

John 14:15-24
Pneumatology
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Easter V
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"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. ¹⁷ This Companion is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world can't receive because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. You know him, because he lives with you and will be with you. ¹⁸ "I won't leave you as orphans. I will come to you. ¹⁹ Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." ²² Judas (not Judas Iscariot) asked, "Lord, why are you about to reveal yourself to us and not to the world?" ²³ Jesus answered, "Whoever loves me will keep my word. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴ Whoever doesn't love me doesn't keep my words. The word that you hear isn't mine. It is the word of the Father who sent me. (CEB)

Pneumatology! The Greek word for Spirit is πνεῦμα/ pneuma from which we get, for instance, the word pneumonia. Pneumatology is the study of the Spirit, specifically the Holy Spirit. As Episcopalians we pretty much avoid talk of the Holy Spirit. The rector of the church I served at in Princeton, All SS, the Other Episcopal Church in Princeton, would say that Episcopalians don't believe in the Holy Spirit but believe that they get all of it in Confirmation. In contrast to our reluctance to talk about the Holy Spirit, John says a lot about the Companion/Advocate/Paraclete/Spirit so I will attempt to address it today. Indeed, the way most Christians express Christianity is as radical monotheists. We see Christ as Lord; we have a somewhat inchoate idea of God the Father perhaps confusing God with Santa Claus, and no idea what to do with the Holy Spirit. Yet we are Trinitarian. The Spirit is important to the Fourth Gospel and therefore to us.

Two weeks ago, I saw the documentary, *The Philadelphia Eleven*, and I recommend it to you. It seems clear, 50 years later, that the Spirit was working in the ordination of these eleven women even as the church at the time was certain that they should not be ordained. The spirit is a provocative way in which God continues to stir up the church and his world.

The Spirit was also working in the ordination of Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire. Many Episcopalians disagreed and some left TEC. The current and relatively new bishop of Connecticut is a married gay man. His sexuality wasn't an issue. The Spirit has brought about change.

But does the Spirit work in our ordinary lives? Is it personal? Is it political? What is it? What do we mean by spirituality?

In John the Spirit is in opposition to the World. We are told to test the spirits so this is a test.

Do you agree that the world is under the control of Satan, The Ruler of This World? This is not the idea promulgated by either the Holy Roman Empire, or the British Empire and now the American Empire. They, we, and many others, believed that their and our American rule brought heaven to earth. This is the underlying philosophy behind *God Save the Queen* or *Rule Britannia* or even *Jerusalem*. Today, many in our country believe we are the heirs of pax Britannia and that the most recent manifestation of God's Kingdom on Earth is the U.S.A. This is the thought behind adding to the Pledge of Allegiance, in the 50s, **One Nation Under God**, or promoting the singing of *America The Beautiful*, and *God Bless America*. It is even true in *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.¹ Those who misremember our founders as being active Christians use this as a reason to claim we are a Christian country. Our founders were notoriously unreligious and if pressed many would have described themselves as deists². Hardly 21st Century conservative Christians.

There is biblical support for this belief that there is a Holy Nation. David and his successors saw themselves as God's anointed and believed that the states they led were divinely inspired and comprised of God's chosen people. However, they failed to accept what it means to be God's people, and ultimately both Israel and Judah were destroyed. There are risks with claiming to be Chosen by God. God expects the exercise of power in his states to be exercised to benefit those God loves; that is, the poor and the powerless. So, a state may be chosen by God and then find itself subjected to constant spirit inspired prophecy. States have consistently proven themselves unwilling to accept prophetic critique. They have seen Divinely Sanctioned rule as meaning whatever they do is by definition, God acting on Earth. We are seeing this again in our country. We are called to test the Spirits.

Keeping in mind that Satan is the ruler of this world in the Gospels, we come to the conclusion today when we read: the world can't receive (the Spirit) because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. This is the same as the conclusion we reach when we read in the Temptations of Jesus by Satan in the Synoptics³ that Satan rules the world. Jesus doesn't contest that the world is under Satan's control. He counters that only God is Lord. The world is owned by Satan and worships power. The Spirit has nothing in common with those who follow Satan. We are called not to be in the world. If you reread the Gospel you just heard, you will get this point.

