

How much can you bear?

Trinity Sunday

Year C

John 16:12-15

Jesus' words, in the small snippet of his farewell discourse chosen for this Sunday's Gospel reading, tell quite a different story and describe what the Father, Son and Holy Spirit actually do. Jesus says there is a wellspring of love and information in the Trinity of God.

The Father has given all to the Son. The Spirit takes what belongs to the Son, and declares it to us on the world's behalf.

We might be forgiven for believing that the Spirit merely reinforces what is already in the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels. Is the Holy Spirit a sort of active, living index which points the Church back to what she already knows but has perhaps forgotten or failed to apply? Does the Holy Spirit have a Bible in its hand?

Maybe we should expect to hear timeless truths in Church. We have a Communion Service based on very old past history. It warms our hearts to hear the Bible read sometimes in traditional translation. We refer to our hymns sometimes as the Old One Hundredth, we even sing about being, asking to be told "...the old, old story" but Jesus promises his disciples here that the Holy Spirit will shepherd them into novel territory. Frankly, I can see little in the passage to indicate that the content of what the Spirit will proclaim will limit itself slavishly to what is already there in the parables, the controversies, the public discourses of Jesus or the private teaching between the Master and his disciples.

The disciples had heard all of that and had profited from the private teaching during his ministry and in the days between Easter and Pentecost to clear up what they had not yet understood. Jesus says explicitly that he has other things to tell them which, at that moment, they could not bear to hear. “The Spirit of truth...will guide you” We should at least be curious about what he meant.

There is enough material in the Acts of the Apostles to give us a hint of how the Jerusalem Church, Peter and the other Apostles along with the newcomers Paul and Barnabas and a small army of deacon/evangelists sent to the Samaritan and Greek cities were privileged to express in new and changing times and places not only what the Gospel said but what it meant as well. In so doing they disagreed with each other – sometimes quite loudly. Following the Spirit of God into truths which a previous generation or even our younger self could not possibly bear courts a certain degree of risk.

Jesus knew his time with the disciples was drawing to a close and His journey to the cross was ever near. Soon he would be betrayed, arrested and taken away for trial. Though Jesus knew what was yet to come, it doesn't quite appear in this passage that the Disciples have caught on yet. This is not uncommon in John's Gospel as Jesus is often speaking of the spiritual meaning and the disciples confuse it with something physical. One would think after 3 years of journeying with Jesus that the disciples would have started to see the wheel turning in

motion and begin to understand what was to come and what was being promised to them.

In these last moments Jesus has with the disciples, one would think his words would be filled with comfort and encouragement. Jesus speaks of the grief, trials and tribulations the disciples will face in the future once they are on their own. The disciples are not yet fully aware of all that will occur or how drastically their lives are about to change and Jesus' words to them probably sound like a riddle they can't quite solve.

Even with all the unpleasant things they are hearing, Jesus speaks assurance to them promising that though difficulties are coming their way, they will not be alone and they will be equipped to live into the calling and mission they were invited to when Jesus first said "Come. Follow Me." The words of that invitation from Jesus were probably a soft and distant memory to the disciples as they were hearing pieces of their fate from Jesus in the present moments.

The promise of the Holy Spirit is good news. Apart from the truth the Holy Spirit provides, the disciple's calling and fate looked impossible, grim and hopeless. With the Holy Spirit promised to them, they will be able to go into all the world and share the Glory of God through Christ Crucified, Risen and Ascended. They will be bearers of good news and hope to people who have not yet seen and heard of the transforming love of Christ and the gift of salvation will be available to all.

Though the disciples had been journeying with Jesus for 3 years and had witnessed many things, there had to be moments where they felt powerless or unworthy in their calling. There were many times Jesus performed miracles or taught and the disciples missed the main point or focused on something different. The gift of the Holy Spirit would complete their calling as though they had previously seen and experienced the work Jesus did, they would now be equipped to go forth in the Spirit of Truth to do the same work Jesus had shown them all along. The Holy Spirit would guide the disciples and help them to be in the right frame of focus to proclaim the message of Hope and Eternal Life.

I am invested in all of you here. Together we will slowly and surely learn what it means to be attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and what our response should be in how we proclaim the Good News in our greater community and beyond. Sometimes this calling is overwhelming, daunting or seemingly impossible because we will get caught up with what life throws our way and like the disciples, we may not always be in tune or aware of the deeper work at hand being done through the work of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we will doubt ourselves or feel unworthy of the calling we've been invited to be a part of.

