

Chancel Drama/Sermon: The Living Spirit

June 9, 2019

Philip: Hey, Shirley, how are you doing today?

Shirley: I'm good, Phillip; how are you?

Philip: I'm kinda down in the dumps. It's a problem I've had my whole life, actually, but it seems that it's become acute lately—like over the last two years; OK, since November 2016, to be exact. The problem is this—I'm a skeptic, and that skepticism can easily be triggered by circumstances around me. I want to believe in God, but it's hard to believe in an existence you can't see, right? Where is God? Is God alive—surely God must be alive if God exists, otherwise what's the point, but everything living is visible and apparent, right—like Mayflies—aren't they gross? But you gotta admit their lives are obvious, you know? So how can we know if God is real? I can't see God; never seen God, don't expect I ever will. Show me God—and I'll believe. Show me God—and I'll become an environmental activist. Show me God—and I'll double my pledge to Union Congregational UCC!

Shirley: You know, it's not that we can't see God—it's that we're not looking. I just read this book about Fethullah Gülen, and he says it's like we live in a room with 100 doors, all of them open except one. And we're standing in front of the one that's closed. And that's the one we see—and we say, well, that door is closed, so I guess all doors must be closed, even though there are in fact 99 others that are wide open or at least unlocked. Maybe all we need to see God, in other words, is to see the living differently—to see those 99 open doors rather than the one door that's closed. Life is so rich and abundant, isn't it? I mean—it's all around us, everywhere, and always has been, from the moment we're born...so what if we think about God not as the Holy of Holies or something, because that word is really tricky—holy, set apart is what it means, distant, you know, holier than thou—but what if we think of God as the Living Spirit—because when you think about it, life and living is pretty holy, isn't it?

Emmaline or Anne: I'm the Living Spirit who is like a bird—beaked and feathered. I've been called in Scripture a Raptor, even—although not the kind from Toronto, but like an Eagle, and not the kind from Philadelphia, but the national bird, you know. And I've been called a Mother Hen, too, who cares for her chicks. But I think you could see me as a Robin, and I wouldn't take offense. Or an Oriole. Or a Cardinal. Or a Blue Jay—again, not the Toronto kind, but your average shrieking backyard bird. God is a bird—there, I said it. Have you ever seen Canadian geese and how they care for their young? That's how I work as the Living Spirit—quacking and nodding to steer my goslings away from danger. Or have you ever seen a goose grieve for its partner? They do—and so do Sand Hill Cranes. God is a bird. Of course it's a metaphor, but we don't have any other way to talk about me, do we? All language falls short. But if God is alive—and I am, I assure you, quite alive, like the liveliest alive there is—the living Spirit—then I'm like a bird, soaring, seeing, swaying in the breeze, swooping through the trees, nestling in my cozy little crib. Watch the Sand Hill Cranes, if you get a chance—they are funny looking creatures, aren't they? Improbable. How did they survive evolution, anyway? Or check out your everyday seagulls or pigeons—beautiful creatures, actually. It was a pigeon that appeared when Jesus was baptized, although history has turned it into a dove, but in any event I'm the one who flies around you and sings every...single...day. When you have eyes to see, you can see me as part of an integral unity of all things—divine life and birdlife, divinity and animality, spirit and flesh. You can't untangle one from the other.

Philip: Hmm. That's kind of esoteric; it almost sounds pagan, or like we're supposed to imagine God in the image of your local tree-hugging environmentalist. I'm not seeing it; I need real evidence, not some spacey metaphor.

Emmaline: Tweet. Tweet. Tweet.

Phillip: Hmmmm. I swear I just heard that bird talk, like, in my own language, not bird-talk but people talk...

Michael Lukens: And I'm the Living Spirit who is like the wind. In Hebrew my name is Ruah—isn't that pretty? I was present at the very beginning, the genesis of everything, moving over the face of the waters, disturbing them, roiling them up and giving them life. I exist as a slight breeze in Psalm 78, and as the whirlwind in Job. The Prophet Jeremiah understood that I could come from any direction, and thereby represented the freedom of the divine—nobody can contain me—try it. It's like when you go sailing: sometimes you have perfect conditions, a nice easterly breeze, and you can sail across the bay into the sunset. But sometimes there's just too much, or not enough. Human life is learning to know the difference, isn't it?

