

Spirit of Truth¹
John 14:15-21
Marilyn Zehr; May 25 2014

These words in John are some of the most comforting words in scripture. Jesus loves his disciples, calls them friends and promises that he will not leave them orphaned in this his farewell discourse. Out of that great love he promises that when he goes to the Father he will ask and God will grant them the Spirit of Truth to dwell within them.

Verse 17:

14:17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

How do we know this Spirit of Truth that Jesus promises will dwell within us?

Although these verses are very comforting, it is hard to live every moment of every day aware of that Spirit which Jesus has promised. Many aspects of our lives challenge our understanding, awareness of and openness to the Spirit of Truth.

Let me tell you what I mean by referring to a several very different experiences/aspects of my week in which I asked myself the Spirit of Truth question.

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Monday evening I had a long conversation with a young 30-something neighbour who described to me how his relationship with his wife had deteriorated. They were separated and he was planning to go to another city for work - the only job offer out of 150 resumes sent. He was going to accept this job so he could continue to support his family even though it meant living 4 hours away from them and would allow him only every third weekend to be with his children. As he told me his story, I thought of women and men all over the world who leave young families in their country of origin to come to Canada for work so that they can send money home. Was he doing the same thing? After he had shared his story with me, we talked about the Spirit of Truth. I asked him where he sought Truth and guidance for his decisions. He knows that I'm a Mennonite Christian and it wasn't long before Jesus came up in the conversation. He shared with me that though he is attracted to the teachings of Jesus, he wasn't sure how that would necessarily help him find a job closer to his children. He asked me if I had something to offer? Where is the Spirit of Truth now I asked myself? In terms of money and a job - no - silver and gold I have none? (from the book of Acts) As we parted he agreed to invite the Spirit of Truth to be his companion, and I promised that I would stay in touch and keep him and his family in my prayers. Is it enough?

The week continued to be challenging. On Thursday, I was present at the hospital when Jaime Romero died after tragically inflicting serious self-harm. Jaime committed suicide. His family has given me

permission to share this with you. There are no words for the sounds of grief that tried to reach down into the depths of Sheol to bring him back. Again in my mind and heart I sought the Spirit of Truth. Together that night we prayed loudly and claimed the promise of the words of Romans 8. Nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, no height, nor depth, anything in all of creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. As I stood by his hospital bed I asked myself, "What was it in our society that destroyed this young man's life?" I am convinced that there was much more than personal volition involved. What kind of society have we created and are we creating that self-inflicted harm that leads to death is ever remotely considered a solution or a way out. The Spirit of Truth reveals that this kind of thinking is a lie.

Two articles that I read this week, also caused me to ask the Spirit of Truth question....the first one that Tim shared with several us from MCC reporting that Israeli settlers bulldozed over 1500 fruit trees planted by Palestinian Christians. We are rightly appalled by such action. The Spirit of Truth within me asks, have we done the same or worse when we Canadian settlers harvest swaths ie millions of 800 year old trees for pulp and paper – or for whatever reason we give to justify destroying the lungs of the planet.

The second article that made me pause was entitled a Call to Arms: An invitation to demand action on climate change: When world leaders gather in New York this fall. The Spirit of Truth in me tells me that choice of rhetoric matters. Although this was not a literal call to bear

arms, we are close enough to climate wars that peaceful civil resistance needs to choose its words carefully.

Read more: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/a-call-to-arms-an-invitation-to-demand-action-on-climate-change-20140521#ixzz32jLoPG9V>
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And finally far less tragic than some of the above, but deeply important in its own way I continue to work with the church Board on guiding the congregation through discernment regarding a possible building project and mission opportunity. A question we all must ask, where is the Spirit of Truth in this process?

The Board is working very hard to respond to everything that we heard following three Soup and Sophia conversations and a two-part pledge survey and to stories of how the Spirit is at work among individuals among us. At our congregational meeting on June 8 we will have an opportunity to gather together to make crucial decisions about next steps.

In this too, we seek the Spirit of Truth. And we have been promised that we receive this Spirit of Truth as something that dwells within us – personally and communally.

But is everything that dwells within us Truth? What if what dwells within us is fear? What if what dwells in us is anger? What if what dwells in us is frustration, for example, frustration that we have changed course as a community and I know it's not entirely clear to

everyone why we have done so even though Doug (and Jon) have so diligently tried to explain it to everyone.

Fear, anger and frustration are part of truth because they are important sources of information. That's why in our times of communal discernment during our Soup and Sophia conversations we listened very carefully and invited each person to examine and express the resistance they thought or felt to the proposals before us. We deliberately solicit and listen to resistance as part of discernment for the important wisdom that lies within it – but that's not the entire story of the Spirit of Truth that we seek to know.

We need to talk. We need to talk about discernment.

The definitions of discernment that I find most helpful come from several long-time, well-seasoned Spiritual directors and writers. These wise persons tell us that discernment can refer to both a posture and a process.”² Discernment as a posture is a spiritual or contemplative attitude that finds God in all things, including and especially in the ordinary things of life. This posture believes that “earth is crammed with heaven.” This is why we believe that we can hear God speak to us through other people and especially through prayerful attention to Scripture.

As a process, discernment is decision making that lets God into the process and *relies* on God to be a telling influence in the choices we make. It is a deliberate attempt to become attuned to the guidance of

² Au, Wilkie. “Holistic Discernment.” *Presence 11:1* (2005): 15-23.

