

Easter 6
29 May 2011

Acts 17:22–31
Psalm 66:8–20
1 Peter 3:13–22
John 14:15–21
Year A

I.N.I.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The Spirit of the risen Christ is on the loose.

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(I'm not altogether comfortable with saying this, because a good part of me likes things neat and tidy, organized and accessible.)

Some people have a vision of the church as a container for the sacred, which is good, because sacred is good. It's good to come in the doors to drink up the divine with others who are thirsty, then go in peace and come back on a regular basis to become well-fed and nourished.

But what if the church, with that Holy Ghost flying around and invading the baptized became not a container holding things in but instead became so full of wind and breath and spirit that it popped open and turned inside out? That would be messy. Other people would take notice and wonder, what the heck is going with Henry and his family? Don't they know how to control themselves?

In this time in the church year, we are on the verge of many things.... We are on the verge of celebrating a feast of Jesus' leave-taking, the fortieth day of Easter, the Ascension, which is on the verge of the fiftieth day of Easter, the feast of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Now already in the gospels there is Spirit talk from Jesus. Now already Jesus is speaking of himself as both away, as in dead, as in crucified, and in the same breath as very much alive, as in resurrected, as in loose through the Spirit, which we who make a living talking about God say is very Trinitarian.

But it's not so neat and tidy as all that. Because when the Spirit moves around, things happen that defy organizational principles and what I call the Lutheran code of propriety. We may welcome folks into our community as long as they can fit into our scheme, and as long as not too many feathers are ruffled. God forbid there should be a violation of the seven sacred words of the church 1 We've 2 never 3 done 4 it 5 that 6 way 7 before!

Jesus promises the Spirit, today in John, calling it/him/her “the Spirit of Truth.” Whether you call it Paraclete, Advocate, or Comforter, words that are a tricky translation for the function of the Spirit of truth, what I think it means is fairly life shattering.

Here’s what a profoundly provocative writer, Douglas John Hall says about this idea of truth:

*The truth into which Jesus intends his disciples to be “led” by the “Comforter” whom he promises to send, is just this **living** truth, which in order to achieve a foothold in the lives of those who hear it, must radically alter those lives. For theirs (and ours!) are lives that manifest an abiding resistance to truth. Truth makes all human beings uncomfortable; it calls us into question; it makes demands of us that are beyond our ordinary capacities, not to speak of our habitual intentions and preferences. As the historical Jesus (according to John) told his original disciples, the way of truth to which he wished to initiate them could not be borne by them “just yet.” First their innermost selves—their minds, hearts, souls, spirits—must be made ready to receive it. And that would be the work of “the Comforter,” the divine Spirit. (Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For those on the Edge of Faith*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress © 1998, p 70).*

The truth is, I eat way more than I need to.

The truth is, I quickly choose the status quo over what is just.

The truth is, I think of myself first over just about anything and anyone.

But the living truth, **the** living truth, what God wills more than anything and intends and prompts through the Spirit let loose, is for the world to be drawn into God’s embrace of all and the earth itself. How does Jesus put it? *Those who love me will be loved by the Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.*

This means whatever I clutch to becomes cracked open. This means that like the multiplicity of gods that beckoned to the crowd where Paul stood, my own inclinations for self-preservation or aggrandizement must be cleared aside to make room for God and the Spirit.

That means that Jesus’ own path that led to suffering and death is the same path I must be on, which is that living truth.

A big part of me needs to be rejected in order to take the Spirit in. With all that clutters the landscape of my so called life, in reality I am suffocating without breathing in the Spirit of truth, the Spirit let loose, the Spirit overflowing and oiled at baptism, the Spirit that announces life in the midst of sin and death.

I do know of those who live life not for themselves but for others, and for the living truth. There are those like Catherine of Siena, whose day is marked on April 29. Catherine, living in the fourteenth century was maligned by her own parents for constantly praying

and desiring a life in the Spirit. What would you do when your six-year old was claiming divine visions of Christ? For ten years, Catherine was beaten and forced to be servant to her 23 siblings, and she persevered. When that method of squelching the Spirit didn't work, at age sixteen she was locked up into her tiny room to get some sense knocked into her, and she came out shining with the glory of God. In her too short life she was more connected to the living truth than so many that came before and after, at the age of nineteen serving the sick and needy of her community, that she is still revered as a mystic who bore the Spirit of the risen Christ.

There are those like Monica, whose day is marked on May 4. Monica, living in the fourth century prayed fervently that her son would change his rebellious ways and walk in the path of Christ. That son, named Augustine, played the field and fathered a son out of wedlock. Like a kid in a candy store, he tried all the gods current in his day and with his intellectual acumen attacked the Christian faith. When Monica consulted with her bishop, his response to her was that like her example living and prayer brought her wayward husband around, her son's conversion would likewise come from her practice of faith rather than any verbal persuasion. Monica dove into prayer. Many years later, after the family had left Africa for Milan, the bishop Ambrose challenged the young man's imagination with his preaching, and on the day of Easter of 387, Augustine was baptized.

There are those in our day who descend into the decimated ruins around Joplin, Missouri and other parts of the Midwest, supported by dollars given to Lutheran Disaster Response, part of the work of the ELCA Hunger Appeal. Long after the initial attention has been given to those living in the wake of tornadoes and other disasters, Lutheran Disaster Response is dedicated to a long-term presence, long-term relief, and uses donations in more responsible ways than just about any other relief organization.

There are those with whom I shared Churches for Middle East Peace Advocacy Days last week in Washington, DC who unlike some politicians know the truth is the most Palestinians want peace and statehood. In speaking with elected officials I wanted them to know that we have friends there who are Christians who in their schools are teaching tolerance between religions, who in their universities are learning about nation-building, all who would prefer autonomous living in a Palestinian nation rather continuing the occupation begun sixty-three years ago.

There are those this week who will make an impact on the city of Springfield, Massachusetts, Lutherans who are meeting in assembly and instead of spending all their time in plenary sessions will take time part of Saturday serving the community in projects throughout the city.

Later this summer a group of Lutherans will host a day camp for neighborhood children at Resurrection a mission partner of Bethesda, so that they find joy and God's love in the midst of challenging lives.

There are those who today will leave this Sunday assembly around Word and Meal that will be carried and let loose by the Spirit, so that rather than contained in the sacred, are broken and spilled out into the world that God so deeply loves, and in their altered state, will walk in the way of truth.

It could happen.

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