

Acts 17:22-31  
Psalm 66:8-20  
1 Peter 3:13-22  
John 14:15-21

Sermon for May 14, 2023

## THE PARABLE OF BEV AND JIM

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

When we are weak in ourselves, we are strong in the Lord (Ephesians 6: 10)

A few months ago, I was delivering groceries to the hospice residence here in town. It's a very simple chore that even I can do, and I do it every Friday and sometimes on a Tuesday when the other volunteer who usually goes on Tuesday can't make it. All it requires is to pick up the hospice credit card at the office, then drive over to Tops and pick up the order that had been faxed over the previous days and bring the groceries back to the residence, then return the card to the office.

On this particular Tuesday, I happened to deliver the groceries a little before noon, and when I brought the groceries in, there was another volunteer in the kitchen helping the aides prepare lunch that day for the hospice residents. This volunteer was a woman named Bev, and she's also been involved with hospice for many years. Anyway I happened to notice a smooth stone about the size of my fist lying on the kitchen counter, and the stone had been painted with a cute little picture of a pair of chickadees.

I asked Bev where it had come from, and she said she had painted it herself, and was going to give it to one of the new residents. When I told what a nice gesture that was, it emerged that she did the same thing for every new resident. Whenever someone new moved in, she'd ask them what their favorite bird was, and then she'd go home and paint that bird on a stone and give it to them. Until that

moment, I had had no idea that Bev did that sweet little thing, and had been doing so for years.

I was really tickled by that, and they were such pretty and skillful little things that I asked her if she had always had this artistic talent. And she said No, on the contrary, that she'd never had any talent at all for drawing – that she'd always been somebody – like me – who could only draw stick figures like a five year-old. But she said the idea just came to her one day, so she signed up for a craft course being offered somewhere locally, and when she started attending the course, she found out she could for some reason draw these pretty little birds on stones very well. And then she very kindly asked me what my favorite bird was. I told her my favorite was the mourning dove, and sure enough, the next Tuesday when I dropped off the groceries at about the same time, she had a stone ready for me. Here it is.

This memory came back to me when I was reading our Gospel passage for this morning, so let's read it together, and then I'll try to explain the connection.

John 14: 15-21

This passage is part of a much longer discourse that John – writing seventy or so years after the crucifixion – reconstructs from his memory of the final instruction Jesus provided his disciples on the last night of his life. In that final instruction, Jesus tries to prepare his disciples for what would happen the next day, when Jesus would be crucified, and the central element of that instruction was that they would not be left alone to carry forward his ministry, that after his death and resurrection and ascension back into heaven, he would send a spiritual helper to be with them and to help them spread the message of the Gospel, the helper that would be known forever after as the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to send them on the last night of his life is one of the great mysteries and wonders of our faith. Two thousand years of careful Christian reflection since that night have not yet even begun to plumb the depths of that wondrous mystery, and we can't expect to do so this morning, nor can we expect to grasp the full reality of the Spirit this side of heaven. Suffice it to say that its promise was certainly fulfilled to that first small group of rough and unsophisticated and powerless disciples, since the spread of the Christian faith from that small upper room through the efforts of these men over a few short decades until it literally encompassed the entire known world cannot possibly be explained except by the supposition of supernatural guidance and assistance.

But for us, the most important thing is not to understand the means and mechanisms and miracles through which the Spirit provided assistance to those few individuals in the accomplishment of their great original mission. For us, the important thing is to get some sense of what the Spirit continues to provide for us, now, two thousand years later, facing a world and a mission completely different from what those disciples faced. And I think the passage we read gives us at least a framework for making that application to ourselves.

In our passage from John, there are, I think, two elements that Jesus emphasizes. The first is the element of obedience, and the second is the element of the Spirit's assistance in providing support to those acts of obedience.

In the very first verse, Jesus stresses the importance of obedience. "If you love me," he tells his disciples in verse 15, "keep my commandments"; and then he returns to the same thought in verse 21: "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me."

And to that notion of obedience, he links the promise of the Spirit's assistance: "I will pray the Father, and he will give you...a Helper, who will abide with you forever...He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you."

So there you have the two keys to understanding the role and the function of the Spirit: the obedience to the will of Jesus leading to the assistance of Christ's own Holy Spirit in the accomplishment of that will.

Christ's commandment to those original disciples was to venture out into a hostile and ignorant heathen world and spread the good news of Christ, and their obedience to that instruction is what merited for them the miraculous and world-altering assistance of Christ's own Spirit in the accomplishment of their mission.

We, of course, here in Gaines in 2023, do not have that mission. Our world is utterly different from the world of those disciples. But what we do have, and what every Christian still does have, is the mission of executing the Will of God in our world, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, is the central assignment we all continue to have, whoever and wherever we are: and the promise to us is the same as the promise to those earliest disciples: whenever we seek to do God's will, to manifest the will of God, to manifest Christ in our world, the Spirit of God will be there to assist us.

Let me return now to Bev and her bird stones. Whether that's a case of the Holy Spirit operating in her, God only knows; but whether or not, it provides a small but lovely illustration – a parable, we might call it – of what I'm talking about.

Bev conceived a project, that of spreading love in the little bit of the world in which she found herself, the hospice residence in a small town in western New York. And somehow, in being obedient to that loving conception, she suddenly found in herself a talent that, had she not been obedient, might have lain dormant in her forever.

Do you see the point? The Holy Spirit is not promised us as a vital helper in becoming wealthy, or famous, or powerful. The Holy Spirit is promised us, and is there in us, as a helper whenever and wherever we are engaged in the obedience of spreading God's own love into the world.

I've given you one illustration. Now, I could go around this church and make every person here the subject of another illustration – trust me on this, because I'm an observant student of such things, and I have seen the Spirit at work in every one of your lives. But for this morning, because I know it will embarrass him and because I like to make gentle and loving fun of him, and because I'm pretty sure he will forgive me, and because it makes such a clear-cut example, I'd like you all to think for a moment about Pastor Jim.

Just look at him. Who would ever have imagined that this big, truck driving, criminal arresting, argumentative, boisterous, motorcycling rough-and-tumble old rascal farmboy would have ever found within himself the wherewithal to provide tender, loving solicitude – including care of the most intimate nature – to frail elderly folks in the very last helpless stage of their life's journey?

What are the odds?

And yet, having conceived this project for himself of doing something that is entirely in harmony with God's will, Jim has been enabled to accomplish that project, and it has contributed, not only to the spread of God's love into the world, but to Jim's own happiness and peace. I'm sure he would be the first to tell you that both the inspiration for his project and the success of its ongoing accomplishment have their source in something beyond himself.

So let that message provide the substance of our sermon prayer this morning. Father, we know that your Holy Spirit was promised and provided to us, not for the accomplishment of our will, but of Yours. Not our will, but Thy will. Thy

kingdom come, thy will be done. We know that your spirit is with us as guide and helper, as long as we are seeking to follow the way back to You. So our prayer this morning is that you keep us always sensitive and alert to the still small voice of your Spirit whispering guidance to our own, so that our will may always be in harmony with yours. Jesus said I am the Way, the truth, and the life. We pray always to remain on that way, guided by that truth, and filled with the very spirit of his life for the accomplishment of our shared will, and we ask for these things in Jesus' name. Amen.