

And (Pentecost)

John 14:15-17, 25-27

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Humans seem to be predisposed to categorize things. It goes back so far that we can see it in the creation stories in Genesis. God created night and day. Well, is it night OR day? Seems like an easy question, until it's dawn or dusk or twilight. And then, somehow, it's both night AND day. God separated the land from the waters. So is it land OR water? Again, seems like an obvious question, until it's a swamp, a marsh, an estuary, or a tide pool, and then it's somehow both land AND water. Then there are funnier ones. Is a hotdog a sandwich or not? What about a hamburger? Or a taco? How broad do we want to make the category of sandwich anyway? Fruits and vegetables? What's the difference between a squash with tough skin and seeds inside, which we call a vegetable; and a cantaloupe, with tough skin and seeds inside, that we call a fruit? We're pretty certain about those categories, but try explaining it to a little kid and you'll quickly find out they don't make sense. We just feel more comfortable somehow, with the idea that things go in one category OR another, which usually requires us to ignore a whole lot of things that don't fit in either place, or fit in both at the same time.

And what is true of things is even more true of people. We'd like to sort out the people into categories, but people are complicated and complex creatures, and making exclusive categories for them ends up with the same thing: People that fit in neither category, or both categories. And what is true of things and people is even more true of God.

We try to put God into categories. Is God a righteous judge OR is God merciful and forgiving? Does God punish evil OR does God give second chances? Yes. God holds us to account AND forgives us. We do the same categorizing bit on the other two persons of the Trinity, too. Was Jesus a teacher and healer OR was Jesus a flipper of tables in the Temple? Jesus flipped tables AND healed and taught people. But to hear some people talk, it was only one or the other. And the Holy Spirit, the one we understand the least, the one we—at least us Presbyterians—talk about the least. We like to categorize the Spirit with some ORs, too. And we, of course, have Scripture to back us up. The Spirit is a boisterous fire and wind and language riot disturbing the comfort of the church OR the Spirit is a comforter, walking alongside us.

We see those two options in the Scriptures we read today. The Acts story of the Day of Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit with wind and fire and disorderly worship, enough to make Presbyterians squirmy. And Jesus's promise of the Spirit in John, one to teach the truth and be with us always and give us peace. That seems a little more comforting, less disturbing.

So which is it? Is the Spirit a disturber OR a comforter? Well, like everything else we've described this morning, it's an AND. The Spirit is a disturber AND a comforter. One of my favorite Biblical scholars, someone I really admire, who I listen to on a sermon preparation podcast almost every week, said about the Scripture readings this week, "You have to choose your Spirit this week." Acts or John—choose your Spirit. I think she's wrong. We can choose both ideas about the Holy Spirit, because we need both ideas about the Spirit, and we need to hold those opposites together.

In the Acts story of Pentecost, the worshipers are gathered. It's a regular festival day. And the Spirit blows in, disturbing their order, disturbing their thoughts of who were insiders and who were outsiders. Everyone gets the Spirit. And it's chaos, a joyful kind of chaos. The Spirit is a disturber when we think we know what is going to happen and everything is orderly. The Spirit is a disturber most especially when we think we know who is part of us and who is not part of us. The Spirit loves to disturb our categories.

And. Not But. Not Or. And. And the Spirit is a comforter. This is the first place in John where Jesus introduces the idea of the Spirit, Advocate, Comforter, Paraclete you may have heard, which just means "called alongside," so the Spirit is the one who is called alongside us. Jesus tells the disciples, again and again, through these last chapters of John, that when he is gone, the Spirit will come. And on Easter evening, when he visits the disciples in the locked upper room, he breathes on them and says "Receive the Holy Spirit." Over and over, Jesus tells them that the Holy Spirit is to be the Comforter, to be the one who is the presence of God within and among them. The Spirit loves to comfort us.

The Spirit loves to disturb us AND the Spirit loves to comfort us. Both are true. We don't have to pick. In fact, we don't get to pick. That's just the way the Spirit is. Those are just the ways the Spirit is.

When we tell ourselves the truth, we admit that sometimes we need disturbing, and sometimes we need comforting. Sometimes the disturbing comes first and the comforting follows. And sometimes we need comforting before we can handle the disturbing. And sometimes, it's all at the same time.

An old saying that I first heard applied to preachers, but it actually started

out for journalists is this: our job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. That's the Spirit's job, too, only we're both the afflicted and the comfortable. And we need both afflicting and comforting.

When you get riled up and restless, spurred to make waves, wanting to tell the truth no matter the consequences, that's the presence of the Spirit within you. The presence of the Holy. And when you begin to feel alone and overwhelmed and need to take some moments of peace and quiet and calm, that's the presence of the Spirit within you, too. The presence of the Holy.

The Spirit comes as the Spirit wills, a holy disturber and a holy comforter. Thanks be to God.