

The Promise of the Holy Spirit  
John 14:23-29  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C May 25, 2025  
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship on this Memorial Day weekend. Begun in 1868, May 30<sup>th</sup> was originally known as Decoration Day, because on this day the graves of those who had died in battle during the Civil War were to be decorated with flowers. After World War I, the name was changed to Memorial Day to mourn, honor, and give thanks for those American military personnel who died while serving our country in any war. In 1968, the date of this federal holiday was changed to the last Monday in May. As you enjoy get togethers this weekend with friends and family, please remember those who paid the ultimate price on our behalf.

The notion of giving one's life fits well with our lectionary reading from John 14. Last week we began the second major section of John's Gospel, which runs from chapter 13, verse 1 to chapter 19, verse 42. The specific part we explored last week and will look at again this week is known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse, which is found in 13:31—17:26. As we said last week, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure, though he is clear that he will not leave them "orphaned" (14:18). In this Discourse he also commissions his disciples to continue his mission by the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter (13:36), Thomas (14:5), and Philip (14:8) have all asked questions of Jesus. He assures them that the Father and he himself both love them, and that Jesus will reveal himself to them. In response to Jesus' comment that he will reveal himself, Judas (not Iscariot) asks for clarification as to how Jesus will make himself known to his followers but not to the rest of the world (14:22). Without answering the question directly, Jesus reminds his disciples that those who love him will keep his word (14:23).

Let's try to envision ourselves with Jesus on this Thursday night. We've shared a Passover meal, during which Jesus got up and washed our feet (13:2-4). He foretold his death and identified his betrayer (13:26). As we heard last week, he has given us a new commandment to love each other as he has loved us (13:34). He has also said that Peter will deny him three times (13:38). I imagine that we are all trying to process a myriad of emotions: grief that Jesus is leaving us; anger at his betrayer; love for Jesus; and probably puzzlement as to how we are going to fulfill the new commandment that he has given us. Then he goes on to share his promise of the Holy Spirit, which is the focus of today's message.

Jesus tells his friends, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (14:23). Had I been among the disciples that night, I would have been very comforted to hear that Jesus and the Father were going to make their home with us. We will be a community of deep and abiding love. But that apparently won't be true for those who do not keep Jesus' words, which actually come from the Father who sent him.

Jesus goes on to explain that he is telling all of this to his disciples so that when he does depart from them they will believe (14:29). We've seen this idea before in John 20:31, when we considered Thomas' response to Jesus the week after Easter. There we are told that the purpose of the entire Gospel of John is so that "you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit so that his followers will not be alone. The Spirit also has several other names, which disclose his multiple functions: Advocate (defense lawyer), Comforter, Counselor, Spirit of Truth, Teacher. The Greek word here is *Paraclete*, which means “called alongside.” Since this term has so many meanings, some commentators prefer to just use that one word in English, rather than try to describe all the ways we can understand it.

As we have seen previously in John 20, Jesus bestows peace on each of his followers. This peace harkens back to the Hebrew word *shalom*, which is far more than just the absence of war or discord. It denotes fullness, completeness, health, and wholeness. Notice that we do nothing to earn this peace from Jesus. It is a gift that Jesus freely gives to us.

As people who have been gifted with the peace of Jesus, we need not be afraid. That is surely good news in our day when so much of life seems topsy-turvy. Many people fear trouble around every corner. It could be gun violence, or gang activity, or another type of violence. There could be an unexpected job loss through no fault of the employee. A family member could be seriously ill, piling up huge medical bills. A loved one could die with no warning. The list goes on and on. I was working on this sermon the afternoon of May 16th, when we suddenly heard popping sounds, as if an explosion. Suddenly there were sirens blaring from every direction. A garage and home were on fire just a block away from us on Maple Avenue, near Bay View. Craig and I don’t know this family, but I feel certain that when they got up this morning they had no idea that their home would be destroyed.

In the midst of whatever our problems are, though, Jesus exhorts us to not let our hearts be troubled or afraid. I suspect we’ve all had to deal with major problems, so we know that some things, such as a severely burned home, don’t get fixed overnight. Most of us will raise questions that show just how worried we are: Will my loved one be okay? Will our insurance cover the bills? Will our lives ever be the same again? If we’re honest, we are at times troubled and afraid. So what does peace look like? Dr. Larry Petton recounts a story that aims to demonstrate the look and feel of perfect peace:

Long ago a man sought the perfect picture of peace. Not finding one that satisfied, he announced a contest to produce this masterpiece. The challenge stirred the imagination of artists everywhere, and paintings arrived from far and wide. Finally the great day of revelation arrived. The judges uncovered one peaceful scene after another, while the viewers clapped and cheered.

The tensions grew. Only two pictures remained veiled.

As a judge pulled the cover from one, a hush fell over the crowd.

A mirror-smooth lake reflected lacy, green birches under the soft blush of the evening sky. Along the grassy shore, a flock of sheep grazed undisturbed. Surely this was the winner.

