

## 05-19-24 Worship Service

Pentecost

John 15:26-26; 16:4b-15

### **“The Holy Spirit is a First Responder” Pastor Lois Harder**

I borrowed this phrase for the sermon title from one of the commentator’s I read this week. I thought it was actually a pretty good metaphor. Of course, by definition, it’s limited in how completely it can explain the Holy Spirit, but I like the image of the Holy Spirit *as* a First Responder.

Now, as Kris reminded me in a recent conversation, it’s the actual words and teachings of Jesus, of course, that are the MOST important for us to hear and try to embody – more important than the commentators and the interpretations, more important than the explanations of Paul or Peter or anybody who wrote the epistles, and more important than all the similes or metaphors out there, all of which can be helpful! The fact is, Jesus’ words can be really hard! Hard to grasp, and super challenging to live out. And what Jesus was trying to explain in this morning’s text as the writer of the Gospel of John wrote about it is no exception. It’s hard, but it’s hopeful and life-giving!

Jesus was trying to explain who he was and what his tasks here on earth were and what was coming as a result of him fulfilling his tasks. He was trying to give his disciples a heads-up. And actually, by the time we get to chapter 15, between Jesus and John, we can see that they’d already been trying to explain it from the very beginning. Right off the bat, chapter 1, John writes that Jesus was The Word, part of the Creation Team, He was Life and Light. And he became one of us in order to live among us, in order to show us a more clear picture of who God is.

And as it turns out, God is the Creator of everything who absolutely LOVES everything that’s been created and who wants to be LOVED by everything that’s been created! And God is so loving and concerned, that at a certain point, when the creation was not doing so well and getting pretty far off-the-track, God decided to send this Word, this Truth – in the form of a person named Jesus. Now, the hard thing about being the Word of Truth in the midst of this off-the-track Creation is that the creation itself will not necessarily want to hear you, in spite of the fact that you are Truth. And so, as Jesus went about his business of showing and preaching and testifying and living this clear example of who God is, he got a little cross-ways with some of the folks who really did not understand His Truth and, in fact, were so threatened and offended by it that they wanted him dead.

So, as John tells the story, Jesus was trying to help his followers prepare for the consequences of living out God’s Truth. He was trying to prepare them for his departure and for their separation from him. He was being a “First Responder” to them throughout his ministry,

triaging their situations and then providing what they needed. And this is what the Holy Spirit would do for them after he was gone. The Spirit would continue to be with them, responding to their needs.

In chapter 2 Jesus miraculously provided more and high quality wine at the wedding in order to prevent the bridegroom and his family from losing their place in the community. Being able to show lavish hospitality was a high priority in that time and culture, and it mattered to Jesus (and to his mother) that this family would be able to host well and provide generously for their wedding guests. Jesus was first-responding with compassion and plenty.

Next he went to the Temple and found the money changers profiting mightily from the well-oiled and powerful religious machine – the very system that should have provided a nurturing and comforting connection from the people’s soul to God but instead, was scamming and guilting people, creating a false sense of security while robbing them blind. Here Jesus was first-responding with righteous indignation and prophetic testimony, speaking Truth to their power.

When the Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of night, Jesus patiently explained to him that in order to be part of the Kingdom of God one needs to be willing to be transformed. For him, that would mean giving up his wealthy lifestyle and position of power in order to follow Jesus and learn a whole, new way of loving God and people. Jesus was first-responding to him with firm conviction and challenge.

We’ve heard the story of Jesus taking the long way to Galilee by going through the region of the feared and hated Samaritans – just so he’d have the opportunity to interact with the woman at the well, asking her for a drink of water and inviting her to drink from his living water. Although she tried to hide her tragic life-story, he already knew it and first-responded to her with grace and inclusion, assuring her that she could worship God from wherever she was, in Spirit and in Truth. The God of Love would meet her where she was at; she was not bound by her culture’s narrow exclusion.

When Jesus healed the officers’ son – without even going to his bedside and the sick man by the pool in Jerusalem – breaking the Sabbath law, he was first-responding with clarity and courage, meeting their need for healing and wholeness, assuring everyone who witnessed these events that the Sabbath had been made for people, not the other way around. The rules are there to support and strengthen us, not to rule over us and be oppressive.

When he fed the 5,000 he was first-responding to their hunger – for food and for a message of hope and justice. When he walked across the choppy, stormy water to meet his terrified disciples in their boat, he was first-responding to their fear and disbelief, letting them know that he would not leave them alone. He forgave the woman caught in adultery, offering forgiveness that only God can give. He first-responded to her with amazing grace – and the challenge to make healthy and necessary changes in her life.

In the middle of Chapter 8 when Jesus claimed and proclaimed that he was the Light of the World, the Pharisees were at their breaking point with his audacity and outspokenness; they called it blasphemy. He was a first-responder to them when he told them the Truth about their unwillingness to humble themselves and BE God's Love in the world rather than clinging to their certainty and judgment. They picked up stones to throw at him.

Jesus healed the man who had been born blind and told the Pharisees that neither the man nor his parents had sinned. He said that he was, in fact, the Good Shepherd, a title reserved and understood to be for The Messiah. He was a first-responder to all those who heard his message and took courage and hope from his clear-eyed vision for a world in which people are not blamed for their situations of poverty or illness; situations that have often been created by systems of power and injustice. Those in power were furious and picked up stones to throw at him again.

By the time he resurrected dead Lazarus from the tomb, Jesus knew that his humble entrance on a donkey into Jerusalem was imminent and that his death was inevitable. But first he did the unthinkable and washed his disciples' feet, instructing them to do the same for one another. All the while, his disciples were watching, learning, trying to grasp the significance of his life and what it meant to be his followers, living their own lives in his example.

But in Chapter 14 and again, here in Chapters 15 and 16 Jesus promised those early disciples – as well as us – that we will not be left alone. When he went away, he sent the Holy Spirit, the First Responder, to accompany us and give us what we need to be his faithful followers. A first responder comes alongside those in need, sizes up the situation to determine what's needed most immediately and then offers it.

The great gift of Pentecost is the assurance that we will not be left alone, and we will be given what we need most, in order to faithfully follow Jesus throughout our lives, each according to our gifts and our needs. So whether it's chutzpah and courage or humility and compassion, whether it's comfort or clarity, encouragement to move ahead, or put on the brakes and be patient, wisdom for when and how to speak, or not to speak at all, whatever it is, there's no place we can go, no situation we can be in, where the Holy Spirit/First Responder won't come to us and give us what we need in order to testify and live out our faith. All WE have to do is trust.