

# God Is With You Still

May 30, 2010  
John 16:7-15

Pastor Chip Fisher

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The church calendar and the cultural calendar pull us in two directions this morning: as Americans we observe with utmost respect and gratitude the “the supreme sacrifice” so many men and women in uniform have made for us throughout our nation’s history. From the 25, 324 who gave their lives in the Revolutionary War to the 498,332 who died in the Civil War to the 407,316 dead in World War II—not to mention World War I, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and our latest initiatives in the Persian Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Or the millions of others who have endured hardship and sacrifice and permanent injury for our sake.

Maybe you’ve heard of the 8-year-old in the back of the venerable old downtown church. He asked the pastor about all the names of those etched into an impressive-looking marble slab. “Son, those are the names of the people who died in the Service.” The boy’s eyes grew wide. “Which Service, sir, the 8:00 or the 10:00?”

Much of the Christian Church observes Trinity Sunday this day, the first Sunday after Pentecost when we celebrated the unleashing of the Holy Spirit of God among us. You may or may not choose to understand God as eternal, personal, loving Trinity but the Church who sets the calendar thinks it must be a big deal—and more important, Jesus thought the presence of the Holy Spirit with us is a very big deal.

I “God is With You Still”: As we heard in the gospel lesson, Jesus told the earliest Church we’re better off with Him dead and gone than we would be with Him, Jesus, still alive. That’s saying a lot: we’re better off with Jesus gone away because His Spirit is now with us.

If His Spirit is now with us—God abiding in us, God prompting our thoughts and our conscience and God responding to our prayers—God is no longer merely an elevated, eternal, strict and faraway Deity. “In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God (even before there was a universe) and what the Word was, God was. [John 1:1; REB] Jesus is the eternal Word of God born in a human being; God become human and sharing in our pain and suffering. What we need to know of the eternal, invisible God has been revealed for the world to see in Jesus.

But as a human being Jesus was born, grew up, taught, chose to give up His life on the cross, died, and was raised up again more fully alive than before. He is alive now in

the heavenly dimension—but we just read His promise that He would send the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Truth, to continue to lead us and guide us still here on earth globally as Jesus did locally.

When Matt and I were visiting colleges a month or two ago, we were holding and studying a map of the Baylor campus. We had been told where the Engineering Building was, and we found it—but it was a fairly big building. A professor noticed us standing there looking like rookies (or, conspicuously, only potential rookies—not even full rookies yet) and asked where we needed to go. He then insisted we follow him: he took us to the desk we were seeking and didn’t leave til the secretary there had received us.

During His earthly ministry Jesus gave lots of instructions and commandments, plenty of parables and principles to try to obey. But Jesus is no longer here. He did not tell His followers, “Good-bye and good luck”—but instead asked the Father to send the Spirit to be with us, to indwell us, to motivate us and encourage us and empower us and convict us and correct us and renew us and listen to us and speak to us in prayer and in many different ways and to guide us in our lives. Jesus did not leave the instructions for life on a note under a magnet on the fridge, or even in the Bible: God the Holy Spirit is with us.

At Pentecost Heather reminded us of the Holy Spirit as the power of God present with Steven as the first martyr, and present to each one of us. As God is personal, intelligent, interactive, aware, purposeful, feeling and loving, just so is God the Holy Spirit. When we pray to the Spirit for guidance we are praying to God; we are asking direction and guidance from One far more intelligent and with a far greater perspective than any human being has.

When we ponder and respond to the very nature of God, we are not merely indulging in theological exercise. Right theology corresponds to what is true; to the very nature of reality whether we agree or not, whether we believe it or not. Sound theology emerges as a result of the experience of actual people with God; theology is our best effort at keeping the God-Story straight so that people in each generation are not led astray, not building our lives upon sand.

(And most of you know by now that in our Congregationalist tradition, you are free to accept or not accept any and every theological premise. You are

encouraged to doubt what you are taught and then to affirm and believe as God leads you to do so. The quality of your faith will never exceed the quality of your doubts. Your life is the laboratory in which your theology is lived out; you are the living science experiment. You start with a few hypotheses about God and life and purpose—I've shared with you very briefly some of the Church's and some of mine—and as you live with purpose and awareness you keep accruing more data and you keep amending your conclusions. You keep growing.

