

A Place Prepared
John 14:1-17
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Despite being the third person of the Trinity, the church hasn't said as much about the Holy Spirit as it has about the Creator and the Redeemer. In fact, there has been some distrust of the Spirit by the institutional church. Fringe and radical movements have often claimed the inspiration of the Spirit. The Spirit, by its very nature, blows where it will and cannot be controlled by the normal rules, policies, and structures of institutions. It is a radically democratic force, which often subverts those who would exert power and control.

In the twelfth century, one of those radical movements was inaugurated by Joachim of Fiore. As a young man Joachim rose quickly in court positions in the Kingdom of Sicily, but on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land underwent a powerful religious experience which converted him to a life of poverty, devotion, and the study of scripture. He was an influential monk, mystic, and biblical scholar during his life.

Joachim said that humanity was about to enter into an "Age of the Spirit." In this age, "people would live in direct contact with God, so there would be little need for religious hierarchies. Universal love would reign, and infidels would unite with Christians."

After a group of Joachimists formed to follow Joachim's ideas and implement them, ridding the world of the institutional church, Joachim's ideas were declared a heresy. Can't imagine why.

Harvey Cox, the legendary theology professor from Harvard, revived Joachim's idea of an "Age of the Spirit," in his 2009 book *The Future of Faith*.

Cox contends that we are currently entering into an "Age of the Spirit," as the old ways of the Christian faith are changing: Dogma is giving way to mystery. Hierarchies are giving way to greater equality. The barriers between peoples, cultures, even other faiths, are giving way to greater dialogue, engagement, and mutual practice.

Cox believes that faith is resurging, in myriad forms, some new, some ancient and reclaimed. People are seeking rich spiritual experiences of awe, mystery, and beauty.

If we are indeed entering into an "Age of the Spirit," then we might want to learn a little about this third person of the Trinity.

And thus we come to today's gospel reading from the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. I've been preaching from John all of this year and as we moved through Lent toward Easter, we skipped over a long section of the book known as Jesus' "Farewell Discourse." This is found in chapters 14-17, and this discourse teaches us some important things about the Holy Spirit.

The setting is the Last Supper, when Jesus gathered in the upper room with his close followers. Death hangs in the air, for they are worried that he will be arrested and maybe killed, a worry that is about to come to fruition. Jesus has warned them that one of them will betray him, and Judas has already left the gathering to do precisely that. Peter brashly claims that he will stand with Jesus if he is taken captive, to which Jesus answers that Peter will instead betray Jesus three times.

In this moment Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." And what follows is Jesus telling them what will happen after he has been glorified—after he dies and rises again to be with God and with them.

This is the internal setting of the story. The external setting of the book of John is many decades later. The early Christian church is anxious and uncertain. The Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed. Their Jewish sisters and brothers have excluded them from worship in the synagogue. They have lost their ethnic and cultural moorings.

It is an anxious time in which they wonder if the promises of Jesus will be fulfilled. Maybe they wonder whether Jesus is still at work among them. They may be doubting if he ever rose again.

It is this context, many decades after Jesus' ascension, in which the author of the Gospel of John composed this long sermon. The troubled hearts he is concerned about are the troubled hearts of his contemporary fellow Christians. And, so, this Farewell Discourse includes instruction on how to live during the mean time. That time in between when Jesus rose again and while the church awaits the culmination of the promises of God. These are instructions on how to live as an alternative community through prayer, mutual love, trusting God, and discerning the Spirit.

And, thus, it is wise for us to continue reading this material for any good news it can provide us as we continue to live in the mean time. And this year, I would like us to focus on what these passages say about the lasting meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus for us.

So the week after Easter I received an e-mail from one church member who confessed that she just didn't get it. She wrote,

I know that some of it has to do with my rational mind telling me that it's not possible for the dead to be raised in anything other than an emotional or spiritual sense. . . Why do we as adults perpetuate this myth of a dead man who is resurrected and appears numerous times to his followers? Why do we create a lot of ritual around this, champion it as the gold standard of our faith, share pictures of crosses and empty tombs, and sing songs such as "Christ, the Lord, is Risen Today"?

What ensued was a wonderful dialogue. She admitted that she appreciates the symbolism of life from death, light from darkness, and wholeness from brokenness. And then she offered her own interpretations of the resurrection story, including this one:

The best I can come up with is because something opened up in them. The Spirit of God did come upon them at some point, and they wanted to share that freedom with

everyone. Why wouldn't they? After all, it meant that the promise of joy, the hope, the spiritual goodness was available to everyone.

Isn't it something like this that Jesus proclaims here in the Farewell Discourse?

Jesus tells them not to fear, because he is going ahead of them to prepare a place for them, a place with God. Thomas, that good doubter, tells Jesus he isn't being clear. What is this place? And how do we get there?

"I am the way," Jesus says. And the truth that answers your questions. And the life that you are searching for. And then as if in answer to the question, "How are you the way?" Jesus teaches that he and God are one and that if you have seen him, then you have seen God. So, life with Jesus is life with God.

And we are invited to share in it as well. Jesus says, "Because I live, you also will live. . . you will know that I am in God, and you in me, and I in you." Jesus tells us that we are all intimately interconnected with one another because we are deeply rooted in God. And all this happens through love.

At the core of Jesus' sermon is this message of love. Love one another, we are told. We should abide in love, for when we do, God will abide in us.

And what will make all of this possible is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit serves as our Advocate, Counselor, and Comforter, uniting us with God and one another.

Upon reading this passage, we have an epiphany. The place that Jesus is preparing for us is ourselves. We are being prepared for union with God and one another, in love. And this is being carried out first by Jesus and his work, including his death and his rising, and then is carried out by this new advocate, the Holy Spirit.

Let me repeat, the place being prepared for us, where we can live in loving union with God, is ourselves.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit have been working inside of us to transform us. Ridding us of sin and fear and doubt. Liberating us, inspiring us, comforting us. Filling us with the power and glory of God so that we too might live more abundantly into the life of God. Yes, something did open up within these followers of Jesus. Yes, the Spirit came upon them. They were changed, and they wanted to share that change with us, so that we too can enjoy it.

Today we celebrate one particular chapter in that story—the pioneer journey of the First Central Congregational Church of Omaha. For 158 years faithful disciples of Jesus have endeavoured to carry out God's mission in this place. Our current vitality is a sign that we don't rest upon the hard work of those who blazed this trail before us. We continue that pilgrim and pioneer spirit as we carry out God's call for us in the twenty-first century.

My theme for the next month will be "One Life." We will explore the lasting impact of Jesus' death and resurrection through the work of the Holy Spirit uniting us with one another and with God.

The series title, "One Life" comes from the lyrics of the U2 song "One" from the album "Achtung Baby." In this song we are reminded that we have "One life, with each other, sisters, brothers." "One life but we're not the same; we get to carry each other, carry each other." Sounds a whole lot like church to me.

Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus opened up new possibilities for how we can live with one another. He prepared a place for us. A place where we can be one with God and with each other. On this 158th anniversary of our church, let us celebrate that one life together.