

A Vast, Broad Space John 14: 8-17(18), 25-27

Pentecost/ 19th May 2013

In John's Gospel we're missing all the things often associated with Pentecost: an upper room, locked doors, frightened disciples, rushing wind, tongues of fire, preaching in different tongues. All the dramatic events of Luke's account of Pentecost, found in Acts, are missing in John. They're not there. Nothing. John was probably written around 90 AD, so well after what Luke described in Acts. There are some scholars who suspect that John was written as early as 70AD. Even still, John must have known about Luke's story, he must have heard what happened in Jerusalem.

Instead, in John we have Jesus breathing on his disciples on the day of resurrection, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). For John, there's a strong connection between resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. That's John's version of Pentecost. A breath. And what a breath it is. The breath of Jesus breathed into his disciples. Breath, meaning life, is breathed into the life of the disciple. And Christ's breath enables a fuller unfolding of life and truth. His breath leads us into life and truth. That's what the Spirit does.

John's account is not as colorful as Luke's. Where John lacks in drama he makes up for in depth: what we find in John is an articulation of *who* the Holy Spirit is and *what* the Spirit does and is doing. Jesus tells his disciples before his death that he will need to leave them, but not to worry. In fact, he says, in John 16, "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" (16:7).

It's in John's Gospel that we discover the Spirit has other names: Advocate or Helper. *Paraclete*, in Greek, meaning the one who is beside you, the one who is at your side, and on your side, who helps you. That's who the Spirit is. The Spirit is companion, "God with us," who serves the mission of Christ. The Spirit enables our capacity to follow Christ, who gives us the power to *really* love and suffer with and for one another, like Christ; it's the Spirit who empowers us to do the things that Jesus did and then some, and it's the Spirit who reveals to us the truth we need to hear, who allows for the expansion of our world and our sense of self.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). Did you hear that? Empowered and equipped to do greater works than Jesus.

Two chapters later, Jesus says, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth;... [for] all that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:12-13a, 15). And did you hear that? We can't assume that we have Jesus and his message and even God all figured out. We can't assume that we know it all, because we know very little. We can't assume that because

we've heard the stories and went through church school and have attended worship all of our lives that we know all about Jesus, that we understand what Jesus is teaching us and trying to do through us. Because, as Jesus makes very clear here, we're all still learning, we're all still in discipleship school, we're all growing – should be growing – and there are things still to learn and discover about the truth. There are things that we cannot bear at the moment, things we cannot understand, and things that don't make sense, but will in time. There are aspects of God's grace we cannot know at the moment. We're not ready. Either because we're not wise enough or experienced enough or we haven't lived enough or even suffered enough, but, through the work of the Spirit, in time we will know.

The Spirit in John is essentially a teacher, like Jesus himself. What is true for the best teachers is true of the Spirit: a good teacher reveals the truth. Right? A good teacher accommodates what is taught to our level of learning and experience. Right? But, more than anything else, a good teacher desires that we grow, desires our education in order to move us from one place to another place, from one grade to the next, from one way of viewing the world to a more expansive vision of world and our sense of self within the world. A good teacher opens the world to us.

What I love about John's description of the Spirit here is the way he lifts up this notion that to be a follower of Jesus means that we are always learning, always being schooled. And it's dynamic. The Spirit doesn't make us omniscient or know-it-alls. By truth John doesn't mean concepts or ideas or opinions. "The Spirit is a Spirit of truth, [and] it's the truth, Jesus said, that makes us free (John 8:32)."^[1] What Jesus is talking about here is how we see the world, and order reality, how we make sense of things and the meaning of our lives in the world. *This* is truth. We never have it, but are always on our way toward it, and he is the way (John 14:6). We're always developing, evolving, changing, growing, opening ourselves up to the new things Jesus is teaching us, showing us. The poet T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) captures this beautifully when he said:

*We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion.*^[2]

To walk with Jesus means, well, *walking*, it means moving. He graciously takes us each by the hand and leads us to where we need to go. And we all have places to go. There's no room for *stasis*, according to Jesus, for remaining in one place in the life of faith. There's still more to learn, more to discover, more people to love. Truth itself is "journeying," like a pilgrim.^[3]

Before our Calvinist pilgrim forebears, the Puritans, left the Netherlands, seeking freedom in New England, before the sailing of the *Speedwell*, their pastor, John Robinson (1576-1625) preached a sending sermon in which he said, "I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word." *That's* what it means to be open to the movement of the Spirit.

