

The Story Behind the Story

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

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...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. John 16:7

The Day of Pentecost story is told in Acts. It is the story of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' followers with the result that the life of Jesus was now lived in them. The Gospel text for today is a pre-Pentecost story, taking place fifty days before the actual event. It is the story behind the Pentecost story and, as many background stories turn out to be, essential for understanding and then participating in the story that makes the headlines.

John is the only evangelist to tell the story (John 13-17). Here it is.

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It's the story of how Jesus spent his last night with his disciples. The disciples didn't know that Jesus would be arrested later that night and killed before their terrified eyes the next day. They didn't know that these marvelous years with Jesus would terminate at noon the next day in a bloody, mocking, humiliating crucifixion. And, of course, they had no idea that in three days there would be a resurrection. They didn't know that it was their last night with Jesus.

But Jesus knew. And so he set about preparing them to continue what he had begun. They had no idea what was coming next. These unsuspecting, unaware disciples in coming months and years will speak and do what Jesus has been doing, "in fact, will do greater works" (14:12). But how?

How they did it is how we are going to do it—continue to follow Jesus when we cannot see him. But be prepared for a surprise—or maybe I should say, a disappointment. For Jesus doesn't do anything attention-getting, no dazzling miracle to remember him by, no riveting metaphor to keep his message in focus. But if he does not use miracle or metaphor—two things that he is very good at—what's left? Yes, they are to continue Jesus' life when he is not here. But how?

They've been eating supper together. Jesus gets up from the table, takes a basin of water and a towel, and proceeds to wash the feet of his disciples. Peter objects, but Jesus overrides him and continues the washing (John 13:1-11). And then Jesus begins to talk; he talks a long time—this is the longest conversation/discourse of Jesus that we have reported to us. The disciples listen. Eight times the disciples (five are named) make comments or ask questions, one-liners that Jesus weaves into the conversation (John 13:12-16:33). Finally, Jesus prays. As he prays, he gathers up the life that they have lived together and fuses it into the life the disciples will continue to live, praying his life and work and their life and work into an identity—it is going to be the same life whether people saw and heard Jesus living it or will see and hear Peter and Thomas and Philip living it (John 17).

And that's it. This is how Jesus chooses to spend that evening with his disciples

preparing for the transition from Jesus present to Jesus absent. He begins by washing the feet of his disciples, down on his knees before each of them, getting his hands dirty with the dirt of their feet. He ends by praying to his Father and their Father that what they continue to do will be congruent with what he has been doing.

The pattern holds: whatever we do in Jesus' name, we begin on our knees and conclude looking "up to heaven" praying to the Father. Washing dirty feet and praying to the Holy Father bookend our lives. We can't live the Jesus life, we can't do the Jesus work without doing it within the boundaries that Jesus set.

But there is more here, much more. Between the Washing and the Prayer there is the Conversation. Condensed into a single Jesus sentence the Conversation is: "...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" (16:7).

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The style of the Conversation that prepares us for the pentecostal continuation of living the Jesus life in the Jesus way is as important as the words themselves. It is a style that cultivates relational participation. Compare John's story style with the three writers who preceded him in writing a Gospel.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all write the Gospel story on the same pattern. The story line follows Jesus for three or so years of public life, most of it in Galilee, and ends up in a final, climactic week in Jerusalem. Most of the action takes place during the three years in Galilee as our writers introduce us to what Jesus does and says, acquaint us with the various ways men and women respond to him: following, questioning, misunderstanding, recognizing God revealed in him and believing, and some hating and finally killing him. They are all skilled writers and take us through Jesus' days, with gathering momentum to that week of celebration, betrayal, mockery, rejection—and glory. In retrospect we can see that the main concern of all three writers is to get Jesus (and us) to Jerusalem and that final Passover week where the real action—suffering, crucifixion, resurrection—takes place. They provide just enough narrative material to make sure we understand that it is we and the world's salvation that are being brought to completion.

