

Sermon: You still don't know me?
Pentecost, Year C
John 14:8-27

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“Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you do not know me?”

I am sure by now all of us have heard about the tragedy of a man in Virginia Beach killing 12 of his city co-workers last Friday. Their beautiful faces appeared on the cover of last Sunday's Washington Post. Women and men, black and white. People who had just gone to work that day most likely never dreaming they would be shot dead. The flags are flying at half mast all too often these days. Mass shootings are happening with increasing speed to the point where they seem to be becoming the norm. This should not be the norm. Something is alarmingly wrong in our world and many of us feel bereft.

Many people ask, “Where is God in these violent situations? How can a good, loving and all powerful God allow evil in this world?” The theological term that addresses this question is called theodicy, which literally means “justifying God”. Whether followers of Jesus ask the question aloud or not, most of us yearn for answers when we hear of or are victims of abhorrent behavior by other human beings.

Today's reading from John's Gospel offers us some guidance, some direction. When Philip, Jesus' disciple shows his lack of understanding about Jesus' identity, Jesus says, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you don't know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” And if you don't believe those words, then look at my *works*, my life, my actions, and that will tell you who I am.

So what are some of the works to which Jesus might be referring? What things did Jesus do on earth that tell us something about God? (fed the hungry, listened and responded to the poor, to women, to tax collectors and prostitutes, reached out to the stranger, blessed the grieving, healed the sick, saved a party by turning water into wine(!), gave life anew to those who were bereft, he forgave, he loved everyone)

Right! Good examples of what Jesus was about! Later in the passage Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, which is what we celebrate today, Pentecost. The promise was that the Holy Spirit would be with us and teach us everything we need to know and to remind us of all Jesus said, so that we might have peace in our lives. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Jesus desires for us to have peace.

Whether it is due to a mass shooting or a different kind of loss, there are many times when we have to admit our powerlessness, our lostness and we are deeply sorrowful or afraid. And like Philip, we fail to recognize Jesus in our midst. YOU are Jesus in our midst by virtue of your baptism. We are all made in God's image and all have the potential to do the work of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, our champion, our protector; he's cheering us on as we aim to bring some love and peace to a world that is truly crazy at times.

One of our parishioners emailed me not too long ago sharing some thoughts about why church matters when times are difficult. With her permission I share the following. She wrote, "I imagine, knowing so much about what everyone in the congregation is going through, it can be overwhelming sometimes but I hope it also gives you a sense of purpose I know for me thinking about all that people go through can make me sad. But one day it came to me, that how comforting it is and how love-centered (if that is a word) church is for everyone. It is a place that you can bring your heartbreak and challenges and leave with the strength to keep moving. And I do think that even if people are suffering in silence, that they still feel the strength around them and take it with them out into the world. How powerful God is to be the force of love that brings us all together no wonder he is too big to fit into my brain. And ... maybe it is those broken places within us that let that love come in and it certainly must come in at Emmanuel."

There are many broken places in our lives, in our bodies and our spirits, both in our personal lives and in our country and in our world. While we may never be able to adequately answer the problem of evil this side of the grave, together, the Holy Spirit can fan the flames of love within us at this time and in this place that we might carry it out into the world. We can turn our lives over to God and be agents of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of peace and healing. When you hear some news that causes you to doubt God's presence, can you remember that God is right there within your heart, even when your heart is breaking. Remember God's heart is breaking, too.

We need each other to respond well to the difficulties of life. As a symbol of the strength of love we can draw from each other, I'm going to offer you a chance to do something you did in kindergarten. Taking the strips of colored paper you were given at the front door in the Holy Spirit fire colors (red, orange and yellow), I'd like you to write your name on one and give it back to the ushers. They will make paper chains to remind us of our links to one another and the love of God within us. How powerful this force of love that brings us all together is. May we carry that love, out into the world.

Amen.