David Benner is a psychologist who is writing a lot these days about spiritual growth. In one of his books on the Christian journey being essentially about personal

transformation, he insists: “At all times the Spirit is inviting us to be more than we are.” “At all times the Spirit is inviting us to be more than we are by calling our attention to that which lies beyond the boundary of our present sense of self.”^[4] We don’t have to ask the Spirit to be this way; the Spirit is always self-giving in this way. What we’re called to do is this: breathe. Inhale. Receive the Spirit. Or, in other words, receive what the Spirit wants to give us. Or, to put it a different way: Consent! Yield! Say, *Yes!* Be open to what the Spirit longs to show us. It’s nothing less than “a fullhearted *yes!* to life, to love, to others, to the world—to that which is beyond or transcendent to our self. By responding in these ways, we open ourselves to the possibility of becoming more than we presently are.”^[5]

We so we can say that the Spirit is *expansive*. The Spirit is *always* at work moving us from where we are to where we need to be, from slavery to freedom, from tight, constrained places out into open, vast spaces of life. It was theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in his book on the Spirit, who, years ago, first helped me to see this aspect of God. It’s been important to me ever since. It’s not something I learned in church school or growing up in the church or in even seminary, for that matter. It was Moltmann who drew out the significance of this obscure verse from Job for me, in which God is understood as the one who allures us out of “distress into a broad place where there is no cramping” (Job 36:16). We heard a similar image in the psalter reading: “...you have set my feet in a broad place” (Psalm 31:8). The Spirit creates a space for us to live and thrive. And we heard this reflected in the last stanza of the hymn we just sang:

*For none can guess God’s grace
Till love creates a place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.*^[6]

Love creates the space. Love always creates a space. Then Moltmann ties this understanding of God to the Kabbalistic Jewish tradition, a mystical branch of Judaism, which claimed that “one of God’s secret names is MAKOM, [meaning] the wide space.”^[7] Now, I don’t know how they came up with this, how they discovered this, but it rings true; experientially it resonates with an experience of God. For life in God’s Spirit means to exist in a wide space, a vast, broad space where there is no cramping. That’s what I believe God intends for each of us.

Martin Laird teaches in the theology and religious studies department at Villanova University. He’s the author of two companion volumes, short, but profound and beautiful books on contemplative prayer: *Into the Silent Land* and *A Sunlit Absence*. (I highly recommend them both.^[8]) In one book he tells a story that really spoke to me when I first read it and every time I share it with folks it has a way striking a chord in them too. Laird recounts an encounter he had walking along open fields (presumably in England). He always took the same route through the fields whenever he needed to clear his head. And on his walks he often saw a man walking his four Kerry blue terriers. “These were amazing dogs,” Laird recounts. “Bounding energy, elastic grace, and electric speed, they coursed and leapt through open fields. It was invigorating just to watch these muscular stretches of freedom race along.” Three of the four dogs acted this way. The fourth, however, always stayed behind and, off to the side of its owner, and ran in tight circles. Laird couldn’t understand why this dog did this. The dog had all the room in the world to leap and bound, but he stayed close. One day

Laird asked the owner, “Why does your dog do that? Why does it run in little circles instead of running with the others?” The man shared: “before he acquired the dog, it had lived practically all its life in a cage and could only exercise by running in circles. To run meant running in tight circles.”^[9]

This conversation stayed with Laird; it was a “powerful metaphor of the human condition” for him. This is how Laird puts it: “For indeed we are free, as the Psalmist insists, ‘My heart like a bird has escaped from the snare of the fowler’ (Ps. 123:7). But the memory of the cage remains. And so we run in tight, little circles, even while immersed in open fields of grace and freedom.”^[10]

*Even while, ...the open fields of grace and freedom are there. They’re always there, for all of us. Always have been. Yet, how many try to put God in a box (of our own making)? How many of us stay confined in constricting, closed spaces, running in tight circles, even when we know the cage is gone? Still, we hold back, stay close, play it safe, comfortable with confinement, reluctant to take risks, to step out. For some the trauma of living in a cage continues to shape their lives. Memories of the past make it difficult to venture out. It’s tough for us to trust. But God’s grace means that *history is never destiny*.*

And the good news is that the vast open fields of grace and freedom are all around us. They’re always there, for all of us. We’re already in them. We’re immersed in them. The wide space, the vastness is there. In fact, God is the vastness, an overflowing vastness. And to exist in God is to exist in this vastness.^[11]

And so to pray with the Church on this Pentecost—“Come, Holy Spirit! Come!”—means, in part, that we are allowing ourselves to be sent by Spirit out into the fields. When we pray this prayer we are consenting, yielding, saying *Yes!*, releasing our death-grips on reality, and falling into the arms of God. And then we trust and see where the Spirit will take us. For it’s the Spirit—with us, for us, at our side, as our helper—who summons us and calls us and lures us and entices and challenges us to step out, to run, live, risk, grow, expand, breathe, journey for the sake of the Risen Christ toward the truth, into the abundant life that’s already there in him. It’s the Spirit who calls us into the very life of God, to move and live and grow in him. *That’s Pentecost. That’s what it means to be set on fire, with Holy Fire. Not once, but now and always. Forever and ever. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.*

[1] Raimon Pannikar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 123.

[2] T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” *Four Quartets*

[3] This is Pannikar’s idea, truth understood as “journeying” (123). It’s reflected in one of the epigraphs in *Christophany: Ad lucem hoc in saeculo peregrinatibus qui sperant se ambulatores esse in luce*. “Dedicated toward those traveling toward the light in our time in the hope that they may be walking in the light.”

[4] David G. Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 156.

[5] Benner, 156.

[6] From the hymn “Come Down, O Love Divine,” with text written by Bianco da Siena (d.1434).

[7] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 43.

[8] Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and *A Sunlit Absence: Silence, Awareness, and Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[9] Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 19-20.

[10] Laird, 20.

[11] Laird, 49, "...that overflowing vastness whose ground is God."