But Ruah also means breath—as in the breath of life, that first breath that every baby takes when she is born, which is the same breath that Genesis describes as the origin of all human existence. I am the wisdom of God, and I impart wisdom to people. Imagine, for instance, that you're a runner or walker. And you should be a runner or walker. You don't even need to take 10,000 steps, it turns out, to promote health—just 3,000 is enough, or so I've heard in the news recently. But say you're a runner. What happens when you run (or exercise in some other way?) You BREATHE, right? And that breath of life is holy; that breath is sacred; that breath is filled with the oxygen through which I expand your lungs and flow through your veins turning you a nice pink or even (if you're really running a long way like I did yesterday) a little red. And that's a good thing: that redness is the color of Pentecost for a reason; it's the color of blood, the color of life itself: the Living Spirit, Ruah.

But in Greek, my name is Pneuma. You translate that into English as Spirit, but it really means, again, wind or breath. And it has a long philosophical legacy. Pneuma was what the Stoics thought was the “vital energy” of a person; the soul (psyche) which is actually a part of the pneuma of God. For the Stoics, our breath was part of God's breath; the wind we experience is part of God, too. And pneuma is found in four forms, according to the 4th century Christian philosopher Nemesius: the pneuma of tension or coherence, which holds everything together; the pneuma of life-force, found in all growing things; the pneuma of soul—that governing and perceiving essence of life; and the pneuma of reason—the logos. So breath isn't just breathing—all 4 of those forms of pneuma are active in everything. Even a rock has breath or pneuma, according to this way of thinking. The entire earth breathes—and the rocks can sing out, when we have ears to hear.

So I'm the Living Spirit as breath and wind. Does that help you see me, Phillip?

Phillip: Hmmmm. I'm not sure; we can't see the wind, can we? We can see its effects—but....

Michael Lukens: Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh...

Phillip: OK, I think I'm going crazy—I swear I heard a human voice in that wind, speaking to me, encouraging me, telling me I'm never alone, and that I'm loved. Wow. But, it was just the wind...

Barbara: And I am the Living Spirit as a Refining Fire. Fire is of course light—and how most of the world experienced light apart from the sun. And, yes, I am the sun; again—a metaphor! But that energy is mine, and I am that energy. I am the burning bush that spoke to Moses, and that led him to lead his people out of slavery and into freedom. My grace—manifest in light—frees. Martin Luther King Jr. invoked a metaphor of light in his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to describe the working of nonviolent direct action: “We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension,” King asserted. “We merely . . . bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human

conscience.” In my light, you see light—and in my light, your conscience might be fired to change injustice. That’s how it happened in the Civil Rights Movement. When TV cameras caught bigots hurling rocks and racial epithets at peaceful marchers, the ugliness of racism was made manifest to the light of human reason and compassion. Images of light also empowered the oppressed to endure in their struggle, as they sang “This Little Light of Mine” and other freedom songs from jail. Indeed, in the Exodus story itself God returns—after the people have fled Egypt and are wandering in the wilderness—to lead them as a pillar of fire by night—an image to which the prophets return again and again. As light, I expose injustice, and then I light the way to liberation. My grace, manifest in light, is an energy that changes things.

So I am a refining fire. Take the story of Sodom and Gomorrah—you know, that city that was leveled in a war and that the prophets then turned into a synecdoche (look it up) for inhospitality. You see, what the people of Sodom did was not welcome strangers. That violence produced its own result—some strangers eventually leveled the city with fire. You discovered this in the archeological record. But some people still try to turn that story into a clobber passage used to exclude and violate. Ironic, isn’t it! No—what I’m about as fire is warming hearts; changing them from stone into human flesh that FEELS the suffering of another and is willing to do something about it. Put it this way: I’m the fire of love; the passion of God for the people of God; the compassion of God that moves the blood through your veins when you’re in love, and that moves you to care about each other. You do care about each other, don’t you?

Philip: Well, uh, I try? Maybe if I got out of myself a little bit and worked with others that would help me see you more clearly—is that what you’re saying?

Barbara: Crackle, crackle, crackle.

