

The Missing Person

John 14:15-22, 26

May 29, 2011

I.

This weekend, all across America, we celebrate our heritage of freedom. With flags, bands, picnics, and parades we remember the men and women who gave their lives to preserve that freedom. Our Eucharist today, which always is devoted to the glory and presence of our Lord, also will be observed with special intention for the memory of those brave soldiers.

And as we recall the people and things important to us, let us ask what we do if we can't find someone or something? The answer would seem fairly obvious. We look for that person or thing in one way or another.

If we can't find a person we might try to reach them on the phone, or send an e-mail message, or go to their house. Law enforcement agencies might send out a "BOLO," which means be on the lookout for someone. If a child is missing an "Amber Alert" might be issued.

And it seems like we're always looking for things that are missing. In the Roman Catholic church there is a patron saint of lost items, St. Anthony of Padua. And many times the items are not actually misplaced at all, but we just seem to overlook them.

Susan sometimes says that about me. She claims I have "invisifridgephobia," which means that I cannot see things right in front of me in the refrigerator. The fact that the same item is in different places at different times does not seem to be much of a defense.

But what if we don't know that a person or thing is missing? We usually don't search at all. And there can be a third scenario. That's when something is missing but we try to find it in the wrong way. Our searches then can be ineffective.

This can be illustrated by the story of a man walking at night who saw another fellow looking for something near a lamp post. He stopped and learned that the fellow had lost his wallet. So he asked where the other man was when he first noticed his wallet was missing, and the fellow pointed off into the dark distance and said, "Way back there somewhere."

Somewhat mystified, the first man asked why the other fellow was looking for it here near the lamp post, and he replied, "Well, because the light is better here."

Believe it or not, this actually leads into today's Gospel, which mentions an important person who can be misplaced in our lives. And to tell you in advance, I'm speaking of the Holy Spirit Jesus foretold in the reading.

Sometimes as we think about God we might just drift right over the Holy Spirit without much thought. At times the Spirit can be the missing person in the Trinity. Perhaps we believe we know about the Father and the Son, but the Spirit might be more of an abstract idea.

And if we do search for the Spirit we, like the fellow who lost his wallet, might look in the wrong places. We might be tempted to look near the lamp post because the light is better, so to speak, when all we need do is go to the source, and open ourselves to the Spirit. The Spirit will find us.

II.

Let's review the reading. It was at the end of the Last Supper, after Jesus shared the Eucharist, after he washed the disciples' feet, and after Judas left for the ultimate betrayal. It's a small

section of Jesus' lengthy "Farewell Discourse" to his disciples that takes up four chapters of John's Gospel. If you have a red letter Bible, that's about the only color you see.

But this part of that longer reading does not speak directly to Jesus' death and resurrection, but rather to what was going to happen to his disciples after he ascended to the Father, which we celebrate later this week.

Jesus knew he needed to reassure them about the future. Consider the disciples' situation. They had traveled with Jesus for almost three years and witnessed his miracles. They were part of the crowds and the excitement that Jesus generated, and experienced the charismatic force of his personality. Was it all suddenly going to end? Would they all just go back to their old jobs?

No, they would not. That was not God's plan. Jesus did not come into the world only to teach and preach to people who were alive at the time. He also came to reveal God to humanity for all time, and to make God's love known for all time.

So he told them the Father would send another Counselor to be with them forever. Other Bible versions refer to an Advocate, Comforter, or other similar terms. In our version today we heard Jesus say, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

As a result, Jesus was preparing the disciples for life after he was gone, and he offered a vision of the future shaped by God's promises. He wanted them to know that their work would not be ended by his absence from the world as God's Son, but rather would be made possible by God's presence in the world through the Holy Spirit.

III.

So today, I will focus on half of the picture, which is how the Holy Spirit works in our lives individually as Christians. The other half, which will be covered in two weeks on Pentecost, is how the Holy Spirit affects our lives collectively as a community of faith at St. Thomas.

