenians do not know the one true God. Paul gives a description of God in thoroughly Jewish theology, emphasizing, in Filson's words, "God's unity, his creation and maintenance of all things, his control of all history." But it's notable that he does not quote from the Jewish scriptures; instead, he quotes from Greek poetry, from pagan literature with which his audience was familiar. And he uses those quotations to build a logical argument, telling them bluntly that they ought to have better sense than to worship man-made images, that the God who created all things cannot be contained in any temple or shrine, much less a statue. Then he delivers the specifically Christian message: God has appointed a judge and set a day of judgment, and all men must repent of their past ignorance and turn to the one true God.

Now, to quote the angels, do not be afraid. I'm going to describe Paul's activity with a word that seems to frighten many Christians in our day and age...the "e" word...."evangelize." Ooh. Scary, huh? We are commissioned by Christ to spread the Good News, yet many of us, in a multicultural world similar to Paul's, feel uncomfortable even sharing our faith, let alone working to bring others to belief. But Paul teaches us lessons in evangelism that, at least for me, make the word and the activity a little less intimidating.

What lessons we can draw from Paul's experience in Athens for our own evangelism? He doesn't march in with banners or noise, proclaiming Christianity; he looks around the city, observing carefully the lives of its citizens. He begins his self-defense before the court by complimenting the Athenians for their religious nature. He takes their culture, their poetry, things they already have and believe, and explains them in terms of the Good News. He uses language they know, not unfamiliar writings from a foreign faith. He meets them where they are. Paul doesn't have a prepared speech, but responds to what he observes. As Albert Winn, in another volume of the Layman's Bible Commentary, points out, Paul is satisfied with making a few converts rather than disappointed at not making more.

Surely we can strive to emulate Paul and do the same: to take the people we encounter from day to day as they are, to speak from our hearts in an effort to meet their needs, whatever those may be, and to share our faith with them in terms they can relate to readily. We can put aside any idea of converting others and know that sharing the Good News in our own way is enough to fulfill our commission from Christ.

And if you're wondering, "Where would I find the words? I'm not Paul. I wouldn't know what to say or do," I remind you that we, just as much as Paul, have the gift of the Holy Spirit, our Counselor, Comforter, and Advocate, who will teach us and remind us, show us the way and give us the words, if only we are open to accepting them. Just as we need not worry about what we will eat or what we will wear, because God knows our needs and meets them, we need not worry about what to say, for the words will be given to us; we need not worry about what to do, for the Holy Spirit has been sent to help us to obey God's commandments. We have not been left orphaned; through the Holy Spirit, we are united with Christ and the Father. With the Holy Spirit, we never have to face life alone. Amen.