

**May 25, 2014**

**TEXT: John 14:15-21**

**TITLE: Spiritual Guests**

Some mail came here at the church addressed to each one of you. I took the liberty to open it. It said, "Dear (read off series of names), I hope you are well. I'm coming to stay with you for a few days. I'm anxious to see you and hear how things are going." I guess yinz are having house guests. After church, you might need to tidy up the house a bit and get out some clean sheets and towels. You also might need to re-arrange your schedule – change some of your plans for the coming days so you can give your houseguest your full attention.

I didn't finish the letter – "I'm coming to stay with you for a few days. I'm anxious to see you and hear how things are going. We've got a lot to do together. Love, the Holy Spirit." So, the Holy Spirit is coming to stay with you. You pull your bible off the shelf and do some reviewing to get a sense of what it means to have the Holy Spirit as a houseguest. You know about the Trinity – God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You remember the story of Pentecost, when the disciples were gathered in a room and suddenly they heard the rush of a violent wind and tongues as of fire touched them; they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. You worry a little about that happening in your own home, especially with the wind and tongues of fire stuff since you just had the living room painted, but you keep flipping through the New Testament.

Galatians 5 has a nice list of the fruits of the Spirit – things the Spirit brings to us. That list includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Then you turn to John 14, when Jesus was sharing some final words with his nervous disciples gathered at table for (what would turn out to be) their last supper together. That chapter starts out with the familiar words "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.*" It goes on to say, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father to give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...I will not leave you orphaned: I am coming to you.*" You relax a bit. Those words sound so comforting. Jesus promises: "I will not leave you orphaned." You pause for a moment and think of the ways you've felt like an orphan. Maybe it is because you are of an age in which your parents have already died. Or maybe there is distance (literal or emotional) between you and your relatives. Maybe you've felt orphaned because of divorce or a lost job or chronic pain or depression. Memorial Day causes us to remember people who've died in war or been wounded and injured in military service. It also reminds us that the city streets can be rough places and violence touches so many lives today. Given all this, having the Holy Spirit as a house guest will be a good and comforting thing.

But if friends come over, how do we introduce the Holy Spirit to them? What name should we use? In John 14, the Holy Spirit is called the Paraclete, which is

a Greek word that can be translated in several ways. It can mean Comforter, Counselor, or Helper, which all sound quite nice. However, the best translation is Advocate. The Holy Spirit as Advocate - someone who stands right beside you and speaks up for you like a lawyer defending you in a court of law. You weren't aware that you needed a lawyer at the moment, so you re-read the verses in John 14: *If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father to give you another – the Paraclete, Advocate – to be with you forever.* Loving Christ and keeping his commandments mean at some point testifying before others in such a way that you'll need an Advocate beside you. If that is true, it is beginning to appear that this spiritual houseguest stuff involves something more than just hospitality and comforting companionship.

If you climb the central staircase in the main building of Humboldt University in Berlin, emblazoned on the wall in large gold letters is this saying: *Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.*<sup>1</sup> Something similar can be said about the church and Christian faith. Preachers have long interpreted the world and talked about this world from the perspective of faith. But ultimately the point is not interpretation; it is to change the world – to challenge it and correct it after the example of Jesus Christ. Jesus was always on the move. He taught as he walked along the roads of Palestine. He stopped to pray, to bless children, to share meals with tax collectors and Pharisees and women and men disciples. He healed a servant in his home, raised Lazarus from the dead, and overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Jerusalem temple. The story of Jesus is not about house guests and quiet comfort at home; it is a story about action – world-challenging action.

Go back to the John 14 passage. After we are introduced to the Paraclete – the Advocate – we are told: *This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him.* There is a fundamental tension between the world's Spirit and Christ's Holy Spirit. It is critical that we do not forget this fact, because the tendency is to blur the lines between life in America and life in the Kingdom of God. The same sports arena hosts hockey games and Franklin Graham religious revivals, sometimes selling comparable souvenirs and commemorative T-shirts. Politicians loudly profess how Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior, even as they vote for policies of capital punishment, "tough on crime" prison sentencing, and slashes to educational budgets.

African-American theologian Howard Thurman wrote back in the 1940s that he was dedicated to proclaiming "what the teachings of Jesus have to say to those who stand at a moment in human history with their backs against the wall...the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed."<sup>2</sup> Thurman spoke out loudly against racial segregation in America. He warned people of faith to recognize that when our society considers segregation to be normal, then people believe it must be correct; and if it's correct, it must be moral; and if it's moral, then it must be religious and virtuous.<sup>3</sup> How often do we follow that same path with other aspects of American life?

Capitalism means some are rich and some are not, so income inequity is normal, which must be correct, and therefore must also be religious and virtuous. Life requires fossil fuels to meet our needs for houses and cars, so drilling and fracking and pipelines are normal, correct, and therefore must also be moral and religiously virtuous. Marriage has long been defined as between a man and a woman for various reasons including tradition and property rights, so since that's the norm it must be correct, moral and therefore religiously virtuous.

But segregation, despite its normalcy, was not correct, moral or religiously valid. Capitalism is an economic system lacking an inherent moral framework; it too is not always correct and seldom moral or religiously valid. Burning up fossil fuels because of our choices regarding cars and homes and comfort may be the norm, but those priorities are not sustainable, much less moral or religiously defensible. The marriage definition that excluded the possibility of same gender couples making loving, covenantal commitments was incorrect, immoral and contrary to the full gospel of Christ. On that topic, I am grateful that Pennsylvania has finally shifted into the "Yes" column on marriage equality.

But the point here is that the church exists in fundamental tension with society around us. The spirit of the world is not the Holy Spirit of God who emphasizes justice for all, forgiveness over retaliation and punishment, stewardship over wastefulness and gluttony, and equality over privilege and power. The formula for faith is quite clear: *If we love Christ, we will keep Christ's commandments.* Keeping Christ's commandment will at times put us on a path of confrontation with the world, so we are sent the Advocate who is our guest, abiding with us; literally in us. In that long, Last Supper speech, Jesus spoke about this Advocate several times. John 15:18 – *If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. But I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.* John 16:7 – *It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you and he will prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness and judgment.* And John 16:33 – *In the world you will face persecution. But take courage, I have conquered the world!*

You have a houseguest coming. In fact, that guest is already here – near to you, beside you and within you. It is God's wisdom and Holy Spirit – it is Christ re-presented anew – it is the Advocate standing up for what is true and righteous and virtuous. And like the saying over the staircase in Berlin, the point of your faith is not to interpret Christ in ways that are philosophically wise or psychologically comforting. There's a time and place for that, but ultimately, the point of faith is to change the world. To proclaim a new law – a law of love, of equality, of justice. That is true for every one of us. Thankfully we are not alone in this task – and it need not be completed today or even within our lifetimes. For now, let's get our houses in order. And as the invitation letter said: "I'm anxious to see you and hear how things are going. We've got a lot to do together. Love, the Holy Spirit."

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ron Stone, Politics and Faith, 2013, p. 416.

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, foreword by Vincent Harding.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.