

Pat Conover: The Promised Spirit

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John 14:15-21 (Scholars Edition)

If you love, you'll obey my instructions. At my request the Father will provide you with yet another advocate, the authentic spirit, who will be with you forever. The world is unable to recognize this spirit because it neither perceives nor recognizes it. You recognize it because I dwell in you and will remain in you.

I won't abandon you as orphans; I'll come to you. In a little while the world won't see me any longer, but you'll see me because I'm alive as you'll be alive. At that time you will come to know that I'm in my Father and that you're in me and I'm in you. Those who accept my instructions and obey them – they love me. And those who love me will be loved by my Father, moreover, I will love them and make myself known to them.

I had several developing sermons that led me to ask for another preaching turn. But, as sometimes happens to me, I decided I couldn't turn away from the challenge I found in the 14th Chapter of John.

I don't like the gospel of John much anymore. Like many of you, it was my favorite for awhile. I love the great Semitic Poem that opens this gospel.

Verses from John 1 (paraphrase derived from Scholars Edition)

In the beginning was the logos, the divine word and wisdom of God.

*The divine word and wisdom was there with God,
and it was what God was.
It was there with God from the beginning.
Everything came to be by means of it;
And nothing existed without its presence.
In this word was life and it bears light for all humanity.*

I still think of this poem as one of the greatest and purest theological statements in the Bible.

I just wish the writer/editor of John had let it stand alone instead of inserting the verses about John the Baptist that try to make it into a prediction of Jesus.

At this point, and several other, the book of John brings the wisdom, the Sophia tradition into the New Testament. The strength of this wisdom tradition, and, I think the strength of John, is a sense of the universal and the cosmic. It seems a straight link to the music of the prelude.

"Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow"

"All I have needed your hand has provided, great is your faithfulness God unto me..."

The universal presence and faithfulness of God was just what the beleaguered little Christian community needed to hear. In our passage for today we hear this same theme, "I won't abandon you as orphans."

In my earlier years as a psychological and sociological theorist, and as a theologian, I found good stuff to work with in John. And, when I was focusing on my theoretical development, I wasn't too pleased with some of the bad theology in the Synoptic Gospels, particularly the apocalypticism that makes Jesus such a figure of magic.

In the last few years as I've followed the work of the scholars of the Jesus Seminar I've drawn closer to the most probable images of Jesus, the Jesus who spoke in powerful

parables, the Jesus who emphasized making loving connections, caring for one another and setting things right in the here and now; the Jesus who challenged both the sacrificial magic of temple worship and the legalism of the Pharisees. I love the Jesus who shared common meals with the outcasts and marginalized, who could see good in the Samaritan neighbors. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, which also include the Q source, with a little work you can still smell the dust of road.

I still think of myself as a serious theorist and theologian, but I am more aware than ever of the need to start from the honest place, the humble place, the life we live and know. This is where the most probable words of Jesus begin. But the great Semitic poem at the beginning of John, a poem I still respect and love, positions itself as if the author had a viewpoint outside of life as lived. "In the beginning..." Indeed, in the whole book of John, there are:

- no parables
- no associations with outcasts
- no exorcisms
- very little ethical teaching
- and no mention of Sadducees, Zealots, scholars, elders, tax collectors, prostitutes, rich and poor.
- and in our text for today: the three key words I looked up: advocate, spirit of truth and orphaned are gospel words only in John.

Instead, what you get in John is several long monologues, not at all the kind of work that is likely to survive through the oral tradition. John is apparently built in substantial part, on a preceding "Sayings Gospel" plus a postscript chapter. The sayings are about the wonders Jesus did and their purpose is to prove that Jesus was the Divine Messiah.

To get the best out of John we need to understand what the writer/editor was concerned about. The author of John was

wrestling with several problems. In some ways John is the most Jewish of the gospels. The author is intent on claiming the sacrifice and atonement theology of temple sacrifice, the issue of righteousness so central to the emergence of Phariseeism and that Jesus was the awaited Messiah. Written, like Matthew and Luke, after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, John also was concerned about the loss that came when the Jews banned the Christians from coming into the synagogues. The author of John argues that the Christians are the true Jews and the other Jews are wrong.

