

Church of the Crossroads
The Sunday after Pentecost
June 11, 2006
Neal MacPherson

THE FREEDOM OF THE SPIRIT

Isaiah 6:1-13
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday. God is three-in-one: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Each member of the Trinity points to a particular way in which God is known and experienced. The work of God the Creator is reflected and celebrated in the wonder and beauty of creation, which includes us. Jesus the Christ is Emmanuel, God-with-us. If we want to know what God is like, we need only look to Jesus, whose words and actions were marked by a profound compassion and a commitment to peace and justice in the world. Then, there is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God, as I like to envision her, mediates God's presence to us, in the everydayness of our lives, through all the chance and change of life as we know and experience it.

This morning, I would like to speak more intentionally about this third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. More than any other words, the words *mystery* and *freedom* describe the nature and activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is cloaked in mystery. Just as we can never fully explain or define God, so we can never fully explain or define the Spirit of God. We can only experience the Spirit. We cannot predict what the Spirit will do. Nor can we capture the Spirit and own the Spirit, for the Spirit moves freely in our lives and in the life of the world.

In the Bible, the Spirit is associated with breath and wind. In John's Gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus,

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So
it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. - John 3:8

The Spirit, mysterious and free like the wind, works her freedom in us. At the risk of presenting a three-point sermon (it used to be that a three-

point sermon was the only kind of sermon a preacher could preach), I would like to mention at least three ways in which the Spirit sets us free. My three points will not in any way exhaust the work of the Spirit. You are invited to imagine additional ways in which the Spirit sets us free, not only as individual human beings but also in our life together as church.

First, in the Gospel of John, the Spirit is often referred to the Spirit of Truth. And so, I am led to say that the Spirit *sets us free from truthiness and sets us free for truth*. As Rodney Clapp reports in a recent article in *The Christian Century* (May 16, 2006) on the author Dan Brown, the word *truthiness* was named Word of the Year for 2005 by the American Dialect Society, and the *New York Times* has said that this word is one of nine words that defines the spirit of the age. Stephen Colbert, host of Comedy Central's *Colbert Report*, put the word on the cultural map although he did not invent it. In short, we are a culture in love with *truthiness*. Whether it be TV pundits, or ideologues, or politicians, or preachers, or the president himself, everyone is insisting that what they feel and want to be true must be treated as true. In other words, truth is defined as that which I feel or want to be true.

Truthiness, suggests Rodney Clapp, is what has made Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, such a phenomenal success. The novel is, of course, fiction, and a great read, so I have heard from others. (It will be a summer read for me.) But those who have read the novel with an anti-Catholic church bias have had their bias confirmed (the Catholic Church is out to deceive its followers), and they have treated the novel as factually true. Jesus really did marry Mary Magdalene and had a family. There, you see, you just can't trust that Catholic church. For the anti-Catholics who read the novel, *truthiness* declares that the novel is true, in spite of the fact that Dan Brown, as has been pointed out by Biblical scholars, misrepresents the truth in a number of instances.

The love of *truthiness* defines the spirit of the age. Listen to Ann Coulter on the right and her counterparts on the left (I like them better, I admit), and you will get *truthiness*.

Now, the Spirit of God frees us from truthiness and sets us free for truth. The Spirit frees us to see the world as it really is, our nation as it really is, and ourselves as we really are, with all blemishes, with all biases, clearly visible. The Spirit sets us free to unmask the ideologies and the

illusions which cloud our seeing and understanding. Christian faith demands nothing less than this. Reinhold Niebuhr called it Christian realism. Pursuing truth rather than *truthiness* is a rigorous but necessary task if we are to be the people God created us to be. To see the world as it really is and ourselves as we are really are is an impossible task unless we give ourselves over to the freedom of the Spirit.

Secondly, the Spirit of God frees us from our *desire for certainty and sets us free for faith*. Notice that I did not set up an opposition between faith and doubt. I have come to believe that doubt is very much a part of faith, for without doubt faith is not really faith, but becomes certainty. If I have no doubt, then I am certain, and if I am certain, I have no need for faith. The real opposite of faith, then, is certainty. Our culture promotes *truthiness*, as has been noted, but our culture also promotes a passion for certainty. We want to be absolutely certain that we will be protected from terrorism; therefore we engage in our war on terrorism. We want to be absolutely certain that we will be able to live securely; therefore we surround ourselves with material possessions. We want to be absolutely certain that our faith tradition is the only valid faith tradition; therefore we must put down the validity of other religious understandings. We human beings seem to have this need for certainty.

Now, the Spirit frees us from our passion for certainty and sets us free for faith. Another word for faith is *trust*. Faith is trust not in the promises of the culture, but trust in God's leading in our lives and in the life of the world. To rely on the promises of our culture, the promise of certainty in all its forms, ultimately enslaves us, closing us off to the work of the Spirit in our lives. As Paul wrote to the Romans,

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. – Romans 8:12, 13

Now, it's important to understand that when Paul uses the word *flesh*, he does not mean the same thing we mean when we speak of the body. He does not want to set up a dualism between body and spirit. For Paul, *flesh* is a realm or dimension ruled by the fearful and anxious ego. It is the fearful and anxious ego that desires a life of certainty. But the Spirit frees us from that desire for certainty and sets us free for faith, for trust in God's leading.

The Spirit, then, sets us free from *truthiness* and sets us free for truth. The Spirit sets us free from certainty and sets us free for faith. Thirdly, the Spirit seeks to set us free from *caution and sets us free for discipleship*. In the language of Bonhoeffer, the Spirit sets us free to accept both the cost and the joy of discipleship. Bonhoeffer himself was a person led by the spirit. He paid the cost of discipleship, being put to death by the Nazi regime.

Isaiah the prophet was also a human being led by the Spirit. In the temple, Isaiah had such a radical experience of God's presence that he could not help but leave safety and security and caution behind and accept a prophetic ministry that would place him at odds with his own people. His prophetic ministry was a ministry of bold and unrelenting speech. His tongue, having been touched by a burning coal taken from the altar, is set free to speak a word of judgment. God says to Isaiah,

“Go and say to this people:
 ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
 keep looking, but do not understand.’
 Make the mind of this people dull,
 and stop their ears,
 and shut their eyes,
 so that they may not look with their eyes,
 and listen with their ears,
 and comprehend with their minds,
 and turn and be healed.” - Isaiah 6: 9-10

It surely sounds like our generation, a generation enamored by a *truthiness* that will not allow sight and understanding, a generation caught up in a reliance on the things that cannot give life. The Spirit seeks to set us free to speak that kind of word to our own culture. In order to do so, we must leave caution behind.

And then there is our friend Nicodemus, who has this amazing conversation with Jesus about the freedom of the Spirit. Nicodemus, caught up in his certain faith, must leave that behind and be opened to a new understanding and a new calling. Did Nicodemus respond to the beckoning of the Spirit in his life? At the end of his encounter with Jesus we do not know, but we do learn later at the end of John's Gospel that it was this same Nicodemus who helped Joseph of Arimathea take the body of Jesus down from the cross and prepare it for burial. Nicodemus did, in the end, accept

the cost and joy of discipleship. Surely, it was the Spirit that set him free so to do.

And so it is that the Spirit, moving freely in our lives and in the world like the wind, sets us free from *truthiness* and sets us free for truth; from certainty and for faith; from caution and for faithful discipleship. May this same Spirit blow freely through our own lives and through the life of Church of the Crossroads today and in all the days to come.

And now, in honor of Trinity Sunday, let us stand, if we may, and sing the great hymn from the Iona Community, *Praise with Joy the World's Creator*.