

Together, a Discerning Community

The third of three sermons in the series

“Seeking Vitality and Renewal for Our Church”

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- John 14:23-26 ²³Jesus answered [Judas Thaddeus], “Those who love me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and my Father and I will come to them and live with them. ²⁴Those who do not love me do not obey my teaching. And the teaching you have heard is not mine, but comes from the Father, who sent me. ²⁵I have told you this while I am still with you. ²⁶The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God enables us to be a discerning community of faith.

Last week I was on jury duty for the county’s Common Pleas court. That’s downtown in the tall, modern building just south of First Energy Stadium, next to the new Hilton Hotel. This was the third time in ten years that I’d been summoned for duty, so I knew the drill. I knew what to take with me to endure the hours of waiting. I knew where to go and how to get there.

But the first time I went ten years ago was a different story. I was nervous not only about being a juror. How long would it take to ride the bus there? Would I know where to get off? What would I have to do to clear the security checkpoint staffed by sheriff’s deputies just inside the building? And once past security and inside that expansive lobby, where exactly was I to go?

I remember that very first time trying to find my way. I looked for signs bearing the word “Jurors.” I took an escalator, walked across a terrace, went up another escalator, turned a corner, went up yet another escalator, down a hall, turned into another hall, and there were two lines of people divided alphabetically. I figured out where the end of my line was.

The line slowly crawled forward. Got to the check-in desk, was checked-in, then sent down another hall into a large room that’s a cross between a library and an airport terminal: hundreds of people sitting in rows of chairs or at tables or study carrels or on couches. That was a lot to discover that first time I was called to jury duty. I didn’t know where to go, what to do, what was going to happen next.

Today’s reading from John Chapter 14 catches the disciples just a little anxious about not knowing what’s going to happen next. In the previous chapter, Chapter 13, Jesus has just alerted them that he knew he was going to be betrayed. Before that, the disciples had no idea that might happen. Jesus revealed this in the familiar passage about him washing the disciples’ feet to show them that in order to be leaders they needed to embrace servanthood. In so many words Jesus hinted that his betrayal will result in his death.

The next chapter, Chapter 14, begins with the familiar passage about “In my father’s house there are many rooms,” and includes the famous assurance, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” The disciples were beginning to put the pieces together; they realized that without Jesus there to guide them, they weren’t sure what they were to do next. Attempting something akin to cramming for a test, the disciple Philip figured he should just come right out and tell Jesus to show them exactly what they needed to do. Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the father, and we will be satisfied.”

In so many words Jesus responded, “Just as I figured... you still don’t get it. If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Heavenly Father.”¹

What was their problem, those disciples? They had Jesus right there talking with them, leading them, teaching them. Now they wondered what they were to do? Shouldn’t knowing Jesus have been sufficient? Well, yes, he was sufficient, but the disciples’ ability to appreciate him was limited.

¹ John 14:8ff paraphrased

So a little later in the chapter Jesus told them something that should put them at ease. He acknowledged that they still felt somewhat lost even though he'd taught and showed them what they need to know. Then he assured them that they would not be left without help and direction. In Chapter 14, verses 25-26 Jesus said, "I have told you this while I am still with you. The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you."²

Now here's something to consider: Jesus was speaking not just to The Twelve. He was speaking to us, too. He was reassuring you and me as well that we are not on our own – indeed, he said, "I will not leave you comfortless."³ What Jesus promised the disciples of then and today was God's enduring, enlivening, edifying Spirit as a comfort and guide. In this translation Jesus gives the Holy Spirit sort of a nickname of "The Helper." Other Bible translations put it as "The Advocate"⁴ or "The Comforter"⁵ or "The Companion"⁶ or "The Friend."⁷ Those are all attempts to translate a Greek word that literally means "one called alongside to help."

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For several weeks we've been talking about what I've been calling a "season of Vitality & Renewal." Last year some leaders in our presbytery noticed that a number of its churches – large and small – seemed to be "ripe" for exploring new opportunities. I was excited when I heard about this initiative because I'm sensing that as a congregation we are, indeed, on the verge of something exciting and life-changing. Two weeks ago we began preparing to enter this "season of Vitality & Renewal" by affirming that we **look to the future with eyes of faith** because we see God in our future as well as our past and present. Last Sunday we acknowledged that we will **employ faithful imaginations** because in faith we believe that God may lead us in ways we've not yet even imagined.

But how will we be able to do this? What great idea is someone going to share? What previously unknown spiritual or tangible resources are we going to discover? What aspect of our past is going to be the foundation for this exciting, trusting, bold, faithful step into the future? To what are we being led, how will we begin to head in that direction, and who is going to help us figure it all out?

We are. We will. We can... because our church taking this exciting next step is not left solely up to us. How could we forget: Jesus promised that the Heavenly Father will send the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit – our Helper, Companion, Friend, Advocate – that the Holy Spirit will teach us everything we need and will cause us to remember the way of Jesus. I like the way the translation called "The Message" presents that: it says, "The Holy Spirit... will make everything plain to you."⁸

We can trust that the Holy Spirit is giving us the gifts we need as a faith community to be able to discern our future. **Together we will be a discerning community:**

- we will get to know each other better and enjoy our fellowship even more;
- we will eat together and talk with one another;
- we will worship and pray, study and explore;
- we will share and suggest and search and test – testing our perceptions to see if our plan for our future strengthens our fellowship or weakens it, strengthens our witness to the world or dilutes it.

In short, through eyes of faith we will take a fresh look at ourselves and our communities and our opportunities and our capabilities. Guided by the Holy Spirit we will seek to discern what God intends for this congregation God has planted right here. After all, God put us here so that God's will may be done in Rocky River and beyond as it is in heaven. This is not our church; it's God's church, and we are ready to come together to discern the next steps God has in store for us.

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² Good News Translation

³ John 14:18 King James Version

⁴ John 14:26 New Revised Standard Version

⁵ John 14:26 Amplified Bible

⁶ John 14:26 Common English Bible

⁷ John 14:26 The Message

⁸ from John 14:25-27 The Message