

John 15: 26-27; 16:12-15 "The Spirit of Truth" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/19/24

So tomorrow I head to New York City to attend my oldest daughter's graduation from law school; it seems like just yesterday Mikayla was starting this 3 year adventure and now it is complete, with the all-important Bar Exam looming on the horizon. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would have a lawyer in the family – no one in our family even knew any lawyers let alone considered being one. But the past 3 years have taught me that lawyers and ministers actually have a lot more in common than previously thought. In that vein, I share with you a story about a couple who were planning on getting married when they were swallowed up by a tornado and found themselves in heaven. As soon as they were presented to St. Peter for processing, they asked him if they could still get married. He hesitated and said, "I'm going to need to get back to you on this." A week passed, then a month, then six months but still no word back from Peter. Then, after 7 months of waiting, Peter came back with a pastor following close behind. "All right," he said, "you can get married now!" The couple thanked Peter for granting their request, but they now had a second request. Over the 7 months of waiting, they felt that it would be wise to draw up a prenuptial agreement. But St. Peter was upset and he told the couple so: "Listen, it took me 7 months to find a pastor up here; how long do you think it's going to take me to find a lawyer?"

I've always tried to be an equal opportunity teaser, especially recognizing that lawyers usually get ribbed far more than preachers but both vocations have their good seeds and bad ones. I admit I have been impressed at the level of integrity and passion for social justice present at Mikayla's school. Learning vicariously through Mikayla's stories of class topics, presentations, and debates, I have been touched by these young attorneys going into the practice of law. There is a genuine desire to right the wrongs of society with surprisingly very few focused on raking in the dollars after securing employment. They made me grateful if I were ever in a position to stand before the bar of justice as the accused and had to defend myself, there would be someone I could turn to. I'll never forget being chosen to serve on a jury, and I was struck with how poorly prepared the defense attorney was. He was obviously inexperienced, disorganized, overworked, and struggling with English as a second language. Because of that, several opportunities to prove the defendant's innocence got missed and the

state won its case. It showed me more than ever how important it is to have a well-spoken, educated advocate on your side.

The art of using language skillfully and persuasively arose in ancient Greece during a time when there were lots of disputes over property rights and therefore lots of cases brought to court. People hired skilled speakers to argue their case in court. Philosophers began studying language and how it works and thus was born the science of rhetoric. For a confirmed dyslexic, I honestly wondered whether Mikayla could make it in such a linguistic vocation. But reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* with Atticus Finch's fearless defense of the voiceless, among other things, tapped into her passion and she wasn't going to let anything stop her. This resonates with many young people these days and presents a direct connection to our scripture. In today's Gospel story, Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples. He is leaving them so that he might send them an even better, more effective presence. He promises to send an "Advocate," the Spirit of Truth, to have their back, to plead their cause in the face of opposition. The Holy Spirit will come to the community's aid, giving them the appropriate words to say when they are handed over and tried for their beliefs. The sending of this Advocate is what precipitates the birth of the church, what we call Pentecost. Without the Advocate, there would be no universal church under Christ's name. Jesus departs but he sends One to us who become our defense, our defender, our spokesperson, not to keep us safe from conflict, but to take our side, so that the truth can be told fearlessly and persuasively. When followers of Christ are cast out of the synagogues, the Spirit will make the case for why it is wrong and guide the community on a journey toward new understandings.

We who are the church of the 21st century see the need for such an Advocate to testify to the truth, because there will always be new situations that will demand new words, new responses. Jesus states that there are things that he needs to say, but he cannot say them now, meaning there in first century Galilee. So the role of the Spirit will be to speak a future truth -words that Jesus would have said if he were present in this new moment with the new demands. Essentially, what the Fourth Gospel is admitting here is that it would have been impossible for the earthly Jesus to have said all that the community would ever need to hear about how to think and feel and act in every conceivable new situation. Think about it for a

moment – we all come to a time in our lives when all the things we learned and depended upon turn out to be inadequate for some new situation. I’m always saying to folks, “They never taught this stuff in seminary!” A perfect example from the world of lawyers, but could easily have been from the world of preachers, was back in December 2023, when a lawyer in a prominent trial was asked by the judge how he interpreted the word “insurrection?” Was he just making it up or where did he get his definition? The lawyer let out a big sigh and said, “Honestly, your honor, at the end of the day, we are all just making it up as we go.” And therein is the danger, a danger that if not taken seriously, will have catastrophic consequences. Without the guidance of a higher authority, making it up as we go becomes another way of saying the only real truth is my truth. Similar dramas must have happened in John’s community when they became baffled by what Christ never mentioned, so they either had to make it up as they went or faithfully turn to the Spirit for guidance. This approach becomes the heart of the founding of the universal Christian church as we know it.

Leslie Newbigin once said, “Words without deeds are empty, but deeds without words are dumb.” In the mission of Jesus, there is both the presence of the kingdom and its proclamation, its use of words to proclaim an over-arching Truth. Like a seamless robe, word and deed proclaim and authenticate the news that the realm of God is at hand. The Advocate is the One who lays out the authentic Truth, who distinguishes between God’s wisdom and humanity’s foolishness. Bill O’Brien tells of following a team of American doctors into Venezuela. When their medical equipment didn’t arrive, they questioned “Now what do we do?” They were forced to “make do.” They partnered with local doctors and pastors and were empowered to function effectively, even miraculously in some cases – and they were changed by the experience. An educational team in Liberia was extremely short on resources but strong in their love for the students. So the team made do with what they had to teach in the midst of a war-torn climate. An inner-city multicultural, multiethnic church advocates for its members, half of whom are unsheltered. They dare to go up against the government and societal structures that not only oppress their people but also make them invisible. They are the ones who talk to the neighbors who proclaim, “Not in my backyard” and help change their hearts. People who speak in such ways are listening and letting the Spirit-Advocate

provide the words. They are the kind of people who could make reading the phone book fascinating and they are never just making it up as they go.

Will Willimon tells of a businessman who had spent his life in upper level management and without warning, his company changed and he was fired. The company called it “early retirement” but he called it being “put out to pasture.” He became depressed and sullen; his family grew worried about him. Out of concern, the pastor asked him to help out a couple mornings a week in the church clothes closet. He was reluctant at first. Maybe he thought it was demeaning for one who had previously been in a high position of power. But he consented. While there, he met a woman, mother of 3, trying to make ends meet on her meager wages as a domestic worker. She told him about the problems with the electric company. She had paid her bill late, but the company still turned her off and now they wanted \$50 to restore power which she didn’t have. She had called dozens of times, but no one would help her. A rule was a rule after all. The retired executive said he would call for her. When he inquired into her bill, he was shocked at the way he was treated. He demanded to talk to the manager, who happened to be a personal friend, and the manager immediately cleared the account. This led to another person asking him to call a loan company about a problem with her loan. He did so and got action. A new situation opened up for this man. In giving he received. He learned what a gift it is to be able to talk on the phone, to cut through the red tape, to speak up for the voiceless. He became an advocate, someone to plead the case before the powerful. Jesus is leaving but he promises he won’t leave us alone. He will send the Holy Spirit, the near presence of God to stand beside us, to speak up for us, to plead our case, to take our cause. You are not alone – You have the Advocate, the Holy Spirit intercedes on your behalf, Happy birthday Church!