Philip: OK—time to get myself to that therapist’s couch; I really am talking to that fire, which maybe isn’t that weird, because we talk to ourselves all the time, right? And that’s normal—try stopping that internal dialogue. But when the fire talks back? Could that really be what this Christianity thing is all about—listening for God in, with, and under ordinary things? Is that where we encounter God? Is that how prayer gets answered?

Michael Vinson: And I am the Living Spirit as the Advocate; the One who will never leave you nor forsake you; the One who will be like an oak tree for you, there when you’re born, and there when you die: an eternal tree of wisdom and strength. As an Advocate, I’m a lawyer for your defense. As an Advocate, I’m on your side. As an Advocate, I’m the ultimate communicator, pleading your case with the universe.

Which brings me to “The Overstory,” the Pulitzer-prize winning novel by Richard Powers. How many trees would you say there are on the planet? “A lot less than there used to be,” is the correct answer—but still a whole bunch; billions? Trillions?

And why is that, have you ever wondered? Why this proliferation of trees? What do they all mean?

That’s what the novel is about, sort of, and it’s why as your Advocate I’m coming to you right now as the Tree of Life, because without trees, there would be no life. Without trees, no oxygen—and given how you’re all burning through my leftovers there under the surface of the earth in your cars and trucks and trains and planes, you might want to consider who I am and what it means that I’m the Living Spirit, too.

So let’s listen to the trees—not in some romantic silly way, like the quaking aspens—although those are nice, but rather to what they’re saying, as Richard Powers puts it:

“They say: The air is a mix we must keep making.

They say: There’s as much below ground as above.

They [say]: Do not hope or despair or predict or be caught surprised. Never capitulate, but divide, multiply, transform, conjoin, do, and endure as you have all the long day of life....

The environment is alive—a fluid, changing web of purposeful lives dependent on each other.

We ... communicate, over the air and through our roots.

We know when you're close by. The chemistry of our roots and the perfumes our leaves pump out change when you're near....When you feel good after a walk in the woods, it may be that certain species are bribing you. So many wonder drugs have come from us, and you haven't yet scratched the surface of the offerings. We have been trying to reach you. But we speak on frequencies too low for [most] people to hear....

There are seeds that need fire. Seeds that need freezing. Seeds that need to be swallowed, etched in digestive acid, expelled as waste. Seeds that must be smashed open before they'll germinate.

A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still....

What we care for, we will grow to resemble. And what we resemble will hold us, when we are us no longer....

The law must judge imminent at the speed of trees....

What you make from a tree should be at least as miraculous as what you cut down...

Trees used to talk to people all the time. Sane people used to hear them. The only question is whether we'll talk again, before the end.

And let me end with the Muslim poet Rumi, who put it so well:

“Love is a tree with branches in forever with roots in eternity and a trunk nowhere at all.”

So, I am the Living Spirit as your Advocate, your Sister Pine and Brother Oak—who will never leave you nor forsake you.

Philip: OK, I actually think I get it...but I'll need your help. The Holy Spirit is the Living Spirit present in many and diverse ways, like a bird, and wind, and fire, and a tree. And those ARE things we can see—some of those 99 open doors. They speak their languages, yes, but they can speak to us in our language, too—when we listen.

Out of the experience of the Living Spirit in that first Pentecost came the dynamism that grew the church. You would not have predicted it—that this upstart little non-imperial movement of people motivated by grace and faith would survive, much less thrive. And yet they did—because they worked together as friends, no matter what. Their sons and daughters prophesied, and their old men and women dreamed dreams. They were friends of that Living Spirit that was poured out on all flesh. So that's how I'll understand and see God: as a friend. Sure, God is a creator, a mother, father, lover, redeemer, sustainer, wind, fire, breath, tree, and so much more—but what brings me joy are the friendships we share when we work together. That might be working together in Faith Formation, or in Stewardship, or in Outreach, or in New Members Ministry—there are so many ways. And there are so many exciting opportunities on the horizon for us—growing the Dyslexia Clinic (and they still need some new tutors for summer and fall); growing the Brain Center of Green Bay; growing our extraordinary choirs and music programs; growing our food and housing ministries—to name just a few.

But we need each other; nobody can do it alone. We're stronger when we're woven together in a mutual garment of destiny; a web woven in love and service to our neighbors, united by the Living Spirit. And that Spirit says to us: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.'

May it be so. Amen.

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