

Sermon (5/20/18, John 16: 5-15):

I am a sentimental old poop. In some ways, I think I've gotten worse as I've grown older.

In my car, I have an origami crane my son made for me years ago. I have yet to figure out how to make it stay put, so it tends to slide and fly all over the place when prompted by the slightest breeze. Yet, it remains and will remain for as long as I can keep finding it. Why? Because my son made it and, for that reason alone, it's precious to me.

In our basement, we have far too much junk. One of these days, my wife and I often say, we need to clean it out! Even when that day comes, however, there are some things that will remain, such as those little art projects our children made for us when they were young as well as numerous items from the houses we grew up in. I've already told my children they will need to bury that stuff with me because it's just not in me to get rid of it.

As my children grew older, I knew the day would come when they'd be striking out on their own. When that day came, I did not handle it well. It felt like significant loss. For so much of my life they had been an integral part of everything we did. Their absence was and is painful. Being an empty nester has not been easy for me.

As my parents age and grow frail, I think a lot more about what was and, I guess, as part of that, I value more greatly my time with them as well as with my siblings.

So, you see, I really am a sentimental ole poop!

It is the way life is, though. One stage to the next. Try though we might to prevent it, to hold it at bay, to avoid it, we cannot. Time's relentless progression inflicts its share of losses and crises on us. None of us are immune.

To be sure, there are also many joys but, as much as we would like to stay in those places, we cannot. Sometimes we call them mountain top experiences, especially when we relate those times to a palpable sense of God's presence. Mountain top because, biblically, that's the place where significant God encounters tended to happen.

For example, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of Jesus'

transfiguration on a mountain top where Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus' glory in all its unmasked magnificence. Jesus shined in transformed clothing. Moses and Elijah showed up to chat. Life's despair had been obliterated.

After witnessing such purity of glory, Peter, naturally, didn't want to leave.

"Let me build a few dwellings for us, Jesus, so we can just stay here forever!"

Who can blame him! It's a little like that perfect vacation moment when even the air smells good! We just wish we could stay. We wish it would never end. We wish we didn't have to go back to the mess. As with that transfiguration moment, however, it does end and down the mountain we must go back to life's worries, losses, and crises.

Stages come and go, loss and transition are something we all encounter, crises are a challenge we must all somehow manage.

Today is Pentecost. A time when we traditionally remember and welcome again the Spirit that Jesus promised to the disciples just before his ascension. Each of the lectionary texts for this morning suggest that the Spirit's arrival came at a time of crisis.

In Acts, it is the crisis of them losing Jesus again as he ascended into the heavens. They were alone and frightened by the prospect of being targeted by the same violent forces that attacked Jesus. They were confused about what they were supposed to do next.

In John, Jesus made it clear that his days were numbered. Soon he would be arrested, tortured, and killed. A blanket of sorrow naturally settled in upon Jesus' followers. So many questions. So much confusion. One stage of their journey was about to end, and another begin. Just the news of Jesus' pending death rattled them to the core. Not unlike the news we hear about a loved one who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. It's stunning, shocking, crippling. The mind has trouble taking it all in. The heart has trouble coping. It feels surreal. We mechanically go through the motions of living but life, essentially, comes to a screeching halt. A time of crisis ensues.

"I have said these things to you and I know sorrow has filled your

hearts.” Jesus tells his followers in John.

It is not like Jesus is insensitive to what a crisis does to us. He understands how deeply it wounds and he makes the promise that he will not leave us on our own. Jesus will send the Spirit, the Advocate, the third person of what we call the Trinity. Indeed, as one stage of life ends and the next begins, Jesus promises that the best is yet to come. The mortal limits of Jesus’ finite presence will be expanded by his leaving. By way of the Spirit, all will come to know and experience what it is like to have the company of God.