And then we pick up St. John's Gospel. From the first line we know that we are in a very different literary world. We find ourselves involved in a world of leisurely and extended conversation, discourses that expand and ruminate on something that has just happened (usually something Jesus has done). Unlike the pithy, aphoristic language from Jesus that we are used to, we are now in the company of Jesus as he takes his time, repeats himself, picks up a phrase and then drops it, circles around and picks it up again, like someone holding a gemstone up to the light and slowly turning it so that we notice the various refracted colors.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke write like kayakers on a fairly swift flowing river with occasional patches of whitewater—never any doubt but that they are going where the course of the river takes them. But John is more like a canoe on a quiet lake, drifting unhurried, paddling leisurely to take in aspects of the shoreline, noticing rock formations, observing a heron fishing in the rushes, sketching cloud patterns reflected in the glassy water.

Halfway through John's Gospel (chap. 12), it appears the action might be picking up: Judas cynically criticizes Mary as she anoints Jesus; Palm Sunday euphoria trumps

the plot to murder Lazarus; the crowd is aroused, responding to the thunder from heaven and Jesus' prayer; Jesus quietly disappears into hiding, then suddenly emerges, crying out in fragments of urgent apocalyptic. The adrenalin is beginning to flow. Well-schooled by John's canonical brothers we, of course, know what's coming next. The real action—arrest, trial, crucifixion—has got to be on the next page.

We turn the page. What is this? John abruptly stops the action, inviting us into his longest conversation/discourse yet (John 13-17). In my Greek Bible (with notes) it is seventeen pages. The two longest discourses until now have been the Light of the World discourse (chap. 5) with five pages and the Bread of Life discourse (chap. 6) with six. What is John doing?

John is slowing us down. John is quieting us down. John is asking us to shut up and listen. John is telling us to turn off our cell phones, stow our palm pilots, and pay attention to this story that we think we know so well. John is inviting us into the company of Jesus for a time of spiritual formation. John is getting us ready for Pentecost.

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We easily pick up the drift of the Conversation. Jesus says two things over and over and over again. He tells his friends that he is leaving: "I am leaving the world and am going to the Father" (16:28). I count fifteen times in this conversation in which in one way or another, Jesus tells his disciples he is leaving them. The second thing he says, and this also over and over and over, is that he is sending them the Holy Spirit: "...whom I will send to you from the Father" (15:26). The Holy Spirit, also named the Advocate and the Spirit of Truth, is designated by name and pronouns twenty-six times. Fifteen times he tells them he is leaving; twenty-six times he refers to the Spirit that he and the Father are sending.

"I am leaving... I am sending..."

Jesus is leaving, the Holy Spirit is coming.

Jesus is leaving. They are not going to see him again. But the leaving is not abandonment (14:18). He will not be incommunicado (14:13). He is not walking off, forgetful, distracted.

The Holy Spirit is coming. This Holy Spirit will be in them, doing in them what Jesus did among them. The Holy Spirit, God's way of being present with us, will make their life and work continuous with Jesus' life and work. The way God was present to them in Jesus, God will be present to others in them.

The leaving and the sending work together, back and forth, back and forth. Jesus' absence from them becomes the Spirit's presence in them. Everything Jesus said and did among them is continued in what they say and do.

I washed your feet; you wash one another's feet (13:14)

I have loved you; you love one another (13:34, 15:12)

You've seen me; you'll see the Father (14:9)

You've see me work; you'll do my work (14:12)

I've been with you; the Spirit will be with you (14:16-17)

I live; you also will live (14:19)

You are in me; I am in you (14:20)

I am teaching you; the Spirit will teach/remind you (14:25-26)

Abide in me; I abide in you (15:4)
I was hated; you will be hated (15:18-25)
The Spirit will testify; you will testify (15:26-27)
I go away; the Spirit will come (16:7)
I haven't finished what I have to say; the Spirit will tell you (16:12-15)

In the Prayer, this congruence between what they have experienced in Jesus' presence and what they will experience in the Spirit's coming becomes even more explicit:

I am no longer in the world; they are in the world (17:11)
Father, we are one; may they be one (17:11, 22, 23)
I don't belong to the world; they don't belong to the world (17:16)
You sent me into the world; I send them into the world (17:16)
I sanctify myself; they are sanctified in truth (17:19)
You are in me and I in you; may they also be in us (17:21)
You love me; you love them (17:23, 26)

