

PNEUMA - THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT
A SERMON BASED ON JOHN 16:5-16
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2019
10:00 a.m.

If you use social media, facebook in particular,

you will have come to discover

that there are a couple of different or atypical 'seasons'

on facebook in particular.

There are the usual seasons.

when you will experience an influx of pictures and posts.

The family gathered at the Christmas tree.

Everyone around the table at Thanksgiving.

It's really nice to see everyone and their families.

But there are two seasons that are less typical but very expected.

One is May and June's graduation season.

The other we have just come through,

which is the back to school season.

In June, social media becomes filled

with young people graduating.

Graduating high school, graduating grade eight

Graduating kindergarten.

Graduating college, graduating university.

It's pictures of diplomas, awards, achievements and smiles.

It's a good season.

This season we just passed through is 'back to school' season

I've noticed that there is a thing where those returning to school

hold up a little chalkboard with the year and grade on it.

Some of the families with older children have done the

side by side pictures with the child going into grade one

now returning for grade twelve.

There are the pictures of the first year college and university students

getting all set up in their dorm rooms.

I honestly love both those seasons.

They allow me a little window into the celebrations taking place,

the milestones being passed

and they give off a scent of anticipation

with next steps and next chapters.

They hold that sense of promise.

The words that come with them are often bittersweet.

So proud and excited to see her start university.

But going to miss her.

Sometimes the posts are just bitter,

or if not bitter, at least some wondering what to do with themselves
now that the student has moved on.

They grow up too fast.

I'm going to miss them.

Where did the days go?

What is to be done with an empty nest?

What do we do, now that they're gone?

In our Scripture lesson today,

Jesus was sitting with his disciples, they had finished the last supper,
and he was giving them parting words.

He told them he was leaving.

'I am going to him who sent me.'

It was graduation day.

It was head off to university day.

It was a progress to the next thing day.

At hearing this the disciples were filled with sorrow, filled with grief.

Mostly bitter, not really sweet.

What do we do, if you are gone?

After three years together,

following Jesus, learning from him,

fighting with one another and being chastised by him,

hearing parables and seeing miracles,

it was all coming to an end.

They didn't want it to end.

They didn't want Jesus to go.

They wanted things to stay the way they were.

Jesus said to them,

'It is for your good that I am going away.'

'It is to your advantage that I am going away.'

He explained to them that grief at his departure was the wrong reaction.

Earlier he had pointed out that feeling grief at his departure,

would be like a pregnant woman feeling grief,

as the baby leaves her body.

She is not losing the baby as it leaves her body.

She is gaining a child who has come into the world.

But there is also hesitancy and fear.

New chapters can be like that.

The disciples didn't want Jesus to leave.

However, Jesus said to his disciples,

it is to your advantage if I go away.

When I go away, I will send the Paraclete.

Paraclete is a Greek word Jesus uses to refer to the Holy Spirit.

But they were confused by this.

They didn't know anything about this Holy Spirit.

And you know, Presbyterians don't really know that much

about the Holy Spirit either.

It's not really an intentional omission,

an outright refusal to talk about the Holy Spirit
or think about the Holy Spirit.

It's more that in our history,
we were busy talking about other things.

Our branch of the Christian church's family tree
is called the Reformed tradition.

Our closest cousins are the Christian Reformed Churches,
the Dutch Reformed Churches.

And back in the 1500's,
in the beginning of the Protestant movement,
Churches in the Reformed tradition put the Word of God,
the Bible, and the Bible faithfully preached,
at the centre of the life of the Church.

In Reformed churches, the Bible read and preached,
has been considered the anchor that holds everything else together.
You can see this reflected in the fact
that half of our time together is the Bible, read and preached.
But in becoming very clear and intentional about those areas,
and thinking a lot about the word, the Bible

our tradition has not spent as much time,
thinking about the Holy Spirit.

Although an equal part of the Trinity,

the Holy Spirit has been an afterthought.

We fail to notice the Holy Spirit to our own detriment.

It's why we will take a few weeks and spend time

considering the identity, mission and work of the Spirit.

Jesus said, it is to your advantage if I go.

When I go, I will send the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit.

To have the Holy Spirit, it will be to your advantage.

