**“Spirit of Truth”** Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
Trinity Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church John 16:12-15 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Yesterday’s events—the assassination of Speaker Hortman and her husband Mark and the attempted murder of Senator Hoffman and his wife Yvette, plus the ongoing search for the gunman—have underscored that we live in violent and dangerous times. The escalation of political violence in the last few years has been a frightening development, an assault upon our deepest values and our dreams for our nation and our world.

 Much of the Bible was itself written in the context of violence and in response to trauma. Scholar David Carr claims that the Bible emerged precisely as a people’s response to suffering.

 So, we can turn to these ancient words to find human beings grappling with some of the same concerns we have, including how to handle our grief and anger, how to muster resilience, how to heal, and how to keep dreaming and hoping and working for a better world.

 Today’s Gospel passage is part of a long discourse Jesus gave to his disciples during the Passover gathering the night of his arrest, according to the telling here in the Gospel of John. Jesus is preparing his followers for the trauma they are about to experience, and providing them encouragement for what will come—when the Holy Spirit arrives to fill them with power.

 Hear now these good words of Jesus:

When the Spirit of truth comes,
They will guide you into all truth.
They won’t speak on their own initiative;
rather, they’ll speak only what they hear,
and they’ll announce to you
things that are yet to come.
In doing this, the Spirit will give glory to me,
for they will take what is mine
and reveal it to you.
Everything that Abba God has belongs to me.
This is why I said that
the Spirit will take what is mine
and reveal it to you.

The town of Tilden, Nebraska lies near the Elkhorn River in the northeast part of the state, about halfway between the larger towns of Norfolk and Neligh. Tilden’s population is currently just under one thousand.

 There’s a vibrant little church in the town—Peace United Church of Christ—that maintains a strong music and children’s program for the benefit of the wider community.

 If you were to visit Peace UCC you’d find the church history corner and in that corner a section devoted to the memory of beloved pastor August Brueggemann who served there almost a century ago.

 But what you might not realize standing in that little white church is the giant impact that Peace Church has had upon the Christian church as a whole. Because that beloved pastor had a son Walter who grew up in that church and who then became the greatest Biblical scholar of our time.

 The great Walter Brueggemann died last week at the age of 92. Ordained pastor in the United Church of Christ. Professor at Eden and Columbia Theological Seminaries. And author of over 100 published books. I think it is safe to say that no other contemporary scholar has had as deep an impact upon the practice of Christian ministry in our time, particularly in the Mainline Protestant churches. Brueggemann wrote and spoke for preachers, helping us understand the Bible and how to communicate its stories and themes to the people in ways relevant to the concerns of the modern world. I frankly can’t imagine being in this career without new wise words from Brueggemann, who was always there to provide guidance. For example, he published a book on how to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic that came out in either April or May of 2020, just weeks into the lockdowns.

 This week I was perusing some of his books that have deeply influenced my reading of the Bible and my preaching and teaching. And ended up writing my next Anchor column about the influence of his prophetic imagination. One of those books was his comprehensive *Theology of the Old Testament*, which has been a constant companion. In the preface of that book, which was published in 1997, Brueggemann wrote that the scholarly consensus about the Bible that once existed in the middle of the twentieth century was now in disarray. There were now many different voices and perspectives and no one set of theories dominated Biblical interpretation.

 Of course, many might find such a landscape confusing and disorienting. Maybe even troubling. But Brueggemann delighted in that disarray, because, as he wrote, it permitted “venturesome efforts at Old Testament theology.” He enjoyed the many different voices and perspectives and taught us ministers to appreciate it as well.

 But there were two deeper, more theological reasons that Brueggemann delighted in the multiplicity of interpretations in our postmodern era. First, he said the disarray better reflected the nature of scripture itself. The Holy Bible is not monolithic, speaking in one voice. The Bible is full of differing voices and perspectives, and much of his academic scholarship was oriented to teaching us to hear those various witnesses and be open to the reality of God’s word spoken in various, different ways.

 But, there was an even deeper reason Walter Brueggemann delighted in the pluralism of our time—he thought it better reflected who God is. As he wrote in the premise to his *Theology of the Old Testament* “the unsettlement is a reflection of . . . the unsettled Character who stands at the center of the text.” With “character” having a capital-C, indicating that he means God. God is the unsettled character at the center of the Biblical story. God cannot be contained by any one name or set or titles or one particular voice, perspective, or witness. God, and our human experiences of God, are too big, too diverse. They exceed our understanding and our ability to contain them, to pin them down.

 A fitting reminder on this Trinity Sunday.

 In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus tells his disciples that he will send the Spirit of Truth who will guide them into all the truth.

 In his commentary on this passage, Eugene Bay, encourages us to see that the Spirit works within the community. This gospel text isn’t about individuals receiving private messages or special knowledge. It is, rather, about the Spirit speaking and working through the fellowship of Jesus’ followers.

 God might speak to individual people, but those various perspectives and voices need to be in dialogue and conversation with one another. It is together that we discern the Spirit’s guidance. It is together that we discover truth. Which means that skills such as listening and empathy and working to understand one another are vital to the work of the Church, and to our health as a society.

