

June 13, 2010

First Baptist Vancouver

Text: John 15:26-16:16

Title: "The Witness of the Spirit – Part II"

(Continuing a series in "The Space in which He Calls Us to Follow")

Once more...

I invite you to explore with me "the space" in which Jesus NOW calls us to follow.

It is not like "the space" in which the first disciples followed Him:

they *saw* Him with their own eyes,

heard Him with their own ears,

touched Him with their own hands (1 John 1:1-2) – "Lucky bums!"

And it is not like "the space" which we will one day inhabit when in the new creation we will see Him face to face.

"The space" in which we are NOW called to follow Jesus is marked by the absence of His physical presence, not by His absence...thank God!!

It is by living in this space that Jesus began to prepare the first disciples, and us, on the night before going to the cross.

Again, review the context with me.

Jesus had gathered the original 12 disciples together for a meal in an "upper room" somewhere in the downtown core of the city of Jerusalem.

*Jesus likes to gather disciples in the downtown core of cities!

During the meal, Jesus gets up, wraps a towel around His waists, gets down on His knees (!!), and washes the disciples' feet. Mercy!

Thereby revealing His understanding of what it means to be Lord, and thereby showing us the posture we are to take in the world" servants of the Serving Lord.

After that surprising humbling act, Jesus goes on to tell His followers that He would soon leave them. "I am going to the Father", he says. He had come from the Father...and was now going back to the Father.

And for the rest of the evening Jesus prepares the first disciples, and us, to go on living and serving in the absence of His physical presence.

I invite you now... for just a moment, to transport yourself from this room to the place where you spend the majority of your time: an office, a classroom, a Board Room, a house, a restaurant, a hospital, a garden, an airport and airplane.

Now, while in that place, ask yourself: "What do I know to be true about my situation that is going on in that place?" Look around. Listen. Feel. Touch. Take in all the data you can "that is happening in *my* situation?"

In the Upper Room in the downtown core of the city, Jesus prepares us disciples to go on living and serving in the absence of His physical presence by helping us understand what is happening in every situation in which we live and serve.

Four facts stand out to me from what we read in John 14-16

1) First, I know that the people in my situation are, for the most part, like me, trying to make sense of life, and trying to do the best they can in light of what they know at the

moment. Some are making progress, some are messing up...some big time. But everyone, for the most part, is seeking to make sense of their existence, wanting to be, in the words of St. Barnabus(?) "fully human, fully alive." Would you agree?

2) Second, I know that the great "enemies" of life are at work in my situation. I know that sin, evil, and death are at work in my situation and in your situation. That is why there is frustration, confusion, sickness, pain. That is why there is jealousy, lust, power-grabbing, injustice.

Sin, evil, and death are at work in every place we live and serve. Jesus never sends anyone into life and service with rose-coloured glasses. He does not want us to get blindsided. There are powers at work moving against Him and His good pleasure. Would you agree?

3) Third, I know that sin, evil, and death do not have the last word in our situations. Sometimes it appears they do! But they do not. Sin, evil, and death have been defeated – by Jesus! They are strong foes...but they are defeated.

"Because", says Jesus, "I go to the Father." His coming from the Father involved a sequence of events:

- the virgin conception
- the virgin birth,
- His growing up in Nazareth.

His going back to the Father involved a sequence of events:

- His crucifixion,
- His resurrection
- His ascension to the throne of the universe.

And through that sequence of events, He defeated sin, evil, and death. He did not abolish them. One day He will! And every passing day makes that "one day" one day closer! He did not abolish the enemies, but He did defeat them. They do not occupy the place in our existence they once did.

Because He has gone to the Father, because He has died on the cross, and passed through the grave, and is seated on the throne, the stranglehold of sin is broken, the authority of evil is broken, the grip of death has been broken.

(I am going to unpack this more fully the first three Sundays of July.)

If this were not true, discipleship and ministry would be impossible. For you and I are simply no match for sin, evil, and death. You and I are all the other you's and I's on this planet are no match for these foes.

But Jesus is! Only Jesus is. And he has defeated them. Sin, evil, and death, as strong as they may be, are not as strong as Jesus. They do not have the last word in my situation or your situation. Would you agree?

4) And fourth, and most importantly, I know that we are not alone in any of our situations. This is the major fact of life Jesus wants us to know. We are never alone, anywhere, any time.

There is a Presence in the absence...n the absence of Jesus physical presence...there is a Person: bigger, stronger, wiser, more living, more just, than any other person or persons

in our situation.

The Person is here. That is what Jesus calls Him, “the Paraclete” – one called in alongside. “Another” Paraclete, as Jesus says, another of the same kind as Jesus, called in alongside.

Just like Jesus. So much so (!), the Presence of the Paraclete is the Presence of Jesus!
In every situation the Paraclete is there. Would you agree?

“I go to the Father”, and “when I go I will send the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, to be with you and *in* you.”

And not “just there”, but at work there...on the job! Very much on the job.

And...and this is the truth, I want to emphasize today (and next Sunday) He is at work, not only in us, in our situations, He is at work in the others in our situations.