Like heading off to school,

It will be an exciting new chapter,

filled with potential and growth.

Jesus used the word Paraclete to speak of the Holy Spirit.

It is a word that means, one who is called alongside.

Para in Greek means alongside, or beside, or near.

So we have paramedics, and paragraphs, and parallelograms.

Klesis means to call.

In Greek society,

the Paraclete was the attorney for the defence.

He was the one called alongside.

We don't have an English word that translates exactly,

so it gets translated in many different ways.

Advocate, counsellor, helper, trainer.

Jesus said, it is to your advantage if I go.

When I go, I will send the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit.

You will have one who will come alongside you.

A while back now,

Robert Duvall wrote, produced, directed and starred in

a movie called the Apostle.

It was his labour of love.

He says the idea for the movie started back in the early sixties,

when he was researching the role of a character from the rural south

for an off-Broadway play.

He found himself in a small hamlet called Hughes, Arkansas.

He was trying to learn about his character

by watching for the way a man might tip his hat
or drawl directions.

One Sunday, he was strolling down the main street,
and saw people flocking to a simple white clapboard building.

It was a small local church.

All sorts of people were going inside.

Young and old.

Duvall thought to himself, 'might as well check this out.'

and he slipped into the back.

Duvall said this about the experience,

"When I was a boy,

there had been times my Mom would be awoken in the night,

with the overwhelming urge to pray for my Dad

when he was commanding a destroyer in the North Atlantic

during WW II,

I knew about the inner life of the Spirit,

but I had never seen such an extraordinary

outward expression of faith as I witnessed in that church.

People could barely contain the joy of their faith.

Their faces were alive with it, saturated.

They were on their feet singing praise and clapping,
even shouting to God.

Duvall said,

“The place crackled with the Spirit.

I couldn’t explain it,

but I knew the people in that church, had a gift.

I wanted to tell their story.”

Nearly twenty years later,

after many significant roles and an Academy Award,

Duvall was ready to do his project,

a story where Christianity was treated on its own terms.

He said, ‘Filmmakers hardly ever depict spirituality

with such a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit,

and when they do, it tends to be patronizing -

full of charlatans and snake handlers.”

With his movie the Apostle,
he wanted to realistically portray a preacher who was fully human
yet also captivated by the Holy Spirit.

Duvall says he was raised in a Christian home,
taught to believe in Jesus Christ,
but that he never knew much about the Holy Spirit
until he made his movie the Apostle.

Again preparing for the movie,
he stopped into a Harlem church,
and there in a packed congregation,
he says, 'I found myself connected to the Lord
in a way I had never felt before,
deep within me.'

Duvall said he realized in deep way,
that the church are kin through Jesus.
We are connected, related, family, through Jesus.
Not just what we read about him in the Bible,

connected not because we all hold the same ideas,
but by who he is. Who he is. Alive now.

Duvall was touched by the Holy Spirit,

The Paraclete came alongside him.

And he was connected to the Lord

in a way deeper than he had ever known.

Until then he never knew much about the Holy Spirit.

We fail to notice the Holy Spirit to our own detriment.

Jesus says, it is for your good that I send the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit, which is the same word for breath - pneuma.

The Spirit, brings life.

We need to know the Holy Spirit.

The disciples didn't want Jesus to leave.

Their feelings are understandable.

He taught them the things of God.

They were better people for being with him.

The ways of God, the way of truth was being revealed to them.

Jesus had come alongside them,

guided them and coached them toward God,
into the mind of God,
the love of God,
the faithfulness, and mercy of God,
even the pain and disappointment and frustration of God.

Up until this point, Jesus had been their Paraclete.

They were fearful of losing their guide.

Jesus said to the disciples in John 14:16,

I will send you another Paraclete.

When I go, you will receive another guide.

You won't be left to drift, or set adrift.

You will have a counsellor, a helper, a trainer.

Another paraclete.

Another me.

Remember, I am the truth.

I am sending the Spirit of truth.

I am sending the third person of the Trinity.

All the things I have done and taught you,

he will do, he will teach you.

He will be your counsellor.

Jesus said, in the way I have, he will expose the world

and show its errors, its guilt.

In regards to sin, righteousness and judgement.

In its rejection of me.

