

Many Spirits, and the Spirit

Sermon – Proper 17 Sept. 28, 2014

Many spirits urge us on: cheerleaders at football games, advertisers with a better product, and political candidates with a vision of a city set upon a hill. Spirits surround us. How does the *Holy Spirit*, the one that make us whole, move through the other spirits? *Does the spirit move?* Is God still active today? We have our creeds, Bible stories, and sacraments. Yet the question still haunts us: Is Christ a mere *hitching post* we see looking back over our shoulder, or a *guide post* pointing us ahead? Are we playing with a pageant of the past or walking on a road to the future?

The Hebrews made their way out of Egypt; then they wanted to go back. Life was uncertain and sometimes tough in the wilderness. They had spells of cold feet, empty stomachs, and dry mouths. They wanted to go back to slavery where at least they had food and water. Moses cried out, “What’ll we do?” God said, “Go ahead”. The road ahead, even in this dry land, holds water, manna, and fire. Moses with some companions went ahead, stood on a hard rock, and found a spring of living water. The exodus unfolded toward the Promised Land.

Jesus tells of two sons responding to their father’s request to work in the vineyard. One said all the right things; he gave the right verbal responses; and sat at home. The other said the wrong words, but went to the vineyard. “Who is following the father”, Jesus asks. Of course, the one who walked into the vineyard. Actions speak louder than words. Jesus told his story to lawyers and priests who wanted to play a verbal game with him about John the Baptist. Jesus said, by actually meeting people, by stepping into God’s vineyard and relating, working and healing, the way to the future opens.

Paul Beaudette, one of our wardens, and I began a practice last week called Walking a Neighborhood. We needed each other’s encouragement. Probably neither one of us would have done it alone. We chose the immediate neighborhood of St. Michael’s and began walking down High Street on one of these recent sunny days. First, we pondered the demolition of the building across the street, wondered about the housing going into that open space. Then we walked by the old upright building that holds the law firm across from us. We turned and appreciated the special woodwork on the front of our own building. Then a little way down the street we approached a grandmother sitting on a porch with a broken railing watching her grandchildren playing by the curb of the road. Paul said, “Hello, I’m Paul.” The grandmother said, “I’m Barbara.” I had my collar on, so she probably wondered if I was going to try to convert her. When I asked if it was her family that had the lemonade stand where I stopped last Sunday, she smiled a bit and said, no, they’re two houses down. A young mother came over with her children, said Hi, and introduced her kids. We said we hoped we could bottle some of this good weather for later in the year, and could meet again.

Then we went to the Munroe Inn, the Victorian house down the street. We met the owner Olga, a Russian émigré, who's renovated the place as a B and B. We discussed the pluses and minuses of Sec 8 federally supported housing; the situation in Ukraine, where she has relatives; the details of her renovation, and the brunch she serves on Sundays. She and Paul discussed the Chamber of Commerce, where they're both members. We discussed the Russian art she has on the walls.

I don't know yet what sense to make of our walk down the street. I feel we were walking in God's vineyard and many spirits were at work- gov't and private capital investing in new housing, a grandmother trying to make ends meet and caring for her grandchildren, a Russian émigré becoming very American. Many spirits can be bewildering. I need to come back here, to be with you, to pray and worship and find a center. Setting forth to an unknown future is part of God's promise. "Let the same mind be in you", says St. Paul, that is in Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself... and followed.

The self-emptying is part of the way we receive what God wants for us. Loss and love go together. Jesus empties himself through the cross, going farther than any of us to reveal God's presence. There is no crown, without a cross. We celebrate through our own journeys and struggles- the grandmother on the porch, the émigré renovating a bldg. to offer hospitality. We have our own exodus, our looking for living water in our families, our work, and our souls. St. Michael's is well situated for us to become witnesses in God's vineyard, to support each other and those around us- children, parents, workers, and companions. Let us give thanks and look for ways to follow with.