

SERMON: 6 Easter C

John 14:23-29 & Acts 16:9-15

Preached Sunday, May 9, 2010 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Some years ago, the Associated Press carried this extremely brief news report with a dateline of Glasgow, KY:

“Mr. Richard Puckett, after struggling to start his car last Tuesday morning, lifted the hood and discovered that someone had stolen the motor.” Imagine Mr. Puckett’s surprise. And imagine what he must have said to himself after recovering from his shock: “No wonder that thing wouldn’t start!”

This circumstance is probably a lot more common than we think. I don’t mean with cars, of course, but in the life of faith. How many people in this world wake up morning after morning and try in vain to get a little forward momentum? They eat breakfast, get dressed, make their To Do list, grab their car keys and walk to the garage, only to find that the old car just doesn’t sound right — or maybe isn’t even starting at all. Finally, someone suggests looking under the proverbial hood, only to find that the engine ... just isn’t there.

How often does this happen? How often has it happened to someone you know? How often has it happened to you?

The Gospel reading today reminds us that we won’t get very far in the life of faith without a reliable source of spiritual energy. These particular words of Jesus are prompted by a question from one of the disciples we don’t hear about very much, Judas — not the one who betrayed Jesus, but the other guy with the same first name. He says, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” That’s the set-up for the Gospel reading. And I think it’s too bad the lectionary folks left it out, because his question gives us the context for what Jesus says in response.

In so many words, Jesus tells Judas that the engine for the Christian life is love and the Holy Spirit. Without love and the Spirit, you might as well not expect a lot from your life. You might as well keep going through the motions and, like poor Mr. Puckett, be surprised one day to find that you’ve been trying to start a car with nothing under the hood.

“Those who love me,” says Jesus, “will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them... The Advocate, the Holy Spirit ... will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:23, 26-27).

What I hope you hear in this passage is how all the words are interconnected, how they describe the unfolding of the spiritual life. Jesus says the process begins with love. We are drawn to God in love, and God responds in similar fashion. Eventually, this loving relationship grows to the point where we can then say that God and Jesus are making their home with us. As a free and loving gift, God gives us the Spirit — the Advocate, Counselor and Guide. When we have love and the Spirit, we have the twin engines — or, to use modern computer lingo, we have the “dual core” — of the spiritual life. They are the fundamental energy source for the life that God desires for us.

During the week here at St. Philip’s, we often read, pray over and think about the readings that will be heard in church on Sunday. This past Thursday, we were doing exactly that at the beginning of our staff meeting. As we listened to these words, several of us were struck by the passage where Jesus talks about giving us peace and an untroubled heart. He seems to imply that when we have a sense of peace — no matter how brief and fleeting it may be —, we can rest assured that love and the Spirit are powering our spiritual engines. One person at the table said he can tell this is what’s going on whenever he decides to stop being troubled and fretful about something and let God step in. And I had to agree. “Letting go and letting God” is one of the surest signs that I’ve left a little extra room for love and the Spirit to have their way.

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The next mystery to ponder is why it seems so hard to let go the next time I'm troubled and not at peace. But even when we seem stuck in a hard place, love and the Spirit can still be our Advocate. In difficult moments, they can help us join with the Rev. John Newton, the well-known Anglican priest, when he found the wisdom to say, "I am not what I might be, I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I wish to be, I am not what I hope to be. But I thank God I am not what I once was, and I can say with [St. Paul], 'By the grace of God I am what I am.'" "

If you think about it, we really can't go wrong in the long haul if we keep coming back to love and the Holy Spirit. In the Bible, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity is called the Spirit of adoption, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of liberty, the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of counsel, the Spirit of might, and the Spirit of knowledge (among other things). And in his Letter to the Romans, Paul offers us these incredibly reassuring words: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes [for us] with sighs too deep for words" (8:26). Next time you feel anxious or troubled, Paul suggests lots of sighing — and letting the Spirit do the rest!

It's obvious that love and the Spirit were the driving forces behind the growth of Christianity in the first years after the death and resurrection of Christ. In our first reading today from Acts, we hear about Paul and his companions being led by the Spirit through visions to go and minister in places they had never planned to go. And when they went where the Spirit led them, they ended up meeting people like Lydia, the "dealer of purple cloth," who received the Good News and joined them in their ministry. The Gospels and The Book of Acts are filled with stories like these, and they make no rational sense if we don't remember what was behind it all.

Since the Spirit is so central to the life of faith, it's ironic that we mainline Christians can get so spooked by the whole idea of the "Holy Ghost." And I'm not sure our brothers and sisters in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have helped. To hear them talk, I get the impression sometimes that we have to say some magic words or be initiated into some special club before we can enjoy the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. But that's completely at odds with the witness of the Bible and the undivided Church over the centuries. Before we baptized people here several weeks ago at our Easter Vigil service, we didn't tell them and their parents that they would have to come back again later for a separate liturgy of baptism into the Spirit. The one and only Baptism was a full Trinitarian baptism: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So the question is not whether we have the Spirit; it's whether or not we recognize and make use of it. A New Testament scholar says it this way: "There is no place in Scripture that indicates we can receive more of the Holy Spirit. . . . The real issue is the release of the already present Spirit to have free reign. It isn't about us getting more of [the Spirit], but of [the Spirit] getting more of us."*

A woman went to a jeweler one day to have her watch fixed. He took the watch from the woman, disappeared to the back, and soon returned with it running perfectly. Looking surprised, the customer asked how he had been able to repair it so quickly. "Easy," he said, "all it needed was a new battery."

"Battery?" the woman replied. "Nobody said anything about a battery. Ever since I bought it, I've been winding it every day!"

My friends, I bring you very good news, and it's something our hearts and souls already know. God wants us to quit trying to wind our own watches and crank our own spiritual engines. Love and the Spirit are ready, willing and waiting for us to say, "Let it be."

*Eddie Rasnake, The Book of Ephesians (AMG Publishers, 2003), p. 134; emph. added.