

“We’ve Only Just Begun”

Introduction: Having officiated at dozens of weddings over my pastoral career I have now had the opportunity to view them from the inside, if you will, over the course of the months leading up to Luke and Thais’ wedding. May I just say that the details are overwhelming. The checklist of things to be done seems to get longer, not shorter. My offer to marry the happy couple in my office and then send them directly off to Italy for a couple of weeks is looking better and better . . . at least to me! Of course it’s not about me, not even for a second!

Still on the list is picking a song for the Father-Daughter dance. To that end, one night last week Thais and I listened to a wide range of possibilities, from Frank Sinatra to the Temptations, from Dean Martin to the Emotions. At one point, a song from the Carpenters popped up, “We’ve Only Just Begun.” That was a blast from the past! It was a hit single in 1970, when I was in middle school, and remained on top of the charts for seven weeks. It could certainly be used for a wedding, but its lyrics are more appropriate for a bride and her groom:

We’ve only just begun, to live. White lace and promises. A kiss for luck and we’re on our way. Before the rising sun we fly. So many roads to choose. We start out walking and learn to run. Sharing horizons that are new to us; watching the signs along the way. Talking it over just the two of us. Working together day to day . . . Together.

Add the melody and it just gets sappier! You can check it out on YouTube. However, as this song forced its way unwillingly back into my consciousness this past week, I realized it does contain a sentiment that is useful to us at Pentecost. And that is, while the ascension of Jesus which we celebrated last week, might seem like an ending, well might he have said to his followers, as he was being taken up into heaven, “Don’t worry, we’ve only just begun.”

Last week, as we marked the ascension, I noted 4 C’s that it represented: Completion, Coronation, Communication, and Confirmation. Today we’ll add a fifth: Continuation. The ascension was significant because it triggered the sending of the Holy Spirit to dwell within those who had put their trust in Jesus. The ministry Jesus had begun on earth was now going to continue through his followers, working with him, day to day, together, through the empowering presence of His Spirit.

I. Wait!

A. To impress the need for the Spirit upon his followers, Jesus implores them, during his post-resurrection, pre-ascension appearances, to wait: As Luke records it for us in Acts, Jesus says,

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. . . . you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. [Acts 1:4-8]

The command to wait is worth pondering for a moment. Shouldn’t there have been something more useful for these folks to do, something to organize, or plan, or schedule? Like it or not, waiting implied that neither knowing about Jesus, nor having received instruction directly from him for three years, was enough. Waiting implied that the witness the followers of Jesus were to bear, in word and in deed, could not be accomplished on their own. And waiting continues to imply for us, who live in an instant everything world, that carrying on the ministry of Jesus is even beyond our ability to accomplish without the presence and power of the Spirit.

B. Now, as we've heard, our translation refers to the Spirit as Advocate. Other translations have Comforter or Helper. Literally, the word denotes "one who comes alongside." So think of what that implies. If we didn't need any help, why would Jesus insist on sending an Advocate or Helper? Charles Stanley, in his book on the Spirit, *The Wonderful Spirit-Filled Life*, puts it this way: "The promise of a Helper was Jesus' way of tipping us off to one of the most profound truths concerning the Christian life—it's impossible...apart from outside intervention." So what is this intervention that the Spirit provides?

II. Courage, Conviction, and Character Formation

A. Using Jesus' words recorded in the Gospel of John as a guide, broadly speaking we hear that the Spirit's role, as he empowers Christ followers, includes courage, conviction, and character formation. Let's begin with courage. Note that Jesus is speaking to his followers in the upper room just prior to his arrest and crucifixion. Needless to say, they are not thrilled, either with what he says is going to happen to him, or that he would be leaving them alone. It is one thing to have courage when someone like Jesus is always alongside and with you. It is another to think about that person no longer being around.

