

Spirit Speak

Sermon 20 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 16, 2019

John 16: 12 – 15

My dad came into town this weekend to help us with a project. We're installing a tile backsplash in our kitchen. Neither Justin nor I have ever done any tile work, but we've watched how-to videos, read articles, and most importantly... we knew dad would come and teach us how to do it. I've spent the last several weeks picking out tile and grout, Justin measured and re-measured. We were all ready for dad to come up and spend several days with us teaching us how to make the cuts with the wet saw, how to install the tile, and how to apply the grout to finish the project.

Mid-week came and dad sent me a text. "I'll be up there sometime Friday morning and I can stay most of the day... that should get you started."

"Get us started?!"

You can imagine the panic that set in as I realized that Dad wasn't planning to stay with us through the end of the project.

So, I think I understand the disciples here, in this 16th chapter of John. Here we meet Jesus in the middle of what scholars call the "farewell discourse." Jesus is preparing the disciples for his departure; getting them ready to carry on the mission without him. Up to this point, in John's Gospel, they have been traveling throughout the Galilee feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising the dead. Together they travelled to Samaria to meet the woman at Jacob's well. Together they went to Bethany to bring Lazarus out of his grave. They've sought out the broken and named them Beloved. They've welcomed strangers and shared meals with outcasts. These are the cornerstones of Jesus' mission, ordained by God and embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus has been, for some time in John's Gospel, a how-to guide for kingdom building. The disciples have been following along, studying up, supporting the work and now, in chapter 16, Jesus basically says *I have so much more to teach you, but you are not ready now. So, take what you've learned and live like you believe in me, live like you believe in this mission.*

Wait. What? They must have been thinking. You're just here to get us started? And now you're... going home? What?!

I imagine that all of us have felt this way at some point or another. In those moments when everything changes and we have to figure out what life is going to look like given what we have learned or what we have lost.

Sometimes it's moving away for the first time. Sometimes it's starting a new job. Other times it's losing a loved one or learning to live with chronic illness. No matter how much we try to plan our lives, learn the rules, and apply them to every situation, life will throw us a curveball.

Learning to navigate uncharted territory is not only a life skill, but it is a critical spiritual tool that helps us individually and as a community of faith. We can study the Bible, memorize the commandments, and try our best to live out every single verse to the letter as Rachel Held Evans does in her first book, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, only to discover that at some point, we all have to step beyond the pages of history and interpret God's revelation in and for our own time. We have to make decisions that are not black and white, we have to discern what God is calling us to do when the signs are not 100% clear.

The Bible isn't an answer book, Evans writes. It isn't a self-help manual. It isn't a flat, perspicuous list of rules and regulations that we can interpret objectively and apply unilaterally to our lives. The Bible is a sacred collection of letters and laws, poetry and proverbs, philosophy and prophecies, written and assembled over thousands of years in cultures and contexts very different from our own, that tells the complex, ever-unfolding story of God's interaction with humanity.ⁱ

For the disciples, those who knew Jesus and traveled with him through Galilee, Jesus became a living interpretation of God's word. He was the word of God. Jesus knew Hebrew scripture and interpreted it for a new day, *his* new day. And, Jesus also knew his world. He knew the rules and customs of the day, he understood what was happening socially, politically, and economically and he interpreted that world through the lens of the Spirit. Jesus taught his disciples how to be interpreters of scripture and interpreters of the world. That is what it means to be a disciple.

After Jesus was gone, the disciples experienced several changes in leadership. Judas was gone, then Peter and James led the mission. Paul had his own mission that was emerging around the same time. Each mission and each leader had different understandings of what the early church movement should look like. Each had to make decisions based on the wisdom of the group and the power of the Spirit which guided them. Just as the Spirit guided Jesus, so the Spirit guided the disciples toward the wisdom of God unfolding in the world.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth (12 – 13a).