God in important life choices (like the one my young neighbour faces and like the one we face now as a church)

Brother David Steindl-Rast would say that our task in life in every moment is to live in obedient or “responsive listening” to the “living Word of God” and this is much more than discerning or doing God’s will as if God’s will were a static or determined thing. If we are thoroughly listening (*ob audiens – the root word of obedience*) with our whole being or our whole heart we will hear this living Word of God in every person, every thing, and every event. Actually, discernment is learning to fine tune the acoustics of the heart so that we will know with our whole being how to respond to any given moment or complex situation.³ Thus, discernment is careful listening and response to God in a living and dynamic way rather than a seeking after a static fixed predetermined “will” or right way that must be grasped.

Similarly, another theologian says that discernment is learning to tune our hearts to the action and intention of God who is both transcendent and immanent. Because the human creature is always torn between love and fear, between desire for union with God and the terror of it, how can we know when our actions are aligned with the one action of God? He answers with:

This is where discernment comes in. If I want to attune my actions and intentions with God’s one action and intention, then I must discipline my heart to hear what God’s intention is, or rather, I

³ Steindl-Rast, David. *A Listening Heart: The Spirituality of Sacred Sensuousness*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999).

must let my heart be disciplined to hear how my actions fit into God's one action. I must learn to pay attention to the movements of my heart and mind, to reflect on them wisely and carefully with the help of others, [especially spiritual companions,] and to test them over time.⁴

Okay, I adapted this last bit from a paper that I wrote on Discernment. Let me summarize and simplify.

The following is my working definition of discernment.

Discernment is a posture and a process that finds God in everything and relies on God to have an important and meaningful influence on the choices we make. There are certain practices, like prayer, conversations with spiritual companions, attention to the Living word of God in Scripture and creation and learning to understand the messages from our thoughts and feelings including our fears and frustrations that help us to fine-tune our hearts (our whole being) so that we encounter God and God's action in the world moment by moment, remembering all along that nothing, no experience or power can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus. If we know this at a Spirit of Truth level, and if we have attuned our whole beings to this Truth, then we learn to respond to this perception of God's love and action by aligning ourselves and our actions with what we have perceived.

This whole concept of discernment is challenging enough for each of us as individuals, but applying all of this to communal discernment is exponentially more challenging.

⁴ Barry, William A. SJ. *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God: A Theological Inquiry. Revised Ed.* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004). p. 82.

Even as I say this, I want to be clear about what communal discernment is not. Communal discernment is not democracy. Democracy is where individuals exercise their right to vote and the majority of individuals who vote a certain way hold sway. Unlike the nations of this world, the body of Christ is not a collection of individuals with rights but rather a collection of persons, intimately connected to and essential to each other, persons who rely on each other's strengths and who together seek to act in accordance with their corporate desire to follow Jesus.

Yes, occasionally we vote on decisions in this congregation and we do so because it is one way for each of our voices to be heard and included and that matters, but it is not the first, nor most desirable way. That's why we spend a considerable amount of time (often months or years) trying to achieve consensus. Before we ever get to a vote we spend a lot of time talking and most importantly listening to each other and we need to spend even more time than that listening for and seeking God. Yes, we believe that we hear God through each other, but we also need to be still and know that God is God.

If the God train has pulled into the station we need to choose whether or not to get on. (Do I hear a gospel song coming on)

When we think we may be experiencing a call from God to move in a certain direction as a congregation we already do several things really well.

First, we rightly count the cost.

Second, we pay attention to what attracts us to this possibility

and third, we pay attention to the resistance that we have towards this possibility.

Wisdom lies in our both our attractions and our resistances.

Fourth, and we're really, really good at this step, we direct large portions of energy, perseverance and hard work in the direction of whatever project we move towards but I offer a corrective to all of the above that can also be part of the Spirit of Truth

If we're completely honest we know that many of the circumstances of our lives are more miracle than calculation. (let me say that again)

And if God is both the cars and the conductor of the God train maybe that's why it's so hard to get on sometimes. It means we may no longer be entirely in charge. Is what I've just said part of the Spirit of Truth?

Getting on the train when it pulls into the station means trusting that God's got this. It also means trusting each other to be praying, thinking and acting in good faith.

Can we do it?

One more comment from a wise elder steeped in the art of discernment. She reminds us that there is no human process that can protect us from mistakes and failures. We will never be sure of the right course of action. As long as we are human and dealing with other human beings we will be subject to uncertainty and ambiguity in our motives. We can, however, open ourselves to God in the uncertainty, in the ambiguity,

and allow the compulsion for rightness to be transformed into an openness to responsible love.⁵

This passage in John began with “if you love me, you will keep my commandments and ends with 14:21 they who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” Jesus promises to reveal himself to us in an ongoing way and does this through the Spirit of Truth and love.

The Spirit of Truth is connected to both God’s commandments and to the forever love of God. As I said earlier in my sermon, the forever love of God is the kind that we can never, no way, no how be separated from, not in Sheol, not in our stubbornness or refusal to listen to God or each other.

But God does not coerce.

We can turn away from the Spirit of Truth. We can become deaf to it.

We can even reject God’s commandments – but if we do so then we are not acting out of love for God or each other or even ourselves.

Let us choose instead to tune our hearts to hear the Spirit of Truth that abides within us and for that matter all around. Earth is crammed with heaven. This takes practice and trust and openness and these do not necessarily come easily or naturally.

⁵ Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment
Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND
New York: Paulist Press, 1995

Jesus gave this Spirit of Truth to the disciples for their comfort and guidance so that they would not be alone like orphans in the world. So let us allow any fear and frustration to pass over and through us, having gleaned their gifts of wisdom along the way and then allow ourselves to be freed by God to make decisions based on love and on the Spirit of Truth that God grants to dwell within us.