Yet there are times we will witness the Holy Spirit moving and will be a part of divine encounters and moments that we couldn't have orchestrated. In these moments we will see God Glorified and all it

will take is being present and attentive to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Given that Paul is talking about the grace and glory we have received in Christ, you might think he anchors our hope there. But while the promise of future glory certainly occasions hope, the Apostle doesn't stop there. Rather, he continues by saying that, "we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Paul, that is, roots our hope not only in the "things above" – that is, the transcendent promises of God – but also in the "things below" – our own struggles and suffering that are hallowed by God's presence and love.

Why? Because Paul saw God take shape in the world and in his own life most concretely in the cross of Christ, the cross by which God dignifies and sanctifies all human suffering by promising to be there with us and for us, and the cross that we bear as we struggle to be faithful in this world. If God's greatest revelation was made manifest in and through the struggle and suffering of a man hung on a tree, then what suffering of ours can ever truly be God-forsaken. God promises to be with us amid suffering, and even work through that to build character and endurance and increase our capacity for hope.

Not, that God ever desires us to suffer or causes our suffering. God did not cause the tornadoes that swept through the Midwest any more

than God caused Jesus to die. God does not delight in suffering. Ever. But God does promise us to be with us in our suffering, and to use our suffering whenever possible for some greater good, and in and through all things to redeem our suffering by joining it to Christ's own. After my second back surgery I couldn't return to work within a year. They medically terminated me. I felt useless, not able to work what was I supposed to do. I found myself depressed and lost. The endless days of suffering with the pain I felt in my back and in my heart was wearing on me. I went to my pastor who at the time was Rev. Bill Ward. With his counseling and the love my church family showed me, I began to get more involved in church events, Sunday School, Bible study and I found that God was there with me. It's not what I thought at first. I was praying why God why can't you take this pain from me. Never did I get any relief. But I learned that I was not praying for what I needed. I needed strength to endure and live a life that I desired. Pain doesn't have to limit what we do, what we have do learn is how to endure and learn from that pain.

No tear shed, that is, goes unnoticed by God. No frustration or hurt or loss is unimportant to God. No tragedy – personal, communal, national, or global – is ignored by God, which means that God is present in our suffering and dignifies it by God's presence.

But this passage isn't only about tragedy because God determined to make God's own self known in the concrete form of Jesus and his

suffering, we can look for God in the concrete, ordinary, and every day forms our lives take. In our relationships, in our jobs, hobbies, volunteer activities, and more. God hallows all of this by promising to use anything done for the good of the neighbor is a way to extend God's love and concern to all of God's beloved people. Nevertheless, we believe that this hope is not only true in the long run but in everything and everywhere.

So where is God in the tornadoes? He is working through rescue workers, he's comforting the grieving, he's encouraging those who are helping, and guiding those who try to plan to avoid such disasters in the future. And where is God in our sometimes painfully mundane daily lives? He is present with us in the struggles, rejoicing in the triumphs, nurturing our best relationships, he's encouraging us to care for those around us and receive their care in turn, he's using us and even our daily routines to love and care for the world and people God loves so much.

This is the hope Paul talks about. And that kind of hope is, as he well knows, a powerful thing. Indeed, even our larger culture senses the power of hope, even when it at times misunderstands or mistrusts it. There is a scene, in fact, from the recent blockbuster film adaptation of Suzanne Collins popular novel *The Hunger Games* that, while it wasn't in the book, fits the story perfectly and captures the power of hope in a nutshell. President Snow, the totalitarian ruler of futuristic Panem, asks his chief Games-maker – the one charged with creating a spectacle as

entertaining as it is barbaric – why they must have a winner. The answer? Hope. Snow wants to give the oppressed people of Panem hope that maybe, just maybe, the odds will be in their favor and they may win the Hunger Games and escape their life of servitude. “Hope,” he explains, “is the only thing more powerful than fear.” But for that very reason it is as perilous to a dictator as it is useful: “A little hope,” he explains, “is effective; a lot of hope is dangerous.”

Paul invites us into “a lot of hope” by tying our suffering to Jesus’ own and inviting us thereby to recognize God’s presence not only in the distant heavens but also, and even more, in the daily struggles of our lives, trusting – promising! – that this kind of hope does not disappoint. It is just that simple and it is just that hard! Amen!