



What Do We Presume?

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Year C, Easter 6

Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29

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‘The Advocate, 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.’

We hear this promise. It builds on the readings we’ve been hearing since Easter of the promised Holy Spirit that’s to come. And we know Pentecost is just around the corner, the festival sometimes named the birthday of the church, when there’s great outpouring of the Spirit upon the gathered community. Is this promise of the Holy Spirit a new thing, a special thing that’s to happen? If so, what happened to the Holy Spirit we already know of, where’s she being hanging out in the meantime?

The ruach of Genesis who breathes life into being populates the OT. Pnuema, the name in Greek in the NT that’s invoked as Advocate today. “[B]oth [are understood as] invisible forces ... [having] three main meanings ... “wind”, “breath” and “spirit”. ... the energy behind the experience of the invisible force, rather than the force itself.¹ This Holy Spirit to come, are we talking continuity, displacement, replacement, how do we place what seems to be declared as new with that which has been?

I found this week’s gospel, along with a number of the readings over the Easter season, setting my teeth on edge. I think it’s because of their certainty and definitive lines of inclusion and exclusion “We are

¹ <https://heraultenglishchurch.fr/jj-ruach-and-pneuma.php>

witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” “I have told you [I am the Messiah] and you do not believe ... because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish.”

It's in keeping with a rhetoric of persuasion. Emerging from a newly evolving and likely persecuted community I get the need for this. That it's necessary when you've been changed, converted might be the word. When your world and you in it, has been upended. Fearful, you need to posit certainty in face of what you are yet to know. You need to justify and defend your position. To yourself as much as to those from the world you used to inhabit. It's essential also, potentially life dependent, protecting those who are part of this emerging community. The new identity opening up for you is grounded in and shaped from the old. Grounded in the tradition and culture in which Jesus was born, yet shifted and changed. In order to create stability, to know and assert unique identity over against what has been you need there to be innies and outies. To be safe, you need to be able to identify who is like you, who belongs and who does not.

But this is not our current context. In the place we 're now located, I wonder whether the greater threat to the continued existence of the community known as church is not persecution but irrelevance. And the rhetoric expressed through these texts, if left unfiltered, exacerbates this. The idea that we need such defended identity. Need to claim specialness over against others and fortify this with assertions of rightness, is not helpful.

We're in the season of Easter that follows from the Passion drama. At the end of the Good Friday service, I happened to be asked why we keep telling this terrible story year upon year and yet nothing has changed. I mused as to whether this tells us something of our expectations. That through Christ we expect that it is possible to

change the world, even though Jesus died trying. Could we be bold enough to consider that the Good Friday/Easter story is telling us about the way things are, the way the world is. That systems of power and dominance would rather kill that which threatens their grasp on control than be changed. The dreadful threat that if people uncover and embrace their own worthiness, and that of each other, they might want to live in a way to express this, they might be given eyes to see through the tyranny of control and be freed from it.

We tell the Good Friday story in the face of the systems of power and dominance, though it may seem futile, because there **is** another story and it is valid in its telling. A story that quietly yet insistently refuses to accept the one told and enacted by the powerful - that they have right and authority to dominate and determine the shape of things.

I suggested the rhetoric of the post Easter texts was unhelpful if left unfiltered. Let's pay a bit of attention to the part we may have in this. If we think we've been given a special gift for our special selves we may think, perhaps subconsciously, that in order for people to also receive it they have to become like us. Interestingly this resonates with the ways of the powerful in the world around us. And suggests though we claim a difference of context, we may not be that far apart. Perhaps we're afraid of everyone getting included and welcomed as they are. We're anxious at the inclusion of people not like us, especially if we struggle with who or how they are. What would that lead to and mean for the outworking and purpose of the community we've committed ourselves to? Chaos?

Our very real, fearful anxieties mean we want to narrow and control what's possible. Ironically in limiting the possible, we come to limit ourselves, our potential, who we can be. Entangled in this way makes it harder for us to see **through** the way the world seems to be, to discern that insistent story. That life and being and value are not measured by the sum of power and dominance one possesses. And we have part in inhabiting this quiet insistent story, without possessing it, even as this may go against every of our acquisitive instincts and training.

How might it look for us to live this insistent way? Bp Mariann Budde writes: “Acceptance of the world’s suffering is our collective responsibility and responding with ... love is our most authentic task. ... Love is not always easy but like muscles we get stronger with both repetition and as the burden gets heavier. And it works.”

What Curry means by “and it works” isn’t that we always get what we want or hope for, but rather that love is God’s way. When we choose love in response to what we wish we could change but can’t; when we choose love as our response to the world as it is, not what we wish it were; when we choose love over denial, or anger, or cynicism and withdrawal, we share in God’s redeeming of our world. It doesn’t make the work any easier, but it gives our efforts a sense of purpose that can carry us through.

Acceptance remains among the hardest things asked of us. The price is always high, but in the face of what we would never choose and cannot change, it provides a way forward. We needn’t worry if we don’t always get it right. ... Our capacity to love will grow, and through us, God will work quiet miracles that keep hope alive, even in troubling times. “²

² Mariann Edgar Budde. (2023). *How We Learn to Be Brave*. Penguin, 102, 103