The Paraclete is at work in Jesus’ disciples. Hallelujah!

And, He is at work in those who are not yet Jesus’ disciples. Hallelujah! Would you agree?

The Paraclete is at work in you and in me. We are surrounded by His Presence. We are indwelt by His Presence.

Bring to our remembrance the things Jesus said: teaching us all truth, leading us into all truth, disclosing what is to come, making Jesus (and His Father) real to us.

The Paraclete is doing this not only on Sunday mornings in the Sanctuary, not only in Bible studies in small groups, in counseling sessions, but “out there” in those places where we spend the majority of our time.

And, not only in us “out there”, but in the world “out there”. The Paraclete...quite apart from us...is at work “out there” in the world, on behalf of the world.

It is important to remember what John – who recorded Jesus’ words - means by “world”. The actual word is “cosmos”. “Cosmos”, in John’s vocabulary, does not refer to the natural world, to the earth and sea and sky.

Rather, “cosmos” refers to “human society organizing itself without God.”

“World”/“cosmos”: human society resisting God, rejecting God, rebelling against God.

Know any place like that?

“World” – Our situation!! The context in which we are called to bear witness, to testify to Jesus as Lord of the world...mighty to save!

And to testify in such a way that the world chooses to no longer be “world”, to no longer “organize itself without God”.

But how?

How in heaven’s name can our witness to Jesus break through to “the world”?

- In many parts of the world the doors are literally closed to witnesses.

- In our part of the world unbelief appears invincible. The values and pre-suppositions of our secular age often appear impenetrable. (I owe the term to David Wells, “God the Evangelist”, 28)

How do we break through?

Answer:

We do not!

We do not break through.

We cannot break through.

But!

The Paraclete can. And does.

That is what Jesus wants us to get...that is what Jesus wants us to realize about any situation

Listen: John 15:26

“...when the Paraclete comes...He will bear witness of one.”

Yes, so will we. But what Jesus’ emphasizes is that even if we do not, the Holy Spirit does.

Listen: John 16:8

“And He, when He comes, will convict the world.”

He...the Spirit of truth... He will convict human society organizing itself without God. Like a brilliant prosecuting attorney, He will break through the resistance, rebellion, rejection...and convict the world.

Not in the sense of “secure a conviction before a judge”, as D.A. Carson puts it, but in the sense of “drive home personal conviction in an individual’s heart and mind.” (“The Farewell Discourse” 139)

One of my favourite scholars is Leslie Neubigin, a British Anglican who spent most of his adult life serving in India, working with Hindus in South India.

“If you have ever entered into dialogue with the Hindu worldview you know what a challenge those years must have been!!

Let me read Neubigin’s insight into Jesus’ promise: “the Paraclete will bear witness of me”.

I am reading from his book “The Light Has Come”. (If you can only read one book on the Gospel of John, read Neubigin’s “The Light Has Come”.)

It is important to note what is not said. It is not said that the Spirit will help the disciples to bear witness. That would make the action of the disciples primary and that of the Spirit auxiliary. What is said is that the Spirit will bear witness and – secondary – the disciples are witnesses.

The Gospel repeatedly affirms that it is not the work of man, but of God to bring people to the knowledge of Jesus as He truly is. To know Jesus as Lord can never be the work of “flesh and blood”. It is always a miracle of God’s grace and never the direct result of even the most impressive ‘proclamation’; for no one comes to Jesus unless the Father draws him (6:44).

What is promised here is that...the Spirit will “perform his own miracle (!!)

 in the hearts and consciousness of people so they are brought to recognize Jesus as the One He is.”

The promise to the community of the disciples is not that they will have the Spirit at their disposal to help them in their work of proclamation. That misunderstanding has profoundly distorted the missionary action of the Church, and provided the occasion for a kind of missionary triumphalism (of which we ought to be ashamed).

The Spirit is not the church’s auxiliary.

The promise is not in the midst of the church's words and deeds and sufferings...."The mighty Spirit of God will bear His own witness and the crucified Jesus is Lord and giver of life." (207-208) Wow!

Do you see how this puts our situation in a very different light?

Long before we say or do anything, the Paraclete is already on the job. He is always already on the job, "out there" doing His thing...quite apart from us!

We tend to think that evangelism happens only when we show up. Not so! The great Evangelist is there ahead of us.

The privilege we are given is that of joining Him in His already-well-on-the-way work.

We are not the ones who will bring about conviction of the heart. He will...the Paraclete will...the Holy Spirit will!

Long before we come on the scene the Spirit is already there...and in some way bearing His own witness to Jesus. Making Jesus real and attractive. This is such good news! Especially at this challenging time in history in this challenging contest.

So a friend of mine, Jodi Hoffman, a systems engineer for TRQ, defines evangelism this way: He had heard me speak on the witness of the Spirit, and in the parking lot after the meeting said:

"Try this on: Evangelism is listening in on a conversation the Holy Spirit is having with a human being."

Bingo! He got it.

Evangelism is listening in on a conversation the Holy Spirit is having with a human being." And speaking only when invited by the Spirit or the human being.

