

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Year B

RCL



1 John 4:7-21

Psalm 22:24-30

John 15:1-8

The Collect

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life:
Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to
be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfast-
ly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and
reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one
God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 22:24-30 Page 612, BCP

Deus, Deus meus

24 My praise is of him in the great assembly; I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship him.

25 The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and those who seek the LORD shall praise him: “May your heart live for ever!”

26 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall bow before him.

27 For kingship belongs to the LORD; he rules over the nations.

28 To him alone all who sleep in the earth bow down in worship; all who go down to the dust fall before him.

29 My soul shall live for him; my descendants shall serve him; they shall be known as the LORD'S for ever.

30 They shall come and make known to a people yet

unborn the saving deeds that he has done.

1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 15:1-8

Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

SERMON

I'll be teaching this year at St. Meinrad. Quite a stretch for me, but enormously flattering. Our topic is a book entitled "Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit" by Francis Chan. It is about that most neglected aspect of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit.

He has this to say about the contemporary approach to church:

The church becomes irrelevant when it becomes purely a human creation. We are not all we were made to be when everything in our lives and churches can be explained apart from the work and presence of the Spirit of God.

He goes on to quote Doctor A.W. Tozer:

We may as well face it: the whole level of spirituality among us is low. We have measured ourselves by ourselves until the incentive to seek higher plateaus in the things of the Spirit is all

but gone ... [We] have imitated the world, sought popular favor, manufactured delights to substitute for the joy of the Lord and produced a cheap and synthetic power to substitute for the power of the Holy Ghost.

I have to agree with both Chan and Tozer. I talk to a lot of people at the Chapel of St. Starbuck. Many of them are pastors, of course, but many are not Christians, or occasional Christians, or very fundamentalist Christians identifying themselves as “non-denominational” to separate themselves from what they see as the sins of the organized church. Among the people to whom I speak, the notion of an in-dwelling Holy Spirit seems foreign except to the fundamentalists. In the other groups, the non-Christians and the occasional Christians, the Holy Spirit seems to be only associated with ecstatic speech and chaotic worship forms.

A guy from one of the more ecstatic churches visited

a Presbyterian Church. He enjoyed the sermon, and to encourage the pastor he shouted, “Amen!”

A deacon motioned for him to be quiet. He did it again, however, and the deacon tapped him and said, “Shhh!”

“But I've got the Spirit!” the worshiper replied.

“Well, you didn't get it here,” the deacon replied. “Be quiet.”

That sort of thing ...

Jesus didn't see it that way. Jesus taught:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

“Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” We abide with Christ and He with us that the will of the Father be accomplished. And how does Jesus

abide in us? John explains that further in his first letter.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.

That sounds pretty empowering to me. I think we all agree that the early church could not have grown from eleven terrified men hiding under the furniture in a locked room to what it became by human effort alone. They could do nothing apart from the motivating power of the Holy Spirit abiding within them. It did and they did. I wonder where this idea of isolating one aspect of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, in the way we seem to have done came from?

We look back and see the success of the disciples after the Resurrection as the measure of the power of the

Holy Spirit to get things done in accordance with God's will, but that is not the measure we apply to contemporary churches. We measure ourselves by ourselves – we try to apply the same measure of success to our churches that we are accustomed to apply to the other aspects of human behavior. Our Executive Presbyter addressed the ways we measure the contemporary church. He said that we look to the “three Bs” – Budgets, Buildings and Butts. A church with a large budget, impressive buildings and lots of butts in the pews is a successful church by contemporary lights. Chan disagrees.

Let's be honest: If you combine a charismatic speaker, a talented worship band, and some hip, creative events, people will attend your church. Yet this does not mean that the Holy Spirit of God is actively working and moving in the lives of the people who are coming. It simply means that you have created a space that is appealing enough to draw people in for an hour or two on

Sunday.

Well, what other model do we have to measure success? If we start a small business do we not anticipate that if it is successful it will grow? We are doing what Doctor Tozer said, “We have measured ourselves by ourselves until the incentive to seek higher plateaus in the things of the Spirit is all but gone”. We need to be courageous enough to ask ourselves if we are measuring the activities of the contemporary church by the proper standards. Are the activities of the contemporary church recognizable as those of the early church? As in most complicated questions, the answer is “maybe.” Some are, some are not.

We had, in the tornado that did such destruction in West Liberty, an opportunity to see the church respond in ways which I believe reflect exactly the sort of spirit the early church experienced. Our churches responded

to those injured and left homeless with immediacy and an outpouring of love. FEMA regulations would not permit our churches to take used clothing. We didn't dump our hand-me-downs on West Liberty – we bought new.

Other times, our churches seem almost calcified within the stained glass, afraid and fretful of outreach to “those people”, doing what good is done for our salvation instead of reaching out boldly because of our salvation.

Suppose we went on a field trip to a watch factory. Inside we found a great number of workers sitting on comfortable seats in a well-maintained factory. Our tour guide tells us that the factory and all the employees are dedicated to producing the finest watches American technology and craftsmanship can produce, but when we ask how many watches the factory produces annual-

ly we are told none. Would we count such a factory successful? Mustn't church have a purpose as well? And mustn't that church be led by the indwelling Holy Spirit if it is to do the will of the Father? Put another way, if ghost means spook and spirit means dancing between the pews, and we refuse to have any of either, is there any room for the Holy Spirit in our understanding of church?

In our Epistle today, John writes:

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

My eye is drawn to that odd phrase "No one has ever seen God." It seems misplaced in a paragraph about God's love. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us,

and his love is perfected in us.” What has the one to do with the other?

The answer to that, I believe, is the key to understanding the statements of Jesus from our Gospel lesson.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

We do not see God when we are Spirit-led for the same reason we do not see our own eyeballs when we behold God's Creation. When we respond to suffering as the indwelling Holy Spirit leads us, we become instruments of God's love for his creatures and we are empowered to act. We put thoughts of buildings, budgets and butts behind us. THAT, church is what led eleven terrified men to come out from under the furniture, un-

lock the door, and stride into history.

I want to close with the words of Francis Chan with which we began.

The church becomes irrelevant when it becomes purely a human creation. We are not all we were made to be when everything in our lives and churches can be explained apart from the work and presence of the Spirit of God.

We've had endless discussions about the need to bring younger people into the church if the church is to survive. Why should they do that if the church has become irrelevant? Why should we older people expect younger people to come to us, worship in our way and sing songs that we enjoy if we are unwilling to go to them? Church is where we worship and praise God. Church is where we join together, as is right, as the body of Christ. The world outside the stained glass, however, is the mission field. That is where our focus

should be.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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