

The Spirit of Truth

John 14: lived a 15-21, 23-29

Sixth Sunday of Easter/ 22nd May 2022

More than eight hundred years ago, there lived a man named Joachim de Fiori. He was born in Calabri, Italy around 1135 and died there in 1202. Joachim was a Cistercian abbot, theologian, and mystic. Some of his writings were condemned as heretical, although he was never declared a heretic. In Dante's (c.1265-1321) *Divine Comedy*, Joachim is placed firmly in paradise and not hell or purgatory. He was a controversial figure. Dante considered him a prophet, although Joachim never claimed that role. He was imaginative, a mystic, who had one particular vision that attracted some and threatened others. He was a millenarian—meaning someone who believed that the one-thousand-year reign of Christ promised in Revelation (20:6) would be realized, literally, historically.¹ It was only a matter of time.

What did Joachim see? He saw history divided into three ages, modeled after each person of the Trinity. First was the *Age of the Father*: this was the Old Testament era, a time of judges, rules, and obedience to the law of God. Then came the *Age of the Son*: this was the New Testament era, the generations that followed Christ, the period that witnessed the emergence and growth of the Church. Joachim believed the Age of the Son was coming to an end in his day. The year 1260 would mark the arrival of the new and last era, which he called the *Age of the Holy Spirit*, a time when people would have direct contact with God through the Holy Spirit. It would be an age known for universal love, the kind that flowed from the presence of Christ, but—and this is crucial—a Christ transcendent of a text, beyond scripture. And the institutional Church would be replaced by something else. In the Age of the Holy Spirit, “there would be no more need for the hierarchy of the Church, for [everyone] would be contemplatives” or mystics.² People would know the freedom of Christ first-hand, individually, not through the mediation of the Church. The meaning of the gospel would be experienced within community, but not mediated by an institution. In the Age of the Holy Spirit, the Church would become unnecessary. Or so Joachim imagined. One can see why the Church considered his ideas heretical.

It's important to remember that in every heresy there's some element of the truth. The novelist Graham Greene (1904-1991) said, “Heresy is another word for freedom of thought.” We could say that a heresy is a partial truth mistaken for the whole truth. Sometimes that partial or hidden truth needs to be brought into the light of day for a later time because at the time it was too radical. Sometimes that partial or hidden truth needs to be taken up by a later time—because we need it.

Perhaps the partial truth that needs to be given more space in our “orthodoxy” is Joachim's vision of the Holy Spirit's work among us. It has some resonance with what we find in Jesus' teachings on the Holy Spirit in John. In John 14, we hear that after Jesus leaves, he will send someone, an Advocate—the *Paracletos*—literally, someone who will stand alongside us and walk with us.

Jesus says the Advocate will be among us and around us, as well as at work *within* us. In John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit extends and embodies the presence of the crucified-risen Christ. In Acts, in contrast, we have a different description. There we find the Holy Spirit arriving in tongues of flame on Pentecost in Jerusalem, *after* Jesus' ascension (Acts 2:1-47). In John's Gospel, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit during his ministry, and then after his resurrection, meeting with the disciples on Easter, Jesus "breathed" the Holy Spirit into them (John 20:22). In Acts, we see the Spirit at work in the Church, forming and shaping the Church. The Spirit also has a communal dimension in John, but it's also far more individual, but never individualistic. The Spirit rests *around* and *in* the disciple of Christ, the individual disciple who worships and serves in community.

This Spirit will abide with us and among us, but also within us. Jesus speaks to his disciples as a community, but also talks to them individually and personally. So, yes, the Spirit is evident in the community, but Jesus also wants us to see that he will come and live *within* us, in our lives, in our spirits, deep in the core of our psyches. The Holy Spirit comes alongside us and leads us in the way we should go. The Holy Spirit comes alongside us and leads into the truth—not dogmatic truth, not theological propositions, not even beliefs, *per se*, but the unfolding of knowledge, what we discover in and through our relationship with Christ, through the Spirit.³ In the ancient world, you didn't possess the truth; you lived in the truth; it's something you discovered around you, you come to see that you're in it, in a new reality. The Spirit leads us into the truth, into reality about who Jesus is, the truth of who God is, the truth about the world, and the truth about who we are within the world, within God. Through the relationship with God in Christ over time, we discover more and more the truth, the reality of God's grace and love.

Whatever we discover in the relationship is that the source, the content, and the yield will all be rooted and grounded in love. *Love the source; love the content; love the yield.* One way to know that the Spirit is moving in our lives is through our growing capacity to love and receive love.