Jesus' words promise the disciples that they will not be alone as they continue their work. Jesus knows that he will not be with them forever, and so, like a good parent or teacher, he reassured them that God will still be with them. With them in their grief, with them in their loss, with them in the midst of change, and with them as they face difficult and

complex challenges that will inevitably come their way. The same Spirit through which Jesus interpreted both scripture and the world will guide the disciples as they seek to do the same.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful things about this reading from John's Gospel is that Jesus' words to the disciples, his promise that the Spirit will always be with them, to guide them towards God's ever-unfolding truth, is that the promise is not only for the disciples individually, but it is true for the whole church. It is true for all who believe in the Johannine sense, all who live their faith and join in Jesus' mission of feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

If any of you follow me on social media, you probably saw that my dad did make it to Raleigh on Friday afternoon. When he arrived, I eagerly bombarded him with questions... What do we need to do first? Can I go ahead and get started prepping the walls? Do we have everything we need?

He took his time looking around the kitchen, noticing every corner, every outlet, every edge that might pose a challenge. He was steady, confident, and non-anxious. After recognizing we were going to need a few small tools that we didn't have in our garage, he suggested we go to the hardware store and pick some things up. I rushed to get my shoes on and was waiting for him by the car before he knew what was happening. We got the tools and then he wanted to get Starbucks! "There's no time for that!" I wanted to yell. But we made time for that. Two Frappuccino's later we were on our way home with everything we needed. By 4:30 pm we were beginning to cut tile and mud the walls. Dad slowly and steadily talking us through the process of measuring, marking, double checking, and finally cutting tile.

After we got a few sheets up on the wall, Justin and I began to feel good about what we were learning. But then my dad looked at the clock and said, "Oh! I've got to get going or it's going to be midnight when I get home."

Panic set in once again. It must have happened for Justin too because without missing a beat he started talking about ordering pizza. "Oh yeah, it's getting late," he said. "We should get something to eat before you have to hit the road."

Dad stepped out into the garage to get something. Justin looked at me. "If we order pizza, we've got him for at least 45 more minutes!" (He's so smart!)

The three of us worked together until almost 9 o'clock. Justin and I never would have been ready for dad to leave. Just having him with us, in the room, inspired confidence and empowered us to do the difficult task at hand. But the time eventually came when Dad had to go home and we had to continue the job ourselves.

“You’ve got this!” he said. “I’ve taught you everything I know. You’ve got all the tools. You’re doing great. Send me pictures when you’re done for the night; and don’t forget, you can call me anytime you need some help.”

Justin and I worked together a couple more hours, trying to use up all the thin-set we’d mixed. We worked our way down the wall and came to our first obstacle. It was one of those light switch/outlet combinations. It wasn’t exactly the same as the ones we’d faced before. But it required the same skills we’d been learning all along. With new measurements and a few adjustments, we applied what dad taught us and successfully made it through the challenge at hand.

In this season of Pentecost, in which the church celebrates the continued presence of God through the outpouring of the Spirit, we are reminded that God is still with us. In the presence and with the power of the Spirit we are given the gift of discernment, discernment to be faithful interpreters of scripture and faithful interpreters of our world. We need both if we are going to grow a church that is relevant, thriving, and building up God’s kingdom in this world.

Much has changed since Jesus walked the earth with Peter, James, and John. Much has changed since this church was established as a mission of First Baptist in 1983. Our leaders have changed over time, those who dreamt of this sanctuary and gave of themselves to make it a reality... many of them are no longer with us. But the Spirit of God who called us here together with a unique mission and all the tools required to carry on the work, that Spirit is still with us today urging us to carry on!

Throughout all of time the Spirit of God has been working, creating order from chaos, calling forth life and making all things new. The Spirit came to life through Jesus of Nazareth who lived and breathed and showed us how to do the same. The Spirit equipped Jesus with all that was required to interpret scripture for the world that he lived in – which sometimes put him at odds with tradition and prompted him to do things that had never been done before. (Dining with outcasts. Communing with women. Healing on the Sabbath. Touching the Lepers. Even raising the dead!)

That same Spirit is still speaking, calling the church forth and equipping us with all that we need to interpret the Bible and interpret our world. We might do well to go ahead and expect that as we follow the Spirit we might begin to hear that Spirit speak in such a way that challenges us to do things that have never been done before – because that is how the Spirit works ever-revealing, ever-expanding, ever-opening up humanity to God’s profound truth.

I still have many things to say to you, Jesus told his disciples.

Maybe our prayer, as we seek to be disciples ourselves, could be as simple as this:
Spirit, speak. Your people are listening.

Amen.

ⁱ Rachel Held Evans. *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*. 321.