We don’t talk a lot about this third person of the Trinity. It is, perhaps, the most difficult part of God to grasp and imagine. To comprehend how this Spirit evidences its presence in our daily living is a significant challenge. A big part of this challenge, I think, is that in order to know this Spirit, we must first acknowledge our need for the Spirit. We cannot do this life thing, at least do it well, without the Spirit. We cannot maintain a lively faith and be the church without the Spirit’s guidance and empowerment. Our success, our well-being, our very lives are dependent upon the Spirit’s breath just like our bodies need oxygen.

It goes against the grain of every independent minded impulse we have been taught to value. Our highly prized self-actualization must be humbly reviewed. We are not as strong as we would like to think we are. We are not as wise as we sometimes assume we are. We are not as self-sufficient as we’d like to believe we are.

In and through Jesus’ words, we are given hints as to what this promised Spirit offers.

First, the Spirit will be a comforter.

At our Pastor’s class this past Monday, I was sharing a story about a time in my life when my grief over the death of my brother was acute. Try though I did to muster up the energy to keep on going and doing, the deeper I plumed my inner well for strength the more it seemed to come up dry. It was only when I realized that the sustenance I needed could not be found inside of me but from what the Spirit offered, did I finally feel the weight of grief begin to lift.

The Spirit will comfort you, Jesus promised. Yes, crises will come,

loss will strike, despair will cripple us, but we are not alone. Be open to the ways the Spirit seeks to comfort. Be open to those whom the Spirit directs to bring you comfort. Pay attention to the urges you feel to bring comfort to another. (Those persistent nudges might just be the Spirit!) Make yourself available to the possibilities the Spirit will introduce us to, even when we feel like we're surrounded by dead-ends. Inner wells dry up quickly. The Living Water the Spirit offers will never run dry, but we must be willing to reach for it or, at least, allow the Spirit to reach for us.

The Spirit will expose the world's untruths, Jesus said. It will prove just how wrong the world is about sin, righteousness, and judgement.

Borders are good, the world tells us. Setting up clear and concise boundaries declaring who's in and who's out is good. We do it over and over again. We draw up lines based on privilege, wealth, gender, race, faith, politics, fear, and so many other factors. While we create barriers and divisions, while we declare such things as good and necessary, the Spirit declares it sin. Boundaries and borders are human made. The Spirit is about barrier toppling.

On that first Pentecost, Jerusalem was filled with a wide swath of people from the Greco-Roman world. People of differing cultures, backgrounds, languages, gifts, and experiences. On that day, there were many barriers separating one person from another. A big component of those barriers was language-the ability to communicate with one another. To overcome that, the Spirit provided the Disciples with the gift of speaking in many tongues so that everyone in this diverse place could hear the good news that, yes, even they were God's Beloved.

It might not be the language we speak but communication these days has surely become difficult. Our ability to listen, converse, and understand has been sorely compromised. There are barriers aplenty. We need another Pentecost so that the Spirit might again make clear that such barriers are sin and, with that, open up new avenues of communication.

To this day, the Spirit continues to pull back the curtain to expose what sin looks like, even when it very well might be that which we have grown comfortable with and deemed to be good. The church, at its best, is best suited to see that Spirit informed truth and has, as a result, often been

a key component of every social movement that has taken place. Change might not come quickly or easily, but the Spirit is relentless in exposing that which contradicts God's will. Eventually it takes root, it spreads, it is made known in the dreams of old men, in the visions of the young, and in the prophecies of our sons, daughters, and those enslaved by the world's sin.

Without the Spirit, the church would have long ago faded into the mist. Yet, the church stands not because of our ability to keep it going but because the Christ has sent his Spirit to sustain us. That Spirit continues to be poured out upon all people. It continues to call us to be braver than we think we are. It continues to push us to do, even when the odds seem against us. It continues to comfort, forgive, and transform the messes we make of things. It continues to sustain us so that we might truly be the bold incarnation of divine love that we were meant to be.

To God alone be all the glory, Amen.