

WHATEVER YOU ASK

JOHN 14: 8-27; ACTS 2: 1-21; ROMANS 8: 14-17

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University Church of Chicago

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It's a well-worn Chicago story about something that occurred sixty years ago when a future U.S. congressman and federal judge named Abner Mikva tried to volunteer at his South Side ward office, the boss asked him, "Who sent you?" After the young Mikva admitted no one had sent him, that he had just come in as a volunteer, he was rebuffed: "We don't want nobody nobody sent."

I think that is what the followers of Jesus must have felt on that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on them "like the rush of a violent wind" with "divided tongues, as of fire...and a tongue rested on each of them" and "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." Luke declares that "all were amazed and perplexed."

Goodness gracious, wouldn't you be amazed and perplexed? If such a thing were to happen in University Church on this Pentecost Sunday more than two thousand years later, most of the people in this congregation would be skeptical. Some even cynical. Not everyone, even on the day of Pentecost, was convinced that a good thing was happening among those who were caught up in the Spirit of God. Some people moved quickly to explain the situation by declaring, "They are drunk with cheap wine."

In the Gospel lection for Pentecost, Philip asks Jesus: just how is God to be known? The answer given by Christ, that he is the way to the truth of God and the life of God clearly delineates the relation between Christ's person and his works (Jn. 14: 11b). The presence of the Holy Spirit in the church ties all this together.

My Dad used to tell about a not very upright character in DeWitt, Arkansas who was sentenced to thirty days in jail for stealing a ham from the local Piggly Wiggly store. Two weeks after he had begun his sentence, the man's wife visited the judge and asked for her husband's release.

"Is he a good husband?" the judge asked.

"No, sir. He's a no-account."

"Does he treat the children well?"

"No, sir. He's right mean to them."

"Well, does he stay home when he's not in jail?"

"No, sir. He runs around a lot."

“Then,” said the judge, why in the world do you want him out of jail?”

“I’ll tell you, judge,” the woman said, “we’re about to run out of ham.”

I think that’s the way Philip and Thomas feel in today’s Gospel lection. They have about run out of understanding and faithfulness. The Gospels usually show Peter as the one who opens his mouth first or does impetuous things, like jumping out of the boat with no clothes on. John shows Peter doing his characteristic thing in chapter thirteen, just before our lesson for today, when he declares that he will lay down his life for Jesus. To which Jesus replies, “You will deny me three times before the rooster crows tomorrow morning” (13:37).

However, following that account, it is first Thomas and now Philip who asks the leading questions. And just like us, they know the common experience of saying something and immediately regretting it. Jesus could have responded to Philip in a way that put him down, but instead He follows Philip’s question with an answer that is not intended just for the foot-in-mouth crowd. “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?...I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (vs. 8, 13).

We long for God to come to us full face and tell us what to do. And yet—and yet, God knows that we would not believe it if such divine revelation were offered. God has to come to us incognito—sometimes as a tempting serpent, sometimes like a descending dove, other times in tongues of fire and strange languages.

Do you remember Ignazio Silone’s wonderful novel, **Bread and Wine**? The novel’s action occurs in Italy in the 1930s during Mussolini’s imperialistic invasion of Ethiopia. The central character, Pietro, is a leader in the underground struggle against the war and on behalf of a new order in Italian society. Even though Pietro, earlier a candidate for the priesthood, declares that he has lost his faith, the old priest, Don Benedetto, his former teacher, finds God operating in Pietro’s social activism:

“In times of conspiratorial and secret struggle, the Lord is obliged to hide Himself and assume pseudonyms. . . Might not the ideal of social justice that animates the masses today be one of the pseudonyms God is using to free Himself from the control of the churches and the banks?”

Silone is, in effect, asserting that the hand of God might be acting among the very forces that the churches are condemning, that God might more truly be among those who express disbelief in God than the priests and bankers who say they believe but act against God’s purposes.