We worship and obey the living God, indwelt and guided by His Holy Spirit—not a handful of premises or someone else's systematic theology. Theology, even true theology, is no substitute for the living God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is with us still in the Holy Spirit.

II (God is with you still); God shows you how to assess the claims of this world. God shows you how to assess the claims of this world. (“When the Spirit comes/when He came, He [will] exposed/proved wrong/convicted the world about sin, and righteousness, and judgment.”)

The common sense of this world is never equivalent to the truth of God. “Blessed are you when you are poor in spirit—at the end of your rope.” “Keep living fully according to the principles of the Kingdom of God—totally give up on trying to get ahead in the ways of the world—and the Father guarantees you will get everything you really need.” “You will experience fullness of life as you give your life away and follow Me, Jesus, with abandon.”

We will always be misled living in this broken world. Jesus freely laid down His life at the cross in a spiritual combat against Satan, the liar, the deceiver, the “ruler of this world.” It was Pilate, one of Caesar's trusted governors and Caiaphas, the High Priest, who pushed for His crucifixion. Successful representatives of the world's government and religion they were—and these are the ones who condemned Jesus as sinful and judged Him as guilty. Had God the Father not raised Jesus from the dead we would have no valid basis for disagreeing with the verdict of the world; Jesus would have been a crucified and very dead prophet, take him or leave him. But God's verdict was made known when on the third day Jesus was raised: Jesus is not guilty. The risen Christ shows the world that the earthly conspirators were the guilty ones. Take Him or leave Him—but once we know, we can no longer pretend it doesn't matter and that every judgment or no judgment is the same.

The modern world has lost its nerve when it comes to judgment. For intellectuals in the most recent two

generations, the great virtue has become “tolerance” and the great vice to believe some faith claims are true and some therefore are not; to name good and evil. Former General Secretary of the United Nations Kofi Annan, for example, when speaking in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, observed “Unquestionably very evil things happen in the world...” The difficulty, he concluded, “is to know where to draw the line...If we are intent on naming evil...then let us name it as intolerance.” Intolerance is more evil than wanton violence and destruction and murder? What could that even mean, if we took his words seriously? [quoted in *The Good Life*, Charles Colson, Tyndale, 2005, p 190]

[Very curious, this voice of our time: evil is not to be named even in the violence or destruction or the intentional taking of innocent life on the most massive scale possible; the great evil is intolerance—which can only mean in this context the belief that some worldviews are more valid or valuable than others. One of the firefighters who gave his life rescuing others who condemned the act of the terrorists would be as evil as the terrorists because the firefighter was equally intolerant?]

Contemporary philosopher Stanley Fish, recently Professor of both English and Law at Duke University observed immediately after September 11 that describing the actions of the terrorists as “evil” was “inaccurate and unhelpful” because it rested upon “false universals.” [Also quoted in *The Good Life*.] To this very influential professor and many—probably most teaching in the Humanities today—concepts such as good and evil are useless and to be avoided—merely invented by one group to gain power over others. To such postmodern intellectuals, there is no objective right and wrong, no real good and evil other than to believe there is.)

God the Spirit keeps showing us in every generation how to assess the claims and the worldviews of the world around us. (Not, by the way, because Christians are smarter or more moral or superior to anyone else—the Spirit is always speaking God's Truth to every person and every culture and every religion, eager for everyone to hear and obey.) Only our Christian faith understands a living, accessible Holy Spirit as one way in which God is available to and in the world today. The Spirit continues to interpret the Scriptures, continues to interpret what Christ or God the Father would have to say in each new situation. Jesus did not teach us about the ethics cloning or of prolonging life in a persistent vegetative state on a respirator—but His Spirit continues to speak for God in each situation.