The man with the vision uncovered the second painting himself, and the crowd gasped in surprise. Could this be peace?

A tumultuous waterfall cascaded down a rocky precipice; the crowd could almost feel its cold, penetrating spray. Stormy-gray clouds threatened to explode with lightning, wind, and rain. In the midst of the thundering noises and bitter chill, a spindly tree clung to the rocks at the edge of the falls. One of its branches reached out in front of the torrential waters as if foolishly seeking to experience its full power.

A little bird had built a nest in the elbow of that branch. Content and undisturbed in her stormy surroundings, she rested on her eggs. With her eyes closed and her wings ready to cover her little ones, she manifested peace that transcends all earthly turmoil.

Peace is not the absence of problems.....peace is knowing the Presence of Jesus.

I can almost see the mother bird resting, undisturbed, on her clutch of eggs in the midst of this stormy weather. And the ending of the story is so true: "Peace is not the absence of problems.....peace is knowing the Presence of Jesus."

Do you know this firsthand? I do, though I don't recommend finding out about this truth the way I did. As most of you know, I flatlined on the operating table during cardiac bypass surgery in 1996. I'll spare you all the details, but I was on life-support for about 10 days. Although I was heavily drugged with morphine and don't remember much of anything, I do remember being with Jesus on a beach. Whether this was some kind of vision or hallucination or what, I can't tell you. I don't know. What I do know is that we were walking along a sandy beach that had huge boulders all around. Suddenly, the sky turned black, the wind and waves kicked up, and Jesus and I were being buffeted by a dangerous electrical storm. He swooped me up in his arms. I threw my arms around his neck, and he ran like a sprinter. We were safe because he had carried me all the way. In all honesty, I seldom remember dreams, but the picture of Jesus rescuing me from danger in a terrible storm remains as clear in my mind as it was 29 years ago. While I had always been taught to believe that Jesus was constantly with me, and while I truly believed that, this experience gave me proof that I could never doubt. I may not always stay peaceful, but I know that Jesus is always present with me, no matter what. Reading again in John about Jesus' peace brings me real peace and joy.

Of course, peace is not something we just will to achieve. The Holy Spirit is with us, bringing us the calm assurance that we need. Through the Spirit's actions in our lives, we know that Jesus is present with us. I also find it very reassuring to know that the Spirit reminds us of what Jesus taught his followers while he was here on earth. We may forget, but the Spirit does not! Moreover, the Spirit continues to surround us with divine love.

Jesus has promised us his peace and the Holy Spirit. Just before his ascension (which we'll encounter next week), Jesus tells his disciples that they will receive power from the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). The main purpose of this power is to witness to others, to share the good news of Jesus, in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and all the earth. To be effective witnesses, we need to open our hearts and minds to the Spirit's leading so that we may become more like Jesus. We United Methodists refer to this as sanctification, becoming more like Christ as a result of the grace of God. The Spirit helps us to identify our sins so that we may repent and turn toward God. As we do this, the fruit of the Spirit grows and matures within us. We've seen this list from Galatians 5:22-23 before, but it is so important that it bears repeating: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."*

How does the Holy Spirit do all of this? One way is through the Bible. If we study our Bibles carefully, the word of God can correct and reshape our thinking, as well as guide us on our spiritual journey. This kind of intensive study occurs over a lifetime. We can't just read for a few minutes in the morning or evening and listen to a Bible-based sermon on Sunday. Yes, these actions are, as philosophers would say, necessary, but they are not sufficient. We need to dig

deeper. And we need to do that within the context of the community of faith. To simply decide what *I think* is not enough. Individual interpretations can quickly go off the rails! The community of faith stretches back through history and across the globe. We can learn from Christians in many cultures over the 2000 years of church history. While it's true that we don't all agree on everything, it's also true that we agree on basics.

We can also experience the Spirit's presence through prayer. Whether a lengthy conversation with God or a quick "May God's healing be upon you" as you see an ambulance speed by, the Spirit is with us in those times. We're taught that the Holy Spirit prompts and guides our prayers. Even when we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit intercedes for us (Romans 8:27). Knowing that the Spirit directs our prayers, we can pray boldly with the assurance that God hears and will respond to our prayers.

Another way we experience the Spirit's presence and activity in our lives is that we are motivated to serve others in Jesus' name. God has given each of us spiritual gifts that we are to use to build up the Kingdom. God gives many different kinds of gifts. Here are places where you can find lists of these gifts: 1 Corinthians 12:7-13; Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:7-13; and Isaiah 11:2-3. None of these lists is exhaustive. God is always providing for the church, the body of Christ. We are called and expected to use whatever gifts God has bestowed on us to make the church a more loving, better witness for Jesus.

As we've already noted, Jesus told us that he was leaving and that the Spirit was coming so that "you may believe" (14:29). Your challenge this week is to make a list of your bedrock beliefs, particularly those concerning who the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity is, and what the Spirit does. How has this sermon helped you to become better acquainted with the work and person of the Spirit? How does what you know change you? Love, Nan