Love and truth then come together here in the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes alongside us and leads us in the way of love. If we love the Lord, we will keep his commandments to love God and our neighbors as we love ourselves (Mark 12: 30-31). And we do not try to love the Lord on our own; the Spirit comes alongside us and enters into our lives and frees us to love. The Spirit is given to help us to love as Jesus loved. The love that Jesus offered God is possible *within us* because we have an Advocate who supports us. The experience of love that Jesus felt from God is possible for us because the Advocate will create the space for the love to be experienced. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we discover, more and more, that Jesus is in the Father, and the Father is in him, and we are in Jesus, and Jesus is in us. Do you sense how relational this is?

The Spirit leads us into truth, in and through love. In and through the Spirit's love, we are led into truth. Working on our behalf, the Advocate is tirelessly calling, inviting, and leading us into a relationship that leads us increasingly closer to the source of Life. This is, in fact, one way we can view Jesus' entire ministry. Even here in the closing chapters of John, just before the crucifixion, Jesus wants his disciples to understand that this has always been God's intention

from the beginning of time: *that we come to know that we were created to be in relationship with God, to know that our existence matters—yours and mine—and that we come to know the inherent worth of our existence in and through that relationship.* In Jesus, Immanuel, “God with us” (Matthew 1: 23), God took on flesh to dwell among us (John 1:14)—not just historically, in space-time a long time ago, but also experientially, psychologically, here and now, in my space and yours, in my time and yours, in my life and yours, in the depths of my soul and yours.

In the long history of Christianity, those who have known this best are the mystics. And the Reformed tradition has always been suspicious of mystics. I do feel strongly, however, that contemporary Christianity has a lot to gain from the rich and profound vision of the mystics in the Church, both the orthodox and the heretic. Because what they point to, what they offer us is this extraordinary claim: *it is possible to experience the Holy, both among us and most certainly within us.* The Holy Spirit is available to us; the Spirit of Christ has come and is coming alongside us to lead our lives into the very life of God!

Some have argued, such as Jungian analyst and contemporary mystic Helen Luke, that maybe Joachim was right all along; he was just off by about 800 years. Perhaps we are seeing signs of something new emerging within Christianity.⁴ I don’t believe the Church will become unnecessary; there’s no biblical warrant for that. (And she’s not claiming such.) What is true is that the nature of the church, how the church sees itself and understands its ministry, a church changing and that needs to change. Phyllis Tickle suggests that every 500 years, the Church clears out its attic and has a giant rummage sale where we get rid of the things that we don’t use and no longer need to lighten our burden so that we can move toward the next thing the Spirit is leading us toward. Every 1000 years, the Church almost reinvents itself. Five hundred years ago, the Church weathered the Reformation. Tickle believes we are living through one of these once-in-a-thousand-year moments. Tickle suggested this many years before the pandemic, which has ramped up the change already underway in society and the church. Only God knows that the church will look like post-COVID. Something new is emerging.⁵ And we can see it in the decline of church membership and worship attendance in Europe and the United States over the last forty years. It can look like decline. We can become anxious and depressed by it, although that doesn’t do much good and it certainly doesn’t serve us well. But what if something else is going on? What if what we’re facing might be the birth pangs of something new that is waiting to be born?

Despite institutional decline there remains a hunger for God. People, especially youth and young adults these days aren’t looking for religious institutions and church hierarchies to mediate the presence of God. People don’t want the faith of *the* Church. People want an *experience*; people are hungry for an experience of the Holy in community. People still yearn for the voice of the Spirit, the love and truth that Christ reveals. For the way of peace. A life of meaning. We are living through one of the most significant upheavals in the history of Christianity as we rediscover the purpose of the Church, rediscover the Lord of the Church, rediscover the power and presence of the Spirit, our Advocate, sent to help us to love. Perhaps we are slowly emerging into a new age of the Spirit. I hope so. Because it will take power and presence, the love and truth, and peace and grace of the Spirit—in community, but more importantly *within* us—to heal Christianity and renew the Church. The ancient prayer, “Come, Holy Spirit,” therefore, is needed now more than ever. Let this be our prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit. Come!*



¹ On Joachim's theological view of history, see Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 145ff.

² Helen M. Luke, *Kaleidoscope: The Way of Woman and Other Essays* (Morning Light Press, 2004), 176.

³ Gary D. Badcock, *Light of Truth & Fire of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 33-34.

⁴ Luke, 178.

⁵ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Baker Books, 2012).