

DAY OF PENTECOST | MAY 18, 2021

ACTS 2:1-21 | PSALM 104:24-34 | ROMANS 8:22-27 | JOHN 15:26-27, 16:4B-15

In Luke's telling, the gift of the Holy Spirit means a big party. Tongues of fire, the gift of language, a global celebration. If St. Luke ran the fellowship committee at a church, he would be the person who reminded you to wear red on Pentecost.

St. John's Holy Spirit is a little bit different. It's no less important, but it's certainly less of a party. "When the Spirit of truth comes," John's Jesus says, "he will guide you into all the truth." For John, the gift of the Spirit is less about energy than it is about truth.

It's hard to escape the sense that truth feels increasingly negotiable. More and more, it seems like we don't simply have differences of opinion, but that we're inhabiting different realities altogether. I used to think that when I met someone new at church, the most useful information I could learn about them was their spiritual and religious background. But what's become much more important is what news they consume. What do they think is real? What do they consider true? To understand the promise Jesus makes in this gospel, we have to ask a cynical question earnestly: "What is truth?"

Usually when we think of truth, we think of the facts. Some incontrovertible piece of evidence that can be gained only by sorting through the noise. A lawyer aims to discover the truth by examining witnesses. A journalist seeks the truth by talking to sources. A researcher uncovers the truth by digging through the numbers. If we get the right witness or the right source or the right data set, we can get to the facts. We can get the truth.

And it would be easy to think Jesus's "spirit of truth" in much the same way. That when Jesus talks about truth, he's talking about facts about God. Sort of divine trivia. This Sunday, Jesus promises us the spirit of truth, and next Sunday you can explain how the Trinity works.

But that's not quite what Jesus is talking about. For Jesus, truth isn't an idea or a set of facts or something you know in your head. It's not an intellectual thing. Elsewhere in John's gospel, Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."¹ Truth is how Jesus refers to himself.

When Jesus refers to himself as "truth," he doesn't mean that he's a fact or some piece of knowledge. He means that his life, which manifests the character of God perfectly, is not contingent on anything. It doesn't depend on any supporting case or evidence or process. It isn't here to convince or persuade. It is offered freely without any condition or argument or justification. There is a reason why Jesus's self-declarations in John's gospel don't begin with *Because...* or *Since...* or *As long as you...* but simply *I am. I am the truth.* Jesus is not the truth because he is accurate or precise or he knows everything. Jesus is the truth because his love for us is not conditioned and does not "admit impediments."²

It would certainly be easier if the truth of Jesus was just about facts. If discipleship was simply like an episode of "Law and Order" where there was one fact that could crack the case, and wrap things up before the next commercial break. But there's not. The truth of Jesus can't be memorized or written down or stuffed into a curriculum. No, the truth of Jesus can only be experienced by living.

But Jesus promises us that we aren't doing that living alone. To use Jesus's own phrase, we are always being "guided into" that truth. That use of "guided" is sort of reassuring. Because it

¹ John 14:6

² William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116," Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation, May 17, 2021), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45106/sonnet-116-let-me-not-to-the-marriage-of-true-minds>.

suggests that this is supposed to take time. It isn't supposed to happen all at once. For the disciples Jesus is talking to in today's gospel, it's saying that this isn't the end of your relationship with me. This is just the beginning of it carrying on in a new way. That when you are out living and serving and working in the world, you aren't stumbling around on your own. You are being guided into truth. You are being guided into the love of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

There's a story that I like about a lecture some famous theologian gave at Yale Divinity School some years ago. I've tried to find it in writing, but I can't find anything, so it may just be a creation of their admissions department. But this brilliant writer gives this lecture and they get to the Q&A portion at the end. And some student gets up to the microphone and says, "I've been studying here for years, I've read stacks and stacks of books and written countless pages on theology and God and all of that. And I get it all. I believe it all. Except for the resurrection. Can you give me some sort of insight or advice or wisdom that will help me make sense of it?" And everyone in the room waits in silent anticipation for the answer. Maybe it's some Greek word that will solve the riddle. Maybe it's some spiritual practice that will provide a new insight. Maybe it's a book that will crack the case once and for all. And there's this long silence as everyone waits for this answer. And eventually the answer comes. "Stick with it."

It's sort of an unsatisfying answer. But it gets at something important. It's basically saying, "I can give you advice. I can give you a hack. I can give you a suggestion. But I can't give you the truth. Only Jesus can do that. And the only way that truth will come about is if you go on living and being guided." That's what John's Spirit is all about.

This is less exciting than Luke's Pentecost story. No flash of illumination. No tongues of fire. No party with all the residents of Mesopotamia. Only the quiet reassurance to "stick with it." That realization that after all out searching for the truth, it has already discovered us. And the promise that even when we "bear [life] out to the edge of doom," we are still being guided into the truth of Christ and the love of God.

So go on living. And stick with it.

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