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The Conversation is rambling and unsystematic. This is not what we ordinarily think of as good teaching. But Jesus is not making things clear, smoothing out ambiguities, but making them vivid, pulsing. There is no outline and there are no transitions. Definitions are lacking. What the Conversation does is immerse us in the presence of another, the presence of Jesus, readying us for the Spirit. We are soon listening more to who he is than what he says; we are drawn into this seamless web of relational attentiveness, leaving and sending, sensing within ourselves the pervasive, soul-permeating continuity between the absent Jesus and the present Spirit.

And there is also this about the Conversation. It is exceedingly spare in the use of imperatives. Jesus is not telling us how to practice spiritual formation, "how to do it"—he is telling how it is done. Spiritual formation is primarily what the Spirit does, forming the life of Christ in us. There is not a whole lot we can do here any more than we can create the cosmos (the work of the Spirit in creation), any more than we can outfit Jesus for salvation (the work of the Spirit at Jesus baptism). But there is a great deal that the Spirit can do—this is the Spirit's work. But what we can do, need to do, is be there—accept the leaving and the loss of the physically reassuring touch and companionship. Be there to accept what is sent by the Father in Jesus' name. Be there, receptive and obedient. Be there praying, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to Thy word" (Luke 1:38).

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A number of years ago we got a call from our son: "Mom, Dad, Lynn's pregnant. We're going to have a baby." Their first child. But more important, our first grandchild. Within days we were driving the two hours to Princeton Seminary where they were students. My wife Jan was excited, brimming with anticipation. But I wasn't feeling much of anything. We had had three children of our own—I didn't see why this was so special—and there were still six months before we would see the baby. As we got closer to greeting them, Jan's anticipation heightened, but somehow this pregnancy hadn't penetrated my emotions. I felt dull, flat, routine.

Driving back home the next day, I complained of my lack of ebullience, which Jan had in excess. "What's wrong with me? Why don't I feel anything?" Jan said, "It's because you've never been pregnant." "Well that's just great; so what am I going to do about that?"

She told me to build a cradle.

When we got home, I went to the public library and found pictures of cradles. I decided on an early American hooded cradle, sketched out plans, went to a specialty woods shop, examined the stock, and chose some Honduras mahogany. Most afternoons I came home an hour or so early from my parish work to my shop and worked on that cradle. I decided to finish it with applications of tung oil. I worked on each piece of the cradle with the finest grade of sandpaper, over and over. I then went to fine steel wool, over and over. Each application of tung oil deepened the color; after several applications it seemed like the wood glowed from within. Each piece of the cradle, shaping it, holding it, rubbing it, over and over and over. And all the time anticipating the baby who would be in that cradle, over and over and over. Jan's prescription worked: I got pregnant—week after week shaping that cradle, my hands and fingers working the wood, over and over anointing the oil that set the mahogany on fire from within, imagining the developing baby who would soon be swaddled in that cradle, praying in gratitude and anticipation for the life in Lynn's swelling womb. By the time the cradle was ready, I was ready, prepared to receive the gift of new life.

Think of the Conversation as cradle building, the images and repetitions. The images: the continued life of Christ in us grounded in the physical act of kneeling and the material stuff of dirty feet, a basin of water and a towel (John 13); the life of Jesus to be continued in us offered in prayer to the Holy Father who, we can be very sure, is faithfully even now answering Jesus' prayer (John 17). And the repetitions: Jesus' words working deep into our praying imaginations, over and over and over—"I'm leaving...I'm sending"—the emptiness, the fullness. Jesus visibly leaving, Spirit invisibly arriving.

As Americans we are typically impatient with this kind of thing. When something important is before us, especially something dramatic like Pentecost, we like to set goals and develop strategies. But that is not John's way. He tells us Jesus' story. He takes us into the company of Jesus in such a way that we are formed in the way of Jesus, takes us into the room where Jesus is praying to the Father for us, "that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me..." (John 17:22-23).