 The Christian community the Spirit desires is one that is open and receptive. Eugene Bay adds this to his comments on the gospel: “What the text wants most to do is encourage within the community an openness to fresh encounters with the revelation of Jesus. John intends to shape a community that is receptive to Spirit-guided growth.”

 I hope that’s what we want to be as well. That we at House of Hope can be a community receptive to the guidance of the Spirit into fresh encounters.

 Eugene Bay writes that such a community—one that is open and receptive to the Spirit’s leadership—“can face the future with confidence.” He adds, “John is confident that, relying on the guidance of ‘the Spirit of truth,’ the community will be led where it needs to go.”

 But sometimes it is difficult to muster that confidence, right? To trust that the community is headed where it needs to go. One reason we struggle with the confidence and trust necessary to take the risk is that it isn’t clear anymore what is true. Or what is the way to discover truth. Our social and political discourses include debates about basic facts. People seem to exist in alternate realities with radically differing moralities. Plus, now we have the growing quality of deep fakes and AI generated images and videos. How to discern what is true will become even more complex and complicated.

 In response to yesterday’s events, Brian Klaas wrote in *The Atlantic*, “The United States is a fraying society, torn apart by polarization, intense disagreement, and ratcheting extremism.” He continued, “We don’t know when or where the deadly conflagration will strike next, but more flames will no doubt come. We may still be shocked . . . but we can no longer feign surprise.”

 In a society becoming more violent and dangerous, where cynicism and nihilism become serious options, how to form the courage to trust the guidance of the Spirit and be an open and receptive people?

 Among the temptations in a time such as this are to seek for certainty and to participate in unhealthy nostalgia. Some people will retreat into ideologies that seem to have all the answers. Others will try to compel a return to a time period they idolize. Some will resort to force to get their way. Others will give up entirely.

It’s clear why folks might yearn for what seemed simpler times, when maybe there was more confidence and a sense of certainty about many matters, including Biblical interpretation and theological ideas. As Walter Brueggemann always understood, for many folks the proliferation of perspectives and voices and interpretations seems challenging, or even threatening, to the way they make sense of the world and organize their lives. There is a deep appeal in a sure foundation, a center that holds.

 One of the great challenges of faith in the twentieth-first century is to learn to let go of that sense of certainty and to live more comfortably with uncertainty, ambiguity, nuance, and doubt. *And* to learn that it is through this multiplication of voices, ideas, and interpretations that the Spirit is leading. The present pluralism *is* the movement of the Holy Spirit. Our challenge is to trust in the Spirit’s guidance and face the uncertain future with confidence.

 So, how do we learn to embrace the plurality of interpretation as a good thing that can still lead us to truth?

One of my guides in that adventure is the Reformed philosopher James K. A. Smith who teaches at Calvin College. In his book *The Fall of Interpretation* he argues that one of the lessons from the story of the Tower of Babel is that attempts to find one monolithic way of approaching God in one common language is wrong. Because God thwarted the endeavors of those tower builders, multiplied human language, and spread people out into different social groups to evolve their own unique cultures and ideas. He writes, “The sin of Babel was its quest for unity—one interpretation, one reading, one people—which was an abandonment of creational diversity and plurality in favor of exclusion and violence.”

[A reminder of how often attempts to uphold one perspective as certain truth leads to violence and harm.]

 Smith claims that “plurality of interpretation is not the original sin; it is, on the contrary, the original goodness of creation.” And this original creation is recreated in the moment of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit arrives and is poured out on the diversity of flesh who then begin to prophesy, dream dreams, and have visions.

To be a human being in this world is to live with risk and uncertainty. Our faith is how we stay rooted and find guidance through all the noise, confusion, and danger. Smith identifies the “primordial trust” of the Spirit’s guidance that roots our faith. But this trust in the Spirit is not achieved by challenging reality or the human condition with an attempt to establish certainty—one interpretation and one way of life. Our primordial trust in the Spirit should come through embracing the goodness of the diversity of God’s creation.

 Smith calls this a “creational-pneumatic hermeneutic.” Which is a fancy academic way of saying that our approach to interpretation should be centered on God’s creativity and the inspirations of the Spirit. What Smith describes is that this approach, this “creational-pneumatic hermeneutic” opens up a space—(and listen to this great quote)— “a field of multiplicitous meeting in the wild spaces of love where there is room for a plurality of God’s creatures to speak, sing, and dance in a multivalent chorus of tongues.”

 Doesn’t that sound amazing?! That’s a party we want to go to. Fortunately, Jesus has already invited us.

 In essence, if we learn to let go of our need for certainty and take the risk of listening to the Spirit, the Spirit will speak to us, speak truths to us, and will guide us through these challenging times. And where the Spirit is guiding us is into a new, better, healthier humanity, and a newly recreated world of love.

So, let’s do it. Let go of our need for certainty, take the leap of faith, trust the guidance of the Spirit, and, be like Walter Brueggemann, delighting in the adventure that leads us closer to God and who God dreams we might yet become.