The living, speaking Holy Spirit among us helps allow us

also to be critical with respect to our own Bible. Islam has a different view of God, of Allah, and of their holy Quran. They do not believe the Spirit is in any way divine, so the Quran must bear the infallible weight of Allah's revelation. The Quran for centuries was not allowed even to be translated, since any translation would detract from its perfect, divinely-dictated accuracy. It may not be questioned by faithful Muslims; it is believed to be the perfect revelation of Allah to the Prophet Mohammad. In contrast we believe the Spirit will interpret the Scriptures in every language and in every age—so we have thousands of different translations. The truth of God does not reside in the printed word but in the Spirit of God who keeps bringing them to life within us every moment, every century.

In the same way we honor our Lord Jesus by obeying Him this day and every day. We believe His Spirit is alive and with us; we do not need to venerate Him as we would a dead saint or guru. In contrast, the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul exhibits relics presumably having belonged to the Prophet Mohammad: his slippers, his vestment, a letter he wrote, and other personal artifacts. (Very well-used swords of his noble caliphs are also proudly displayed.) Christians keep looking forward, trusting that God the Spirit will show us what we need to know. It would seem odd to us today try to preserve artifacts of Jesus in a museum—though I must admit there was a brisk business in splinters of the true cross for many a century.

I point out this distinction not to be disrespectful of Islam—their priority is to venerate Allah and the truth of the revelation of Allah to the prophet—but simply to observe something of what it means when Jesus promises the Holy Spirit is present today to guide us. God shows us how to assess the claims of this world.

(If my contrasting the beliefs of Islam and the beliefs of Christianity makes you uncomfortable, I wonder what could account for that? Perhaps the central tenet of Islam is that “Allah alone is God, and He has no son.” To assume that the Christ and/or the Holy Spirit might somehow be divine or share in the nature of God is not conceivable to a Muslim: it is considered blasphemy. It is very disrespectful to Allah. One of the central tenets of most Christians is that God consists of and exists in three Persons, thought of historically as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—although we know that the Spirit and the Creator have no bodies, no gender.)

Whichever view of reality you believe, although they can both be mistaken they cannot both be true. God cannot exist only as Trinity and at the same time only as a Unity any more than 2+2 can equal both 4 and 5, or any more than a dog can be both a dog and a cat at the

same time. Yet many well-educated people are trained to believe every religion must necessarily be saying the same thing and that it is dangerous to speak as if one religion might be more valid or more true than another—which discomfort underscores my point exactly.)

III God makes it possible for you to live a truthful life. God makes it possible for you to live a truthful life (“the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, will lead you into all truth.”) It is surely important to Jesus, or at least to John, that we know that God is interested in our knowing and living according to the Truth.

To live according to the truth of God is paramount since we all tend to want to distort or deny the truths which make life less comfortable for us. We are very good about being selective about the truth. Whether Iranians or Israelis or El Quaeda or North Koreans or Americans or liberals or conservatives or pacifists—we all tend to see our selves and our cause as the righteous ones. We naturally tend to see “the other” as the bad guys. The prophet Jeremiah observed, “The human heart is devious above all else; it is perverse/desperately wicked—who can understand it?” [17:9]

You may have heard a similar observation from the prophet Phil Jackson just yesterday, speaking of Laker Ron Artest, who showed up late for practice. Jackson observed, “Ron has a penchant for allowing the little things to trip him up... Ron is dogged by his own nature.”

Ron Artest is not the only one: I'm afraid I, too, am “dogged by my own nature.” (Do you know anything about this?) I can pretend to forget, or at least de-emphasize, those things I have clearly heard the Spirit ask me to do. I will receive a burst of insight from the Spirit as to how I might better love those around me and before long I'm right back in the same routine, loving myself first. I understand with my mind God's promise that if I search after Him with all my heart I will surely find Him, experience Him deeply"... and yet I tire so easily and I settle for so little.

How dedicated are you to living an absolutely truthful life? I suppose I'm not bad at literally telling the truth, though sometimes I'll catch myself in mid-sentence stretching the truth or exaggerating. Do you ever do that? I suppose I've trained myself fairly well literally not to lie—but that's apt to be superficial behavior.