That is what is going on in "The space" in which Jesus calls us to follow!

As we and the other people in our situation try to make sense of our lives, the Spirit is having a conversation with us, with them.

And when we listen carefully, we can sometimes hear the conversation. And sometimes are even invited to join the conversation.

We see this mystery lived out throughout the larger biblical story.

For instance, in the story of Abraham and a king named Abimelech. Abraham, out of fear, had said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister". So Abimelech took Sarah into his harem.

But the text says (Genesis 20) "God came to Abimelech in a dream in the night and said to him, 'Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman you have taken, for she is married.'" (20:3)

How many other kings have heard such a word in their head and heart? Some, like Abimelech, have responded righteously. Others have not. But the Spirit was there...having a conversation.

Or, like the story of Joseph and Pharaoh of Egypt. The text says (Genesis 41) "The Pharaoh experienced a number of puzzling dreams over a period of nights. The dreams troubled his spirit. He did not know why he is dreaming or what the dreams meant. Until someone mentions Joseph, who had helped others recognize dreams as possible conversations the Spirit of God is having with the dreamer.

Joseph says to the Pharaoh, "God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do." (25,26) God!

How many other leaders has the Spirit spoken to? How many leaders is He speaking to right now? Who are feeling restless? Who cannot sleep?

Or, the story of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon!

The text says (Daniel 2), “Nebuchadnezzar dreamed dreams, and his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him.” (2:2)

Daniel is brought in to help the King. He recognizes that the Spirit of God is having a conversation with Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel says to the King, “There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place...” (2:28)

How wonderful! God wanted that world leader to know His will. So entered into a conversation with him...?? Daniel was then invited to speak.

Or, the story of Pilate’s wife.

Pilate is wrestling with what to do with Jesus. The fact that he wrestles says the Spirit of God is somehow at work. Agitation about you is a sign that the Spirit is at work!

Matthew tells us, that as Pilate wrestles, his wife sends word to him: “Have nothing to do with that righteous man; for today I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him”.

(Matthew 27:19) The Spirit was bearing witness to Jesus in the heart and mind of Pilate’s wife – “a righteous man”. And both she and Pilate knew they were being spoken to beyond what humans were saying to them.

Long before any of us bears witness in our situations, the Spirit is already there bearing His witness.

Sometimes the Spirit asks us to speak into the conversation. Sometimes He does not.

Either way, He is on the job.

You can hear echoes of the conversation in so much of the music of our time. You can hear this deep groaning, this deep longing for something outside ourselves to help us be whole.

Why? Because the Spirit is speaking...opening people up to “something more”.

So Celine Dion in her song, “Call the Man”. Listen.

“Close the door
Shut the world away
All the fight’s gone from this wounded heart.
Across the floor
Dreams and shadows play
Like windblown refugees

Call the man
Who deals in love beyond repair
He can heal the world
Of hearts in need of care
Shine a light ahead
When the next step is unclear
Call the man
He’s needed here

I closed my eyes
I remember when
Your sweet love filled this empty room
The tears I cry
Won't bring it back
Unless the lonely star should fall

Call the man
Who deals in love beyond repair
He can heal the world
Of hearts in need of care
Shine a light ahead
When the next step is unclear
Call the man
He's needed here

Needed in the chaos and confusion
From the plains to city hall
Needed where the proud who walk the wire are set to fall

Call the man
Who deals in once upon a time
Maybe he
Can mend this broken heart of mine
Shine a light ahead
Now the future isn't clear
Call the man
He's needed here
Call the man
He's needed here

He's needed here
He's needed here
Call the man

He's needed here
Right here right now."

Knowing or unknowingly, the song is a response to the witness of the Spirit, to Jesus, the Man who deals in love.

"He..the Paraclete", says Jesus..."will bear witness of me."

In the world, organizing itself without God, He will bear witness of One.

- It is the Spirit..not the apostles...who initiated the first evangelistic move into the city of Jerusalem.

- It is the Spirit who led Stephen to break out of the confines of Judaism to reach out to the Greeks (6:3,5,10; 7:55)
- It is the Spirit who brought in the Samaritans and Ethiopian eunuch and the Gentile godfearers like Cornelius.
- It is the Spirit who broke into the worship service in Antioch....imagine that...right in the middle of worship! And commanded the church to send Paul and Barnabus into Asia Minor.

Long before any of makes a move to share the good news of Jesus the Spirit is already on the move.

And is this not what we see happening in the story of the early Church as we have it in the New Testament document we call "Acts"? Some people call it "The Acts of the Apostles". In one sense, that is correct. But in another sense, it is profoundly misleading. For what Luke, the author of Acts, is relaying is not the human actions of Jesus' apostles, but the super-human action of Jesus' Spirit.

The document should be called, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit".

It is the Spirit ...not the apostle Peter, who brought people under conviction on the Day of Pentecost.

Let us now be still before the Lord. Just listen.\O blessed Paraclete...give us ears to hear your witness...in our hearts and in the hearts of those in the places where we live.