

Sermon Easter 6 Year A, 2023; Gospel John 14: 15-21

God open us to know Your Spirit, within us and among us and in all things. Amen

The Advocate: Where Do We Find Her? *

So what or who is this Advocate, also called *Paraclete*, Jesus is talking about? A little context: In the gospel today Jesus and the disciples are having their final meal in that upper room, and he has started his Farewell Discourse to them. He has told them that one of them, that being Judas, will betray him, and Judas has already left to find the men who will arrest Jesus. He then says that he must leave them, that he must die. They are shocked of course. They thought that Jesus was the immortal messiah who would overtake the ruthless Roman rulers, that he would restore peace and justice to his people who were being oppressed. And now he is telling them that those same oppressors will kill him? What?, they are saying. You are the one who is supposed to change everything, the strongman Messiah who will make everything right! In trying to explain all this, Jesus says that he is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and that where he is going he will prepare a place for them also. Of course they don’t understand, and Jesus continues trying to comfort them. Jesus says that after he leaves the Father will give them “another Advocate” to be with them forever. And what does he mean by “another?” The Greek word for “another” in this passage is *allos* which means “another of the same kind.” So, it means that all the things Jesus has been for the disciples in the past—advocate, teacher, comforter, friend—this Advocate the Holy Spirit will be for them going forward. By saying “another” Jesus implies that there was a prior advocate, and that it is Jesus himself. If you look at 1 John, that is the first of the two letters of John—not the Gospel of John but one of the epistles—you read this: “...we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ...” This points toward what would become orthodoxy in the church about our understanding of God. It took another three centuries to evolve, but what did become orthodoxy is that God is one being in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all divine, all God, a

relationship coursing among the Three. So this Advocate Jesus leaves is indeed God, remaining with us after Jesus, the human face of God, has gone. This Advocate, this Holy Spirit, is what Jesus leaves for all of us, as we move forward in our own lives.

And yet, how do we get to know and feel this Holy Spirit? (And by the way from now on I will refer to the Spirit using feminine language.) I think that we have to somehow experience her in our own lives. We have to have some kind of encounter that we know is real, to know in our hearts and in our minds this reality which transcends our usual senses and ways of knowing things, and yet is imminent for us. It is a way of knowing different from how we typically encounter the world using our senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell. I remember being a college student in pre-medicine back in the late 60s. I was learning all about how the world works, its chemistry and physics and biology. It was the scientific way of understanding reality. Everything works according to a few laws, like a clock. Those were Darwin's laws of nature. There was nothing mysterious. This continued in medical school, where we learned how the body works and how it gets disease, and how to fix it when it does. In my arrogance I thought I had it all figured out. And for me there was no need for or even room for God. My world was what I could see and touch and hear using my senses, and I couldn't see or touch God. Then I had a discussion with my roommate. He was a religious guy, and also a spiritual guy. After he heard me going on about all the things I was learning about science and medicine he said something I will never forget. "Bob," he said, "There is a great big spiritual world out there, and if you don't look for it, you'll miss it. And that would be a terrible thing." Those words—that warning—got my attention, and stayed with me, even to this day some 53 years later. It was an epiphany for me. I didn't at that time have any kind of mystical experience, but his remark at least got me thinking about it. I think I was beginning to "suspend my disbelief."

No, we cannot see the Spirit, or touch her, or hear her, and yet She is real. Jesus was himself a spirit-filled person. Marcus Borg said that in an important sense all that he was, taught, and did flowed out of his own intimate experience of the “world of spirit.” This notion of the world of the spirit is a vague and difficult notion in our world today. As my roommate was telling me there is another dimension or layer or level of reality in addition to the visible world of our ordinary experience. The modern worldview or picture of reality sees reality as having essentially one dimension, that being what is visible and material. This other “world of spirit” is not part of our taken-for-granted understanding of reality. It is not part of how we see and encounter the world around us. But, this understanding of the reality of the spiritual world has been a common property of virtually every culture before ours. It was mostly lost following the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the Modern Era. But we are beginning to see a re-emergence of this understanding of reality as being more than just one dimensional. And importantly, it is not simply an article of belief, but an element of experience. This world of spirit is not merely believed in, but known. Jesus knew it, and invites us to know it too.

