

A-Easter 6, 2008  
St. Luke's, Renton, WA  
Kevin Pearson, Preacher

John 14.15-21

Sometimes I marvel that you and I come here. There are, you know, other things we could be doing with our time on Sunday mornings. And I have to say, though it might be bad for business, that I sure enjoyed sleeping-in last Sunday when I was on vacation and only attending a later mass. I do marvel that we come here, for to do so is a revolutionary act and while we live in a land born of revolution, few of us anymore choose to cut against the grain of our culture. It is possible that coming to church has become rote for you and you come simply because you're used to coming, but I doubt there are many, if any of us, who come with so little intention. The vast hoard of us, I'm sure, fall into a continuum of folk with varied intensities, but who come to church because we have some inkling about life in the Spirit and we seek to be reminded, shaped and enlivened by the Spirit of God in community. We seek to expose ourselves to God. We're here, rather than not here, because on some level we know there is a land out beyond the land of our own private selves—our individual wants, our own possessions, our little worlds and our false selves—there's a land out beyond the land of our own private selves where there is awe, wonder, compassion, grace, generosity, and love and we seek to meet there, dwell there. Or here.

We don't always know what to call this land, but we know it when we see it or feel it or sense it or get a whiff of it or come alive to it in some way. The church calls it a place of the Spirit and it breathes where it wills. We build churches as gathering places in order to touch the Spirit of God. Sometimes we get confused, as humans are wont to do, and we think that the building itself contains the Spirit. But as Luke writes in our first lesson today "the Lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands." This house of prayer *occasions* the Spirit; it is in our meeting and in our leaning toward one another, our leaning toward God by our intentions, by our hearts singing praise, our prayers, and our cares that we become aware of the Spirit of God who is ever present.

This is why, by the way, that we talk a lot in the church these days about all of us being celebrants of the liturgy. We are not spectators at a show (though that pattern is always difficult to break). We are all participants in the grand drama of the liturgy. Now if you were the director of a drama, what would you do if 2/3's of your cast sat back and watched with wary and critical eyes while the other 1/3 participated? Well, you would give that 2/3 something to do and you would call them to the task. There is a sitting back posture and a leaning out posture, a withdrawn posture and a posture of offering.

And our doing this is, indeed, revolutionary. For are we not taught to look out for #1? Are we not taught to rely on our own understanding? Are we not encouraged to form our own perspective and to assert it strongly above all others? Is there not a greater premium placed upon our ability to speak rather than our capacity to listen? Are we not to rise and conquer as opposed to make room and share? Yet we come to this place, yielding to the power of the Spirit, and in our coming we stand the chance of being shattered and made utterly new. Not just anyone would venture here. But we are here. We come.

My sense of our texts today, is that they are calling us—they are inviting us—to the life and wonder and well-being God holds out to us when we are able to slip out of our isolated shells and lean toward God in faith. Tilden Edwards, a master in the spiritual life and founder of the



Shalem Institute in Washington DC, suggests that the whole of the spiritual journey is a life-long process of spiritual conversion which involves God's slow purging us of our sense of separateness and illuminating our true natures on the way to union with God and with God's loving will in the world. Or to say that with less words: God invites us from our separateness to connection with God and to live in love.

But things get in the way; we do not walk easily from our culturally conditioned and self-seeking worlds to union with God. It takes practice: weekly practice, daily practice—sometimes more.

What people in 12-step programs know is that their lives have been shaped by some addiction and it takes not only the turning over of their wills to God's will, but it takes a regular practice of reminding—a regular spiritual conversion to change their mind and open anew to the way of the Spirit. So strong can be our own attachment to our own selves and desires.

In John's gospel, Jesus is portrayed as knowing the fearful hearts of his followers. They worry what will happen to themselves when Jesus, their leader, is no longer with them. And Jesus says that the Father will give them another Advocate to be with them forever. What is an advocate, but one who comes along side you, walks with you, supports, encourages, upholds you? One who listens to you, knows your heart, and speaks on your behalf. To those who are fearful of being left by Jesus, they are promised an Advocate, who is the Spirit of God who will be intimately present to them. "I will not leave you orphaned," says this Jesus. The wonder of the Spirit is that it is always and ever present. Our Advocate is always with us. As Luke says in Acts, "in him we live and move and have our being." The trick is our own opening up of ourselves to notice the Spirit's presence. The trick is to practice the presence of the Spirit such that we rely on it rather than all of the things fear would have us clutch onto.

The promise of God is that when we do step out beyond our private and isolated selves and circles and abandon ourselves to the mercy and love of God, we become part of the energy of that love for the world. And it happens right here. When we are willing to lend our voice to the chorus of praise, the room swells with sound and each and all of us are transported to that land—to this land, where we can see, feel, sense the Spirit at work among us generating love and giving us life.

The invitation today is to open our hearts, open our lives, to the presence of the Spirit, the presence of love that God has for us which exceeds anything that we can desire on our own.

May it be so.