Illustration: I remember as a kid, learning how to sail at age 10. It was a blustery, late August day up on the lake in New Hampshire. The fellow teaching me, Peter Brown, was an old New Hampshire salt. Nothing rattled him. Even though the wind was howling, he was calm. I was doing fine, while he was sitting in the boat next to me, shouting instructions. But then we pulled up on the beach, he jumped out and said, "You're on your own." He shoved me back out into the lake and I was terrified! I didn't like being on my own at all.

Jesus did not, and has not left us alone. Through the empowering presence of the Spirit, he continues to be with us. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever . . . he lives with you and will be in you," Jesus promised. "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

Another Peter, the apostle, is the most immediate example of this. Prior to Pentecost, we last see Peter in Jerusalem standing by a campfire, scared out of his wits, denying that he ever knew Jesus. But on Pentecost, after the gifting of the Spirit, we see Peter back in Jerusalem boldly preaching about Jesus to a whole crowd of those that had crucified him. The difference? The Advocate, God's empowering presence, had come alongside Peter and filled him with courage, giving him a backbone to bear a witness that he would not have been able to do on his own power. Physically Jesus was not there. But with the empowering presence of the Spirit, it was as if Peter's old friend Jesus was standing right there alongside him, filling him with courage.

B. In addition to courage, a second broad role of the Spirit's empowering that Jesus speaks of is in the realm of conviction. This coin has two sides.

1. For the follower of Jesus, this conviction involves guiding us into all truth: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." The disciples were like most students. In the three years they had spent with Jesus, they had probably forgotten a great deal of what they had learned! Furthermore, what they remembered, they still needed to understand more clearly. They needed help, as we all need help, in putting all of the pieces of the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus together. This is a crucial role of the Spirit.

Illustration: Bobby Ross and I were talking over breakfast last week about this aspect of the role of the Spirit and he shared with me his experience of watching, recently, in campus, a fellow who was blind maneuver his way through the Kerr Building, then outside, down the steps and around an area of sidewalks. After watching Bobby offered to help him but he said that he was only

marking out a safe place for him to walk and get a bit of exercise. How did he find his way safely around when he couldn't see? The blind man had a long stick that he used to help guide him.

Such, really, is the ministry of the Spirit. He opens God's word to us, helps us to understand it, and convicts us of its truth so that we might walk in it. As Paul reminds the Corinthians, the things of God can only be revealed to us by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:12). Without his empowering presence, we will stumble around blindly.

In helping us to convict us of the truth, the Spirit will not be a lone ranger. Instead, it is clear that he is an integral part of the triune God. "He will not speak on his own," Jesus assured his followers, "the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

2. The other side of the conviction coin comes as the Spirit relates to the world. Jesus says that it will be the Spirit's role to convict the world about sin, and righteousness, and judgment. That is, that sin is an issue one should be concerned about, that individuals are not as righteous as they think, and that a day of reckoning will come. That's good news because it means that we are simply called to bear witness to the way God has worked in our life and leave all the judging and convicting to the Spirit. How freeing is that?!

C. A third broad role of the Spirit's ministry we could call character formation. As he takes up residence within us, the Spirit begins to form us into the character of Christ, taking on what Paul elsewhere calls the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5), and taking us back to that wardrobe in Colossians, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. This character forming role of the Spirit is hinted at in the midst of everything else Jesus has been saying when he turns to the image of a vine and its branches: "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit" (15:5). If, then, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, we could say that the Spirit is the sap that flows from vine to branch and provides the nourishment necessary for fruit to form.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul shifts the image to one of walking with the Spirit in relationship: "keep in step with the Spirit" he says, pointing to the way in which we are to make ourselves available to the Spirit's character forming work in our lives.

Next week we will return to Colossians 3 and explore this further. For now, on this Pentecost Sunday, let us remember our need for the Spirit, give thanks for his empowering presence, and pray that he would breathe his breath into us, filling us with courage and conviction, and forming our character such that we might participate in the restoring and renewing mission that Jesus has only just begun.