

“God in Us”

Introduction: A few days ago, as Iela and I sat down to relax and take a break from all of the activity that has been swirling around the various events in her life, we decided to watch the movie *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*. She'd seen it before and showed me the trailer and since it looked intriguing, and I enjoy Meryl Streep, we dialed in. As usual when we watch something that she's seen before, I end up asking all sorts of questions about what is going to happen. In response, she always simply but firmly says, “Just keep watching papa!” A few times, when I did get an answer out of her, I couldn't figure out how she knew what she knew until she confessed that she had also seen the prequel. A prequel is the backstory. It typically explains the background which led to the events you are watching in the original story.

In that vein, we could think of our text today as part of the prequel, or backstory, to Pentecost, which we'll celebrate in a few weeks. If Pentecost narrates the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and the life of Jesus that is now lived in us, in John 14 we find ourselves fifty days before this arrival, listening to the explanation Jesus gives his disciples regarding the purpose and ministry of the coming Spirit. Essentially Jesus is seeking to convey to his followers that while he will be leaving them, at the same time he will be coming to them. Because of this, they will not have to try to follow him, or represent him, on their own. In fact, they cannot. What Jesus wants to impress upon them, and us, is that we cannot be who and what Jesus calls us to be without the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's begin by considering a bit of the context of this “prequel.”

I. The Farewell Discourse of Jesus

A. Those of you who have been studying John this year in our adult SS class with Jason have no doubt noted that John is a very different gospel account than that provided by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I appreciate how Eugene Peterson makes the distinction. He observes that Matthew, Mark, and Luke write like kayakers on a fairly swift-flowing river, with occasional patches of white water. This river is taking us as readers in the definite direction of the final and exciting week of Jesus' life. John, however, writes more like a canoer out on a quiet lake, drifting unhurriedly and paddling leisurely so as not to miss the various aspects of the shoreline, or the many different rock formations, or the herons fishing in the rushes, or the patterns of the clouds in the sky that are reflecting on the water. So, for instance, just when John chapter 12 reports on the events of Palm Sunday and we might be led to believe that we are about ready to move into the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus, John slows us down and takes us to an upper room where we are invited to turn off our cell phones and listen in to an extended discourse, lasting nearly five chapters (13-17), from Jesus. If I've counted correctly, just 26 of the 155 total verses in this section are not spoken by Jesus.

B. The drift of what Jesus wants to say has to do with the fact that while the disciples had no clue that this would be their last night with him, Jesus did. And he knew that despite his efforts to make them aware of his coming arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection, it hadn't really sunk in. So, Jesus wanted to both prepare them to stand firm as those events began to unfold over the next few days, but even more importantly, to begin to prepare them for how they would continue what he had begun in bringing new life, the life of God, into the world. They, and the church that would be formed, would now be his body in the world, living his life and doing his work. Here's how Luke describes it in Acts:

“In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and teach until the day he was taken up into heaven . . .” (Acts 1:1f). His ascension, which we will look at next week, meant not absence but a continued active, living presence, albeit in a different mode.

## II. Living the Jesus Life

A. What this living presence, this Jesus life, is to look like is given shape by Jesus as we notice the “bookends” of his discourse. In chapter 13, it begins with Jesus, after dinner, getting up from the table, taking off his shirt, wrapping a towel around his waist and, like a common servant, getting down on his knees to wash his disciples’ feet. It was an incredible, shocking even, act of love and service. “I have set you an example,” he tells them afterward. “Do to others as you have seen me do for you” (13: 15). What they were to primarily be about was loving others in a servant-like, sacrificial way. Then, at the end of the discourse, we see Jesus “looking toward heaven” (17:1), praying for his disciples and for all who would later come to put their trust in him, that they would truly be those who both experience and share his love with the world. Service, and prayer; on our knees and looking toward heaven. . . As Peterson observes, these are the boundaries Jesus has set for living his life and doing his work.