The Holy Spirit has the job of coming alongside us,

and revealing to us the truth that righteousness is found only in Jesus.

The Holy Spirit has the job of exposing our error in regards to judgement.

With our belief in our own righteousness,

comes a belief that we are above or beyond judgement.

All of these things could be explained as seeing the truth.

Jesus said, I am the truth.

I am sending the Spirit of Truth,

and he will guide you into all truth.

The Spirit will not speak on his own,
he will speak only what he hears.
He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine,
and making it known to you,
all that belongs to the Father is mine.
He will make it known to you.
You will have the Spirit of truth.

The Holy Spirit is Jesus for us, our Paraclete,
coming alongside us, guiding us in the truth.

The big difference between the Holy Spirit and Jesus however,
is in how they come alongside.

With his incarnation, Jesus was fully human,
just like you and me.

And therefore he experienced
all the limitations of being human,
of being in one place at one time,
of needing sleep and something to eat,
being limited in the number of words in the language,

to communicate love or an idea of God,
of having to be heard above the crowd,
and being limited to how many he could teach at once.

But the Spirit,

the Spirit is not limited by the Incarnation,
the Holy Spirit can move and be.

The word for spirit in the Greek is the same word as wind,
is the same word as breath. Pneuma.

The wind, the spirit blows where he may.

He is our breath.

He is life.

At Pentecost,

the Holy Spirit descended

with the sound like the blowing of a violent wind from heaven.

What seemed to be tongues of fire

rested on the disciples.

And they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Filled.

In Old Testament prophecy,

God speaks of how one day,

He will pour out his Spirit on his people.

Young and old, women and men.

Sons and daughters will prophecy.

God said, 'I will pour out my Spirit in those days.'

God said,

I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

I will put my Spirit in you,

and move you to follow me.

Jesus said to the disciples, it is to your advantage that I go.

If I go,

I will send another Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth,

the Holy Spirit.

I will give you myself in a way that will bring life to you,

in a way deeper than you ever imagined.

I will pour out my Spirit upon you.

I will put my Spirit in you,

removing your heart of stone,

replacing it with a heart of flesh.

I will cleanse you from your impurities.

I will move you to follow me.

I will save you. You will be found.

You will have life.

If your faith right now,

is merely a head experience, a theological system,

or an experience of habit, doing religious stuff.

If your experience of Jesus

is no more than a deep respect for what he taught,

and is nowhere near what could be described

as a passionate love and devotion,

if Jesus feels like a stranger to you, a character in a novel,

you may, like Robert Duvall,

like many Presbyterians,

not really know the Holy Spirit.

There is a very famous passage in Luke 11

which begins, 'ask and it will be given to you;

seek and you will find;

knock and the door will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives.

The one who seeks finds.

To the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

We more likely than not have applied these verses

to all and any of our prayers,

and have used these verses to justify asking God for anything.

But that passage continues,

which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish,

will give him a snake instead?

Or if he asks for an egg,

will give him a scorpion?

If you then, though you are not righteous,

know how to give good gifts to your children,

How much more will your Father in heaven,
give the Holy Spirit,
to those who ask him.

Ask, seek, knock.

The passage is an invitation for you to invite the Holy Spirit into your life.

The promise is that God surely will grant that request.

What tends to be forgotten, is that this verse is written to the church.

It is an invitation to the church to allow Jesus in.

You have an opportunity to have a faith that is more than religious
behaviour or learned duty, habit, or being good.

You have an opportunity to know Jesus as more than a distant teacher to
be respected.

You have an opportunity to be in relationship with him,
to have intimacy with the living God.

You have an opportunity in front of you.

A next step, a new chapter,

Like every disciple who had to decide whether or not to follow Jesus,

to decide whether to come alongside Jesus,
or let Jesus come alongside them,
we are faced with the same decision.

Too bad we would often prefer to stay where we are,
with what's known, with what is comfortable.

The opportunity is here to do what Jesus says
will be to your advantage,
to knock, seek and ask

and to have the Holy Spirit pour out on you,
and into you, to fill you,
to set your heart on fire,
give you a deep experience of the living God,
which can change your life,
and change how you live your life, forever.

Jesus says, it is for your good that I am going away.

I will send you the Holy Spirit.

Breathe deeply.

Amen.