

John 7:37-39 Where is the Holy Spirit? Pentecost 2017
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

“On the last day of the festival (of Tabernacles - celebrating God’s faithfulness to the Hebrew people in their journey in the Wilderness)... the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

In my first summer as an Associate Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church, Sanford, in central North Carolina, I was an on-call chaplain at Lee County Hospital. One Friday evening I received a phone call that a woman was dying, and could a pastor be present with the family? I arrived at the hospital, found the room, knocked on the door, and a woman in her mid-thirties opened it. She must have known who I was, with coat & tie, Bible in hand, that I’d come to see her mother, Mrs. Gulick. Without a pause she said, “It happened so fast; I had no idea. I just got here yesterday and there’s nothing I can do.” As I listened to her words I was looking at her mother, clearly dying- her yellow-jaundiced skin a clear sign of advanced liver failure.

“It’s all happened so fast”- she said again... “Is there a God? – My mother never did anything to deserve this!” She was angry, frustrated, hurt.

Sensing this wasn’t the moment to run through the top ten arguments for God’s existence, I simply said, “I’m so sorry.” The daughter stared back at me for what seemed like minutes, finally looked down and said, in resignation, “What can I do?” I asked her if she’d like me to pray for her Mom, so we both held her hands, and I prayed. We chatted a little while longer, and I left. I went back the next day, and saw her mother alone. The next day, no one was there. I never heard from her again. I’ve thought about her, off and on, over the years- that’s sometimes the way things go.

When it comes to reasons for having difficulty believing in God, you’d think that stories like this would be well up there.

Somehow in allowing unexplained suffering for loved ones, it seems that God has lost the edge.

There are other reasons why it’s hard to believe in God (not to mention random terrorist attacks.)

Discoveries of modern science are sometimes taken that God has lost the intellectual argument. There is the “God particle”, for one thing- the ‘Higgs-Boson’; perhaps the original

source of energy in the universe, or so they say. It's easy to get hold of some wonderful discoveries about life and the universe and project from there that everything in existence can be reduced to a collection of mathematical formulas.

And then there are other faiths. For some people the fact that so many people believe so differently is evidence that we all somehow made the whole 'God' thing up. God lost the moral and intellectual argument, and now seems to have lost the practical one too.

But these big three questions – suffering, science and other faiths – seldom turn out to be the great obstacles to faith they're cracked up to be. Mrs. Gulick's grieving daughter wasn't saying "I've lost my faith," she was saying "I'm in a whole lot of pain and grief."

Now, you really can't be angry at something that doesn't exist. The discoveries of science deepen our sense of wonder at God's creation. They don't require us to assume nature is a mindless machine. The existence of other faiths tells us that most of humanity in most places for most of human existence has had some kind of faith in God. These all sound more like arguments *for* God than against God to me. Suffering, science and other faiths don't really have to be such big obstacles to faith, at all.

On this Pentecost Sunday- I'll tell you what I think the *real* obstacle to faith is. It's more in the heart than the head. Jesus seems so far away. That's it. That's the problem. Jesus just seems so far away. In fact it's three problems.

Problem one is that Jesus seems far off because 2000 years seems so long ago.

Now, we know in our heads that in the whole history of the world, 2000 years ago isn't yesterday, it's really just a second or two ago. We've all seen those charts that map the history of the world onto a 24-hour clock. Most of the 24-hour day is filled with rocks and no animate life, then amoeba have rule of the planet, before dinosaurs fill up a lot of the rest, and humanity emerges in the last two seconds and Jesus is born about a millisecond ago. That should make us think Jesus is very close, but it doesn't.

We live lives shaped by air conditioning, super-saver airfares and the internet– and first century Palestine is like a fairy land of donkeys and demons, sandals and swords, with Caesar in Rome and the Temple in Jerusalem. It doesn't matter how many Bible studies we take part in, Jesus still seems to come out of another world. That's problem one: Jesus seems so long ago.

And here's problem two. Jesus seems far removed because he really is literally so *far away*. One of the reasons so many Christians feel so drawn to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land is because Jesus seems so close there. Jerusalem (they say), feels distressingly full of guns, politics and postcards, but the Sea of Galilee really feels like the Sermon on the Mount could be preached there still today. Visiting Galilee is being like a parent on a trip down memory lane, returning to

the site of a family beach holiday – every wave on the shore is an echo of Jesus and every shimmer on the lake could be Jesus walking on the water. But Jesus being far away isn't just about geography.

It's also about cosmology. Jesus is in heaven. However much we know, the distance to heaven isn't measurable like working out how far it is from here to Omaha, we can't help feeling heaven is a whole lot farther than a two-day road trip. And so we feel Jesus' absence more than his presence.

We can visit the places Jesus was with us, but they only bring on nostalgia, which doesn't really help- at all. That's problem two: Jesus just seems so *far away*.

And here's problem three.

Jesus seems far away because he's so *different* from us. In a diverse, multicultural society we often talk about difference, and usually we mean race or gender, sometimes class, religion or sexual orientation. There's no doubt Jesus was different from most of us in race, from many of us in class and gender, and from all of us in religion – he *was* Jewish, after all. But the biggest difference is the one we don't mention so much. Jesus was the Son of God; and was so very, very *good*.

In my pastoral experience, the biggest reason people stay away from organized religion is that they know that they're not perfect, far from it, and they are honest enough to acknowledge that there's a long way to go before they might ever really change, and so they somehow get the idea that that means God's not for them.