Yes, this Holy Spirit that Jesus promises his disciples and us lives within us, makes her home in us, and can assure us that same peace which Jesus gives us. But in order to know that I think we have to see the world—the reality—differently. I know I did. We have to somehow get to know this spiritual world which is the ground beneath and the life within everything we see and know with our usual senses. The Spirit of God is where, as Paul told the Athenians in our reading from Acts this morning, “we live and move and have our being.” Or as Isaiah put it “God of power and might; heaven and earth are full of your glory.” To say that heaven and earth (all that is!) are full of God’s glory means that everything is filled with the light of God. God the sacred pervades all that is, even though we don’t often see it, when we miss it. Isaiah must have had some kind of experience of God to say that. And that’s it!: A life-changing experience

of God that makes the reality of God known to us, known to us on a much deeper level than just believing in things about God, things like what we learn about God in Sunday school and say in our creeds. We read about those types of experiences of God, those direct encounters with God, throughout scripture. Such a moment occurs in the climax of the book of Job. Throughout the book Job questions the reality of God that he had learned, a God who rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked. He has lost everything: his family, his possessions, his health, and all for no apparent reason. He has done nothing wrong. What kind of God would do that to him? Then, in the closing chapters of the book Job experiences a magnificent display of the wonders of the universe. In the final chapter he exclaims, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear— but now my eye sees you (42:5).” Job experienced the glory of God in the created world, and it changed his convictions about God. Believing or not believing in a concept of God was no longer an issue. Job learned that God, the sacred, *is*, and that God the sacred is both more than and other than Job had imagined. Such experiences can change our sense of what is real, and our perception of what God is, of how God fits into that reality.

But there are roadblocks to seeing the world this way, to learning to know that as my friend told me “there is a great big spiritual world out there.” Our modern Western culture including Europe and America is one roadblock. It has defined reality as the space-time world of matter and energy, by the Darwinian laws of nature, by what can be observed and analyzed by scientific methods, by what we know with our ordinary senses. In this view of reality there is no room for the spiritual, or the mystical. Another of those roadblocks is even more difficult. It is our perception of God. I would venture to say that most of us in our childhoods learned of God as a supernatural kind of being that is separate and distinct from the universe, a supreme being who had created the universe a long time ago. God was also the supreme authority figure who revealed how we should live and what we should believe. We had a parental image of God, who

loves us—yes—but who is also intimidating, something we fear as a disciplinarian and enforcer of law. This is the God who lives in heaven above demanding our obedience, and whose demands were ultimately satisfied by Jesus' death in our place. Marcus Borg calls this “supernatural and parent theism.” But there is another way of perceiving God, and that's what we're talking about today. The word “panentheism” often gets a bad rap. The Greek roots of the word indicate its meaning. The first syllable “*pan*” means everything. The middle syllable “*en*” means in. The third syllable “Theism” comes from *theos*, the Greek word for God, the sacred. So, panentheism means “everything is in God.” The universe—everything that is—is in God, even as God is “more” than the universe. God is alive and present in all of creation. God is not separate from our universe, somehow “above” it, but rather a luminous presence that permeates everything that is, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it “the luminous web.” That is what I mean by the “world of spirit.” This understanding of God totally changed my way of seeing reality. It moved me away from thinking of God as some supernatural being remote from our lives. And, it is also foundational to biblical ways of speaking about God. Listen again to these words attributed to Paul which we read in Acts today: “God is not far from each one of us. For ‘in God we live and move and have our being.’” (Acts 17:27-28) God is not somewhere else, but all around us. I've heard it said: “A person looking for God is like a fish in the sea looking for water.” We often speak about the transcendence and immanence of God. Transcendence refers to the “moreness” of God. God is more than the space-time universe of matter and energy. Immanence, from the root words “to dwell within,” refers to the presence of God everywhere. Christian theologians have affirmed both since antiquity. When one combines the two words, the result is panentheism. Borg says that it is orthodox Christian theology.

This Advocate, the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit that Jesus leaves us is indeed not far from any of us. She lives in the world of spirit, beyond the reaches

of our ordinary senses for sure, but as much or more alive than we could ever have imagined.

(*Adapted in part from Days of Awe and Wonder, by Marcus Borg, chapter 3, originally published in “Convictions” in 2014)