And as a brief digression, that sermon in two weeks will be especially timely because it also will talk about the St. Thomas Advisory Roundtable (which we call START) that has been described in recent newsletters and service bulletins. The Roundtable will be considering important aspects of St. Thomas future, and invites your participation.

But, back to today. I can continue with the story of a preacher who saw a man who appeared to be homeless sitting on a park bench. He stopped, gave him \$20, and whispered, "Never despair." The next day the same man found the preacher and gave him \$75. The preacher was perplexed, and the other fellow said, "You were right! Never Despair won the third race and paid 4 to 1."

The point is that sometimes people are not who they seem to be. In the same way, the Holy Spirit might not conform to our own image of a spiritual being. We might think of the Spirit as some type of force, perhaps like in Star Wars, or as an invisible presence watching all we do.

The fact is, however, that the Spirit, like the Father and Son, is God. The church teaches that all three persons exist as one God. The Nicene Creed proclaims the Spirit as the Lord, and giver of life. And so the Spirit is a divine being, co-equal with the Father and Son, eternally existing, even before creation. We will hear more about this next month on Trinity Sunday.

But for now we should know that the Holy Spirit picked up where Jesus left off. The Spirit carried on in the world after Jesus ascended to heaven. As Jesus' work on earth ended the Holy Spirit's work began. Everything that Scripture tells us about God the Father and our Lord and Savior in Biblical times is made real in our lives today through the working of the Spirit.

This means that while two thousand years ago people who saw and heard Jesus could receive him in their hearts, today the Spirit enables us to receive Christ into our hearts. When Jesus was alive he proclaimed God's will for us. Now the Spirit can reveal God's will for us. Jesus actually explained Scripture to his listeners. Today the Spirit can teach the meaning of Scripture to us.

IV.

And so we might give some thought to how we live in the Spirit as Jesus intended. A point of departure might be in understanding that the Spirit does not take over our lives whether we are ready or not. And the Spirit does not appear on demand. Instead, the Spirit shows forth through our lives only when we let go of ourselves and trust in what God is doing.

For example, if we think we can acquire the Spirit on our terms, and in our own strength, then we are doing little more than the fellow in our story who was looking for his wallet near a lamp post. On the other hand, if we give ourselves to the Spirit, then we can experience God's love and grace as he intends.

And it's more than semantics. The distinction is important. The Spirit is among us now, in the world, everywhere, all the time, patiently waiting for believers. But if we try to reach out and get some of the Spirit, if we think we can transfer some of the Spirit from the world to ourselves, it won't work.

We cannot make the Spirit increase in us. We increase in the Spirit. We don't open the door and reach in and grab some of the Spirit. Instead we open the door, walk through it and let the Spirit grab us.

When we do that we are surrendering, not acquiring. That's the key; to surrender rather than acquire; to give ourselves to the Spirit rather than believing we can gather the Spirit into us.

That means opening ourselves to God's plans and recognizing that sometimes our plans are not his plans. It also means trusting in God to see us through difficulties we cannot fix even though we think we can.

And when we surrender the Holy Spirit will come, and we will be filled. We will experience God and be led in the way of wisdom and truth, and will know the love God has for us as his children.

V.

We all probably have had moments when the Spirit is with us. A difficult problem suddenly is resolved. A passage of Scripture takes on new meaning. Anxiety or worry is replaced by feelings of comfort or acceptance. Maybe we think back on an unanticipated blessing and wonder, "How did that happen?" Those moments come from living in the Spirit.

In some ways the Holy Spirit is like a cell phone tower. The further we are away from the tower, the worse the reception. The closer to the tower, the better the reception. If we do our best to place ourselves close to our Lord, the Spirit will ensure that our calls go through.

And so the Holy Spirit is more than some vague and undefined presence that roams around through the Book of Common Prayer on Sunday mornings. The Spirit continues in our lives as nothing less than revelation of God and the continuation of the work of our Lord and Savior. And only with the help of the Spirit can we truly know the Lord. *Amen.*