

“Life Goes On” – John 16:12-15 – Trinity Sunday

The word “Spam” has taken on a new meaning. At one time it was the trade name of a meat of questionable origin that comes in a can with a key, but for the rest of us the word now means an annoying flood of unsolicited messages in our email inbox. While most of these unwanted emails are either an attempt to steal your identity, in particular your financial secrets, or to convince you to try their products for enhancing various parts of your body, there are a few other types as well. For example, since I host several web sites I get tons of these annoying messages – and by ‘tons’ I literally mean hundreds each day. I do have a very good spam filter called SpamAssassin, but still a few get through.

Because some of the websites are church-related I also get spam that is of a “religious” nature. Needless to say, a lot of this religious spam is also of the “weird” variety. As just one example, while I was working on a sermon I received an email from a self-ascribed prophet by the name of Ray who claims that “The Lord gave me a vision of a Bell and said, “Ring the Bell. Make a LOUD NOISE! Tell everyone you can to go to YouTube and hear My Words. Let’s shake up this little planet with the Power of the Holy Spirit.” And what was my reaction? Just before I moved it to the “Learn Spam” folder I thought, “Thank you Lord for a sermon example!”

Part of the problem with spam like this one, and all the other actions that loudly claim to be Spirit-led, derives from the reality that there was a problem with Jesus’ ministry. Now before you start gasping and sucking in air to accuse me of heresy, let me say that the problem I’m talking about is that Jesus’ ministry was finite – it was of limited duration. A very short ministry, in fact – less than a third as long as I’ve been here at Central. In those few years Jesus was not able to do or say all that could be said about life and living, and finding favour with God. There simply wasn’t enough time! Moreover, there was a second finite aspect to Jesus’ ministry – he was dealing with real people, with limited capacity to hear and understand, and with faulty and distorted memories – just like all the real people we know, including ourselves! Not everything Jesus did say was heard and/or remembered properly by even his closest disciples – do you recall the reading from John’s gospel last week, when Jesus responds to Philip’s request for him to show them the Father with ““Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?” Jesus did not – could not – address all subjects, all topics about life and faith. Even by his own words, Jesus affirms that his disciples were not yet ready to hear all that he had to say.

And so Jesus did the next best – and an even better – thing ... he promised an ongoing presence who would provide answers to the ongoing questions. In fact, John’s gospel records five times Jesus promised such help and direction, and today’s reading is the fifth and final of these five promises. In the first instance, Jesus said he would ask God to send the Spirit of Truth as another Counselor to be with the disciples forever (14:16-17). In the second, Jesus declared the Holy Spirit will be sent from God in Jesus’ name to teach and to remind the disciples of Jesus’ words (14:25-26). The third promise declares that the Spirit, sent by Jesus but proceeding from God, will bear witness to Jesus (15:26) and in the fourth Jesus promises that upon his departure he will send the Counselor to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (16:7-11). Finally here in today’s short little reading from John Jesus makes three declarations concerning the Holy Spirit.

The first of those declarations relates to the problem of the finiteness of his ministry. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” Jesus tells his disciples. Even if he could have said them, the disciples couldn’t have been able to handle them. Take for example that Jesus left no instruction covering the case of a Christian convert whose spouse remained an unbeliever. Paul faced such a problem at Corinth and had to interpret the will of God (1 Cor 7:12-16). Paul concluded his comments on marriage, divorce, and remarriage with the words, “And I think that I too

have the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 7:40). Obviously the early church thought so, too, because they treated Paul’s letter reverently as scripture, not spam.

The second statement in our reading offers a solution to the problem of unaddressed topics, with the promise of the Holy Spirit who will “guide you into all the truth” and “will declare to you the things to come.” On the one hand, this is very reassuring, being a wonderful promise of ongoing support and revelation from God to address all those things that Jesus didn’t. How comforting to know that Jesus –and God – are still close with us and among us, ready and willing to direct and guide us through the Holy Spirit. How reassuring it is that we have not been abandoned to flail around on our own searching for answers to life and faith.

But on the other hand, how dangerous and frightening is it that every wacko on the planet can quote these promises to bless every weird and far-out concept and bizarre way of behaving?! How unnerving is it that every self-appointed crackpot or would-be prophet can point to today’s reading – and the other four – to claim that only they have the “authentic truth”, that somehow they are the only ones to whom Jesus made these promises and thus they are the only ones who can receive and decode God’s truth.

So, promises made by Jesus – promises that on the one hand offer wonderful images of hope, of spiritual sustenance and nurture, of growth and deepening of faith, and yet on the other hand hold out the dismal prospect of more wacko spam and bizarre misrepresentations of faith. How is one to tell which is which? How can we ever hope to distinguish between the wacko and the wonderful?

The answer to that is given in the third declaration by Jesus here in our reading, the final word on this subject from Jesus in these five passages. Moreover, this closing punctuation mark by Jesus relates directly to the significance of Trinity Sunday. Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit will not speak or act independently, but rather will glorify Christ and reveal only that which comes from Christ and from God. This gives us a measuring stick with which to determine whether the spirit by which any person or group acts and speaks is really the Holy Spirit: Are the actions and words in accordance with what we know of God and of Jesus Christ? Let me repeat that, because it is important. Are the words and actions of someone claiming to be led by the Spirit in accordance with what we know of God and of Jesus Christ?

To be sure, to answer that question is not necessarily easy, because it implies that we know something about God and Jesus Christ, and are able to state what kind of words and actions are in accordance with our knowledge. To be able to assess whether someone is being led by the Holy Spirit or by another spirit we need to know what it is that God asks of people, and what was important to Jesus, and to do that we have to be familiar with God and Jesus as presented to us in scripture. In the Reformed churches, of which we are one, scripture forms the principle foundation and source of our knowledge of God and Jesus Christ. It should go without saying that for scripture to be a foundation for us as individuals we need to actually build our faith upon it, opening it, reading it, and studying it. Surprisingly enough, when we do actually do that – open, read, and study scripture – we often discover a God who is loving and forgiving, calling us to be reconciled and even offering his Son Jesus Christ to effect that reconciliation. We find a picture of God that differs considerably from the distorted view of a God who is mean, vindictive and judgmental, a view fostered by those who would use fear to control their followers. In actually reading scripture we find a Jesus eagerly willing to associate with those whom society and religion would quickly reject, instead of the excluding and isolationist Jesus offered by those who would love to be affirmed as holier than thou. When we hear this passage we hear of a Spirit who will be a helpful, not harmful, guide. Strange, isn’t it, how when you actually read the bible you discover a three-fold view of God, one with Jesus and the Holy Spirit who together lead us into

peace, and acceptance, and reconciliation and healing. That is quite a breath of life, quite the opposite of the stifling, repressive divinity offered by many who claim to be led by the spirit.

And so we have what we celebrate this Trinity Sunday: God the creator; Jesus the redeemer; the Holy Spirit as comforter and guide. It is not an easy concept to understand, as evidenced by the fact that the church has wrestled with the concept for two thousand years so far. But we are shown in scripture how we can envision three unified aspects of God that in a truly divine coalescence provides us with and sustains us with life, and life everlasting. All Glory be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in whom we place our trust and find life.