When we know we've let ourselves **and** God down, our first instinct is to run and hide – hide from one another and hide from God. Jesus may have done amazing things for us, but sometimes those amazing things just make us feel all the more how pathetic we ourselves really are. And who wants to feel that? That's problem three: Jesus seems so *different* from us.

Well, that's the bad news. But today is the day of Pentecost. Today's the day we take our eyes off Jesus for just one second and say "We believe in the Holy Spirit." And that's very good news. Because the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is all about what Christians have discovered is God's answer to the problem that Jesus seems so far away. God doesn't deny that Jesus is far away. The good news isn't that we're mistaken about Jesus being long ago, distant, and very different from us. The good news is that God has sent us the Holy Spirit.

And what that means is three words that address the three problems we've just identified. These are the three words.

Word number one is: Now. Jesus feels long ago. But it's the Holy Spirit that makes Jesus present *now*.

It's the Holy Spirit that gives us words when we don't know how to pray. It's the Holy Spirit that sends us angels in ordinary human form when we don't know where to turn for help. It's the Holy Spirit that makes Jesus present in the bread and cup of holy communion. It's the Holy Spirit that arrives in baptism and makes the believer a child of God and a part of the body of Christ. It's the Holy Spirit that comes into our ears and eyes and hearts when we read the Bible and turns the dry words on the page into the living word that renews, revives and transforms. The Holy Spirit makes Jesus present *now*.

And word number two is: Here. Jesus feels far away. But it's the Holy Spirit that makes Jesus present *here*.

If we're honest, we need to recognize that for some people all the time and for all of us some of the time the farawayness of Jesus is actually a good thing. When Jesus is far away he can be an intellectual pursuit or a theoretical option. It's only when Jesus is here, right here, that we have to face whether we're going to follow him or not and we search around desperately for a fence to sit on but we suddenly find every yard in the neighborhood is clean out of fences.

It's only when Jesus is right here that he can be scary, because he wants our heart, and while he's at it he doesn't just want our heart, he wants our soul, mind and strength too. Some people settle on the heart and some people find that off-putting because they're not the emotional type, and if that's you- my recommendation is to stick with the soul and mind and strength for now because that's plenty to be getting along with.

The Holy Spirit takes Jesus from distant Palestine and far away heaven and puts him right here. That's word number two. The Holy Spirit makes Jesus present *here*.

And word number three is: Us. Jesus feels very different to us.

But it's the Holy Spirit that makes us like Jesus. It's the Holy Spirit that gives us gifts we never before had that make us rise to the occasion when God asks us to do something we thought we could never dream to do.

It's the Holy Spirit that nurtures us like garden plants and sees fruit bear in us, sees us become patient where we'd only known exasperation, sees us find peace where we'd only felt anxiety, sees us develop gentleness where we'd only known hurry and awkwardness. It's the Holy Spirit that gives us power to stand up and not be crushed, to face failure and not despair, to make friendships in spite of our fears. The technical word for all of this is 'sanctification'. And the **key** to it is to see that word number three isn't the singular "me" it's the plural "us."

The gifts and fruits and power of the Holy Spirit aren't given to us privately – they're shared among the whole church. No one has all of them. The Holy Spirit doesn't make us *individually* like Christ. The Holy Spirit makes us *together* like Christ. If we want to be like Jesus, it is good

to hang around the church, hang around one another, to lean on each other, gently- and to share, generously. That's word number three. The Holy Spirit makes Jesus present in *us*.

One of the wisest people I've ever met was a palliative care physician in Hendersonville, NC- where I last served as Pastor, named Dr. Phil Sellers. He was the go-to guy to have a cup of coffee with. He once shared this story with me. "I went to visit a cancer patient in her home. (He still did house calls!) She looked thin and fragile. I've never been much good at small talk, so I pointed to a photograph on the mantelpiece and tried to be cheerful.

'You've certainly got a beautiful daughter,' I said. There was a long silence. The woman gave me a look that sliced straight through me. 'That was me, six months ago,' she said.

I was speechless. I just found strength to say, 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.'"

For me, Dr. Sellers shows us a lot about the Holy Spirit. When he made his colossal pastoral gaffe he could've curled up in sheer embarrassment and run straight out the door. He had a name for what he did. He called it the 'gaffe reflex' (not the gag reflex.) That is, since he so often forget people's names- even in the middle of an examination, he was open enough to stop, wait, and let the Holy Spirit enter in and fill the gap where the 'gaffe' came in. The Holy Spirit somehow gave him the grace to be *now* – to forget about his mistake and instead to focus everything on a woman who needed every ounce of strength and insight and expertise he could give.

The Holy Spirit somehow gave him the power to be *here* – to leave aside his momentary embarrassment for the sake of being entirely present and aware of what God was doing in that room.

The Holy Spirit gave him the compassion to be *us*, to communicate gently and sincerely to that dear and fragile woman that they were in this together, that he was in touch with her pain. And somehow all of those priceless qualities were perfectly expressed in the way he said those simplest of words, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

If we want to be bearers of God's Holy Spirit, and we want to make Jesus present, acknowledging that the cracks that we have in ourselves, the little gaffes, failures and inadequacies, are place where God will seep in (if we let it happen) and guide us to a better way than we could shape ourselves, by the liberating and exhilarating news of three simple words. Here. Now. Us.

The day of Pentecost begins with everything that seems to be wrong with God. It's only ten days since the Ascension but Jesus is already gone too long, too far away, too different from his very human disciples.

But the day of Pentecost ends with the three amazing things we discover when we truly

encounter the work of the Holy Spirit. God is present right now. God is at work even here. God is truly alive in us. Thanks be to God. Amen.