Philip and Thomas are our soul-mates, aren’t they? What’s most surprising is that it took so long for anybody in the Twelve to ask to see God. We might all secretly wish to see God, but whom would we ask to show us God? We would have to have infinite faith in that person to be convinced that he/she could show us God. After all, even Moses was granted only a glimpse of God’s back.

The Gospels deal extensively with seeing and believing—especially the Fourth Gospel, where light and darkness, sight and blindness, provide symbols of the contrast between belief and unbelief. The answer Jesus gives is clear: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” It is by living faithfully that we

find God. Too often love is defined in terms of sentimentality, of how one feels. Similarly, our love of God is defined by that vague thing called “spirituality.” But in the Bible grace, compassion and love as divine attributes are always linked with the divine demand for righteousness, holiness, obedience.

Fiorello LaGuardia was mayor of New York City from 1932 until 1946 and was called “the Little Flower,” not only because of his name and the carnation he always wore in his lapel but also because he was a bright, enthusiastic man of short stature. LaGuardia was a colorful character who went far beyond the usual mayoral functions. He would ride the fire trucks, take entire orphanages to baseball games and when the New York newspapers were on strike he would go on radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids.

One bitterly cold night in January, 1935, the mayor turned up in Night Court, dismissed the judge and took over the bench himself. A tattered old woman from one of the city’s worst neighborhoods was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told the mayor that her daughter’s husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick and her grandchildren were starving.

But the shopkeeper from whom the bread was stolen refused to drop the charges. “It’s a bad neighborhood, your honor. She’s got to be punished to teach the other people around her a lesson.”

LaGuardia sighed and turned to the woman. “In that case,” he said, “I’ve got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions—ten dollars or ten days in jail.” Then, as he pronounced sentence, the mayor reached into his pocket. He threw a ten-dollar bill into his famous sombrero and said, “Here’s the ten dollar fine which I now remit. And furthermore I’m going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.”

So, the woman who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her grandchildren went home with \$47.50, fifty cents of which had been contributed by the man who had refused to drop the charges. Seventy petty criminals, people before the court on traffic violations and police officers gave the mayor a standing ovation.

It is by living compassionately, faithfully, obediently that the Spirit reveals herself to us—but always incognito.

Do you remember that wonderful movie, “A League of Their Own,” the story of the women’s baseball leagues that flourished—not much thanks to William K. Wrigley, that great unbeliever who owned the Cubs—during and after World War II? Those women played all over Illinois, Indiana, Iowa and Wisconsin. In the movie, the manager of the Rockford team says to one of the players, “Baseball is supposed to be hard. If it wasn’t hard, everyone would do it.”

Life is not easy. It’s hard. You don’t become a faithful saint overnight. That, too, is hard, and it requires work and practice.

When I get out on the miniature basketball court in my kids’ backyard and I am alone, you should see me: I am one of the greatest players alive. I can dribble that ball between my legs, I can make a

fadeaway jump shot that LeBron James could not block. But then my grandson and my son-in-law and my son challenge me to play in a real game.

Immediately I freeze up. I couldn't make a shot if the world championship depended on it. I double-dribble, I go up for a jumpshot and take too many steps. It's hard when you're in the thick of things, isn't it?

Kierkegaard characterized Abraham as "The Knight of Infinite Resignation." Not that Abraham simply resigned himself to God's will, but that he did whatever God required—even to the point of going up to the mountain on God's command to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac. Resignation as responding to God's gracious will so faithfully that even the hardest choice can be made. And that sometimes means doing what we believe to be right no matter what others may think.

Some of Kierkegaard's harshest criticism is reserved for the person he calls "the social conformist," the person who forgets that God has created him or her as an individual, not to mimic someone else or to take one's definition from the opinions of others. "Surrounded by hordes of people, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself . . . finds it too hazardous to be herself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass person."

The promise that Jesus makes speaks to us on this Pentecost Sunday: "I will not leave you orphaned. . . My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (v. 27).

The fears that disturb our peace are too often fleeting and superficial, and Jesus promises a deep peace that will not only give us rest but also motivate us to the adventure of the Christian life.