B. What this Jesus life requires is our obedience to his teaching. Three times positively, and once negatively, in our brief excerpt from his discourse, we hear Jesus calling his listeners to keep his commands and obey his teaching. It’s what our response of love for him is to be (vv. 15, 21, 23, 24). This eliminates from our consideration the possibility of being, as Dallas Willard puts it, “vampire Christians.” That is people who just look to Jesus for a little of his blood so that they can get their sins forgiven and go to heaven when they die. Now, getting our sins forgiven is a good and necessary thing, and yes, being with God for an eternity is a worthy goal! But, as the saying goes, while Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven, there’s a lot of room for growth between forgiveness and perfection!

The point is that there’s nothing in what Jesus taught that suggests we can decide to enjoy forgiveness at Jesus’ expense and have nothing more to do with him. This he makes clear through in his primary call: “Follow me.” As we parse that out, we learn that he’s saying something like, “Become my disciple, my apprentice. Learn from me how to live a life of faith, hope, and love in every corner of your existence, on earth as it is in heaven. Love your neighbor, bless those who curse you, and encourage others to follow me as you go along.” Jesus calls us not just to receive the forgiveness of our sin, but into a new kind of life, one rescued by God’s love and one that reveals that love to others. To live this out, obedience is not an option.

C. Now, if obedience is not an option when it comes to living out the life of Jesus in our life, neither is self-effort, or simply trying hard. How, then does this Jesus life come about? The image Jesus uses in the next chapter about a branch being unable to bear fruit unless it remains in the vine, is helpful: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (15:1-6). Jesus’ promise not to leave his followers “as orphans,” but to come to them anticipates this point. And the way he will come to them and remain in them, he explains, is through the Holy Spirit, who will help them and be with them and be in them. Recall from the first chapter of John’s gospel that in Jesus, God was said to have tabernacled, or made his dwelling among us, or “moved into our neighborhood” as *The Message* has it. But now, with the arrival of the Spirit, God is not only going to be with us, he’s going to be in us! Add to that this comment by Jesus: “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (14:20), and we find ourselves in the deep end of the trinity pool!.

D. To keep our heads above water, it's helpful to consider the term "another advocate" that Jesus uses to describe the Spirit. An advocate is someone who comes alongside in some way. It's a very robust word, which is why some translations also use the word Helper or Comforter. And the word "another" in this context means one just like the first one, which helps us to think of the Spirit as Jesus still being with us, though in a different mode. Notice, also in this term, that Jesus is not referring to a force when he talks about the Spirit, but to a person. It's an important distinction for a force is something we try to capture and use to our advantage, but a person is someone we seek to be in relationship with, one we learn from, listen to, wait on, and speak with. If we think of the Spirit as simply a power, we tend to think, "How can I get more of this power?" But if we think of the Spirit as a person, our question will be, "How can the Spirit get more of me, bringing out more of the life of Jesus in me?"

In this vein, I appreciate the way Willard comments on Jesus' statement, "apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5). That's true, Willard says, but Jesus would also say, *if you do nothing it will be apart from Me*. As we've said on other occasions, our relationship with the Spirit is one of cooperation. The Spirit gets more of us not as we grit our teeth in self-effort but as we make space for him through various spiritual practices, such as worship, silence, solitude, service, study, fasting, giving, and the like.

The apostle Paul describes the outcome, or reality of the Spirit working in us in two ways. First, the Spirit develops in us *gifts* for service in his church, gifts that have effects beyond our own making, gifts such as knowledge, healing, serving and teaching. And second, the Spirit works in us the *fruit* of a transformed character – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Thinking of his own life, Paul sums up the work of the Spirit when he confesses in his letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20). Paul has received the forgiveness of his sin and is now, through the Spirit, experiencing his life being formed to look more and more like the life of Jesus.

D. All of this begins to take us beyond our text for today, but it might best be summed up by Jesus in our final word from him: "Peace be with you...do not be afraid." Peace here means shalom, or well-being. We need not be troubled or afraid because Jesus has not left us as orphans but has come, by his Spirit, to live in us. We need not be troubled or afraid because Jesus promises, by his Spirit, to keep teaching us and empowering us to live his life through our lives. We need not be troubled or afraid because, by his Spirit, Jesus continues to be at work in the world in and through his body, the church. May we open our hearts to his transforming presence and resurrection power.