

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

June 9, 2019
The Sunday of Pentecost

John 14:8-17
Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:24-34, 35b
Romans 8:14-17

“Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?” — Annie Dillard

I have to admit...when I first read that quote I was a bit taken back. What in the world could Annie Dillard mean when she refers to cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Surely she isn't talking about any of us, right? That would be harsh. Because, when it comes to our faith, we don't like criticism or judgement and we certainly don't take very kindly to anyone calling us names.

And yet, I couldn't shake the idea that Dillard was on to something. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that her observation was an important one. How often do we come to church genuinely glad to be here but when the sermon kicks in, when we hear a message that makes us uncomfortable, we close off our minds, start to critique, begin to justify why we don't need to listen? When we start to feel a tension between what our faith is calling us to do and what we would rather do.

As one congregant likes to say to me...you made me itch today.

Faith can do that. It can make us itch and squirm a little in our seats. It can make us question what we believe and why we believe it. It can make us reevaluate our priorities and our commitments turning our life upside down. And really, if you don't want to squirm a little bit, then you will probably find yourself frustrated when you sit in the pews each week. Maybe that is what Dillard is getting at...this bigger question of what do we expect from our faith?

Do we want it to change us and move us to a place of deeper commitment? Or do we want it to keep the status quo...the way it's always been? Do we want the packaged tour or do we want a real adventure?

Philip in our Gospel reading seems to be struggling with the same dilemma...He says to Jesus...show us the Father and we will be satisfied. In other words...show us what we want to see, how we want to see it and then we will believe all of things you say. Philip wants to understand the love of God but he wants to understand it in his own terms, in ways that don't stretch his understanding or make things too complicated. And, Jesus responds much as you would expect. He says, Philip, do you not believe? Philip, what do you actually expect from your faith? What do you expect of me?

It's such an important question for us to consider – what do we expect?

Jesus understood the challenge. He knew that we would struggle with how to live into our faith day in and day out because to fully live our faith requires a deep commitment to engage with our faith. In other words, we can't be passive participants, we can't be on the packaged tour.

It's coming to terms with what the Gospel speaks and understanding how we need to listen. So from this perspective we might say that we should expect to face some difficult questions about who we are and what we are called to do. We might expect that faith will push us to places of forgiveness and reconciliation that we have previously avoided. We might expect that faith will cause us to look at where we need to stand up for someone or where we need to take care of the hungry, the abused, the oppressed. We might expect that faith will call us to give up destructive habits in our personal lives. When we listen the Gospel we should expect nothing less than an awakening.

Now...enter the Holy Spirit. Today is the day of Pentecost. The day that we recognize that the Holy Spirit came to dwell among us. The breath of God. The Spirit of truth. John describes the Holy Spirit as our Advocate – a constant source of guidance and support. The Greek word for Advocate translates richly as one who is called to be by our side, to offer counsel, to be our intercessor, to lead us to a deeper knowledge of God.

The Holy Spirit ensures that we are never separated from God even though we may feel resistant, even though we may feel unworthy, even though we may feel that we don't have the time. We can expect that the Holy Spirit will be with us anyway. When we are challenged and frustrated by faith, when we prefer to tune out, shut down, and ignore how God is leading us, we can expect the Holy Spirit to pull us back. Or in other words...you can run but you can't hide.

God is going to keep pursuing you and loving you.

In the words of Annie Dillard...

"It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats...to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares;...the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

So when life comes at you, we are assured that God will draw us out into what we need to face but the Holy Spirit promises that we won't be left alone. We can expect that.

Or as Donald Juel, a former professor of New Testament at Princeton, told the story of a confirmation class he once taught and as he was describing the Holy Spirit one young man in his class exclaimed that, "God can now get at us anytime he wants. Ain't nobody safe now."

Thank goodness we aren't safe from God. Thank goodness we can expect that from our faith.

Because faith will change you. It will call you to do things that are difficult. It will push you beyond your comfort and it will transform your heart. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. And thankfully nothing can separate us from this incredible gift of grace. I want to end this morning with a poem that states what we expect so beautifully...

Nothing can separate

By: Steve Garnaas-Holmes

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.
 Not your sin, not your most horrible awfulness.
 Not your disbelief, or lack of faith.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.
 Not your suffering, even if it feels deserved, which it is not.
 Not your jail cell, your cancer, your failure.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.
 Not your anger at God when things stink.
 Not your questioning if God even exists at all.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.
 Not your turning away when that love
 feels too hot, too confining, too challenging.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.
 Not when you feel absolutely nothing of God,
 for God is not your feelings,
 which are feeble and fickle.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.
 Not disaster, which is not God,
 or triumph, which is also not God.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God.
 You are in it like the air, like gravity.
 It is in you, for it is what you are made of.
 It's for you. On purpose. With delight.
 Nothing can separate you from the love of God.

And we should add...nothing can separate us from the Holy Spirit. Amen.