This means that Faith in God and pursuit of power cannot dwell in the same person; we can exclude the Spirit by relying on power. The Spirit has promised to accept our choices and if we choose power, the Spirit respects that. The Spirit is transparent about what blessing means. The Advocate will not trick us into embracing it. Satan seduces us into believing that power and being the elect are the same thing. For Satan and for those who follow him, blessing flows from power. As I point out frequently the

¹ A recent edition (April 19) of *On the Media* discusses the theology in *the Battle Hymn of the Republic*. <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/articles/meet-the-media-prophets-who-preach-christian-supremacy-plus-journalism-in-civil-war>

² This country was founded between the First Great Awakening and the Second. The time between was a time recorded as not particularly religious. Deism reigned, at least among the educated classes. This was a reaction to the First Great Awakening and probably was fodder for the Second.

³ Matt 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-15; Luke 4:1-13

American perversion of this, inherited from the English, is the belief that Anglo-Saxons are the elect people on earth. We bear the burden of governing those who are less than we are. They should be grateful that we deign to acknowledge them and bestow our benevolent charity upon them. In holding this White Man's Burden position, we listen to Satan rather than the Spirit.

The early church, which gives us this text, had no political power. It took comfort in believing that it existed on the side of the Spirit rather than Satan's side.

Nevertheless, problems arose. One of the earliest was Docetism. The question of Docetism is, to simplify, did Jesus really die and rise again. Docetists claimed that he did not. They could say that the Spirit led them to this. We must test the spirits.

It is likely that these verses were put here to deal with this problem. Docetism is the belief that Jesus didn't really die on the cross. He was rescued and a substitute died in his place. This empties Christianity of all meaning. Docetists were saying that Jesus was a great teacher, a good example, a miracle worker and healer, spellbinding with crowds but the death and resurrection just make no sense, they are irrational. Rational people cannot accept them. Sounds a lot like a rational person, a Unitarian/Universalist.

Do Americans accept the reality of the Incarnation and Resurrection? We might object that America is a uniquely Christian nation and we celebrate Christmas and Easter with gusto. The popular culture has embraced both holidays and robbed them of their meaning. Docetism is alive and well. We are all for Christmas Trees, Easter Bunnies and (hard boiled) Eggs, all symbols of fertility and life but our culture has downplayed the reality of the Passion and Crucifixion and thereby downplayed the pain and suffering of our Lord that sets the stage for Glory. We can't receive the Spirit if we don't accept the Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Even for conservative Christians who celebrate Christmas and Easter, there are Docetic influences. They talk about Triumphalism. Christianity is supreme and the unique truth in all creation. There is no doubt permitted in triumphalistic faith. They are always certain. It says, for instance, that those who do not prosper are those who have not joined in the Celebration. If you are not prospering then there's a flaw in your faith. There is little understanding of who God works with and cares for the powerless. Instead, we are told that God cares most for the right position on abortion, but not capital punishment, straight sexuality and marriage between a man and a woman, no matter how many times they divorce, and that God cares that America be safe which requires the sanctioning of violence, as we Worship the Lord of Peace.

Why be this way? The move to be Rational is an attack on pneumatology. The Spirit is endlessly creative and creativity cannot be controlled. Our institutions, including the church, need control which means they need power which results in failing to acknowledge and embrace the Spirit.

My former bishop, Ian Douglas, said frequently that our purpose today is to figure out what Church the Spirit is calling us to be in this moment. This is another way of saying how do we find the Spirit at work in dispirited churches that are struggling to hold onto their buildings and claim to have no resources for outreach?

We find the Spirit by being true to the hallmarks of this gospel. Our success is not measured by the accumulation of power. It is measured by our faithfulness. Our idea of perfection is following a crucified Lord who died abandoned by everyone who followed him, except for some women who held onto faith. The Resurrected Son of God came to show us that there is another way of defining our lives that has nothing to do with the

world John's gospel talks so disparagingly about. It has to do with being faithful in the midst of our personal passion stories. It has to do in celebrating Easter in a time of conflict and uncertainty. The battle is over, the victory is won but we forget what the battle was about. It was about being chained to the standards of this world. The victory is our freedom from these chains. Knowing this we embrace the Spirit.

Happy Easter