The Spirit wants to make me truthful at a far deeper level so I can live my life and learn to love and to obey God at a far deeper level. If I develop the habit of mostly speaking the truth out of fear of getting caught, or pride at wanting to be a pastor apparently above reproach, I've simply practiced and refined the art of self-interest. The

question is why do I want to exaggerate, or have people think highly of me in the first place? What motivates me not to live a more transparent life, an absolutely truthful life?

I care about what people think about me. I care about what I think is your appraisal of me. (But as long as I care more about that than the truth of God's appraisal of me, any change in my behavior would be superficial.)

When the Spirit allows me more deeply to understand the truth of God's love for me, God's grace made clear in Jesus giving His life for me, then my life can begin and continue to change for good. When the Spirit of Truth allows me—even through my denial—to recognize the truth of who God is, God who keeps putting up with me and forgiving me and giving me fresh starts, then my life can become more and more an expression of gratitude to God; then my life becomes a life capable of integrity and courage. I become capable of greater awareness and deeper relationships and deeper love. Then I become a man capable of obeying His commands, of wanting to please Jesus because He is worthy. Then I have a shot at deeply knowing Jesus, the Truth, who will more and more set me free.

Perhaps the best war movie of all time is Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, based loosely on a true story. In the movie, Captain John Miller survives the horrendous storming of Omaha Beach, Normandy, on June 6, 1944 and then risks his life trying to find and rescue Private James Ryan. Ryan, somewhere already in France, is to be transferred out of combat because his three other brothers have all been killed in action. When Miller and his small company of men finally find Ryan, he refuses to come home. He will not abandon his fellow soldiers or his assignment, which is to hold a bridge on the far side of a river. Miller asks, "You won't come? What are we going to tell your mother when she gets another folded up American flag?"

"Tell her that when you found me, I was with the only brothers I had left. And there was no way I was deserting them. I think she'd understand that."

Captain Miller is angry—he's already lost two of his men trying to find Private Ryan—and now he won't come. Miller finally decides to stay and help Private Ryan to hold the bridge against what turns out to be an overwhelming German assault. Most of the Americans are killed after putting up fierce resistance, and in this final scene just as American reinforcements arrive Captain Miller is dying from bullets and an artillery blast. Private Ryan, relatively unharmed, is there by the side of this man who has given his life to find and save him.

With his final breath, Miller tells him, "James. Earn this...earn it."

The culminating scene of the movie occurs half a century later. Though dressed in his golf shirt and windbreaker James Ryan, now in his seventies, is no tourist in France. He's striding briskly ahead of his wife and family and grandchildren, through the military cemetery at Normandy and its endless rows of white crosses and the occasional star of David. Finally he finds what he's looking for: "Captain John W. Miller, June 13, 1944." His shaking hand wipes his reddened and weeping eyes. His knees buckle; he kneels before the cross as his wife catches up—though she cannot help with what now preoccupies him. His family backs off a few steps.

Ryan, overcome by the memory and the moment, Ryan begins mumbling quietly to his long-dead commander. He tells Captain Miller his family is with him; he tells him that every day of his life he has remembered their final conversation at that bridge. Ryan has tried to live a good life, and he hopes he has. At least in the captain's eyes, he hopes he's "earned" it—that his life has been worthy of the sacrifice Miller and his men had made so long before.

But he feels no peace; how can any life make up for a life sacrificed for it? He then turns to his wife and pleads, "Please tell me I've lived a good life." She's confused, but he has to know the answer. "Tell me I'm a good man." She still doesn't understand, but his manner lets her know this is somehow very important.

She tells him with great dignity, "You are."

Before Ryan joins his family, now drifting away, he comes to attention and salutes his fallen comrade.

You and I are not tourists in this lifetime.

God the Creator has given you the gift of life; Jesus the Son has given His life for you. The Spirit of Truth keeps reminding you: there's nothing you have to earn. There's nothing you ever could earn.

You are His dearly beloved daughter; His dearly beloved son.

Live each day in thanksgiving to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

John 16:7-15 “But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness...; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

“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; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”