- Jesus is the sacrificial lamb of God.
- Jesus sends an advocate who will defend the believer before the judgment of God.
- Jesus is the only path to God.
- Jesus is the true Messiah as proved by the signs of his magical works.

In the passage for today the author emphasizes that you should follow the instructions of Jesus (as held in the Christian community) and shouldn't worry that others teach differently because they have insider knowledge that the others just can't appreciate.

The author is also responding to the embarrassment that Jesus died and the world hadn't come to an end as some expected. If Jesus was the Messiah why weren't things different? John's answer is to move the context to a universal plane and to emphasize going to heaven when you die. This perspective is a key part of the wisdom or Sophia tradition. The beleaguered community is to think of itself as insiders within a universal realm and not as a group attached to the fate of a Zionist state or temple practice.

Let me be clear that I think the core of the Christian message of salvation comes from drawing near to the Jesus of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Jesus who loved, and healed and cared within the midst of life and thought the promise of this way

of living was so critical that he was willing to die so as to stay centered in the claims it puts upon us. The love of the prodigal's father and of the Samaritan is available for you, here and now. Your salvation depends upon what you are going to do about it. You'll either claim it and try to live by it or you'll find a way to turn away.

And so I don't like John because I think it the core message spiritualizes an immediate existential truth and trivializes our everyday personal, family, and societal challenges. It moves the action of God to some place else. It no longer matters very much what Jesus said or did, only that he played the lamb in the set piece story of temple sacrifice, sends an advocate for a future imaginary judgment, and turns Messiahship into a role in a heavenly script for devils and angels. It makes salvation a matter of belief rather than of engagement, risk, confession and forgiveness in a living community.

At this point I think it I necessary to say a good work for the concept of faith. Some might think because I am attracted to the reasonable thinking of the Jesus Seminar, or because I am formally trained as a scientist, or because I resent the magic in the thinking of John, that I have no room for faith.

Faith is critical to me. Because I choose to give my attention to the world I live in, rather than wandering afield in flights of fancy, I am very aware of my human limits and take a very humble stance in terms of claiming presuppositions. I am aware that I can relate to things eternal, such as beauty and justice and love. But I know that I live inside these truths. It is more that they grasp me than that I grasp them. And I know the dynamic truth of love, especially erotic love, just at those ecstatic moments when my awareness and claim of my independence is given away.

The problem with the use of faith in our day and time is that a lot of people want to use it to urge people to believe

things which have no reasonable grounding. Well, I want to reclaim the concept of faith. It is too important to give away to those who want to use it to defend limited thinking.

Faith

- is not an alternative to reason
- doesn't give us an alternative explanation of reality (e.g. creationism)
- isn't meant to fill in the gaps where reason cannot go

Reason and Science are the best humans can do to understand "what is."

Faith is the best humans can do about "what matters"

Faith doesn't deny the reality of death by projecting hope to some heavenly realm. Faith is content to live within mystery and overcomes the fear of death by affirming life and what we can know of the eternal within life.

Faith is what Paul Holmes was claiming when he talked about being a father. Faith is what Brenda was claiming when she felt the closeness of God in the sacrament of communion. Faith doesn't restrict itself to the experience that analytic science is interested in. It isn't about replacing science with faith. It is about attending to what is important in the life we know. (For those interested in theology at this point I refer to my several sermons where I have held up synthetic as opposed to analytic thinking. This means paying attention to what becomes manifest in combinations that can't be seen in the elements alone.) To be as clear as possible, I have faith in Jesus as my Savior because I know the power and joy released in my life when I chose to follow the path he pointed to: love and justice, Eros and honesty, caring and accountability as fully as possible. It has created healing in me and bonds with others and appreciation of life that I cannot grasp but that I touch every day, every minute.

Faith means a willingness to risk one's energy and attention to follow the path that Jesus points to. It means taking up a calling. It means entering the loving community. It gives meaning and identity for the daily round of life. It gives us peace as we engage the eternal all around us and that gives us hope and confidence in the middle of all that we cannot know or answer. It is enough for living our human lives in this time and place.

To make the last link, I think that the author of John also valued the experience I've just described and that is why it made sense to him to point to a present Holy Spirit as an ongoing reality linked in his heart to Jesus and God. That, in the end, is my point of meeting with John. I'm just not satisfied with all the rigmarole John uses to get there. I like Jesus better.