

What Does the Spirit of Truth Look Like? (John 14:15-21)

I remember working with my grandfather in Mexico. It wasn't easy. He knew what he wanted, and he figured you should, too. And he didn't suffer fools gladly.

"I need you to dig a ditch for a footer here, so we can pour later this afternoon. I want it deep, but not too deep. I don't want to waste concrete."

"How deep does it need to be?"

"How deep does a footer need to be for a cinder block wall?"

"See, I don't know. That's why I'm asking you."

"Don't get smart with me. Make it as deep as your elbow."

"As deep as my elbow with my hand flat or extended?"

“Extended. Do you know how to dig a footer?”

“Not really, if you want to know the truth. I’ve never dug one before. How wide should it be?”

“Go cut alfalfa. I’ll get somebody else to do this.”

It’s not easy, is it? Abstractions need to be made solid and specific for us to understand.

If you ask me to feed your dog while you go visit your parents in Catalina, and I say “How much?” and you say, “A bowlful is fine”—I still need more information, don’t I? A bowlful is an abstraction if I don’t have more information.

What kind of bowl is it? How big a bowl are we talking about? Is it the dog’s bowl, or a bowl from the cupboard?

Bowls vary in size and volume. To tell me I need to feed your dog a bowlful of food is not to provide me with sufficient information.

Humans typically make sense of abstractions by analogy.

“Smaller than a bread box. Big as a house. Quiet as a mouse. Faster than a speeding bullet. Dainty as an elephant. Dumb as a bag of hammers.”

We need concrete information.

Let’s be honest, abstractions are difficult, aren’t they? You can say, “I love you” a million times. But after having said it the million and first time, your beloved is still firmly in the realm of the reasonable to say, “Fine. Show me.”

“But I just told you—like a million times!”

“Yeah, that’s nice. Now do the laundry. We don’t have any alfalfa, or I’d tell you to go cut that.”

Humans have a tendency to want some flesh on the bones. That tendency to prefer the concrete is why the incarnation is such an important theological principle. The incarnation is the teaching that God came to us in human form in the person of Jesus. It’s the belief that humans could never grasp God without seeing God with a human face—eating food, loving, weeping, and ultimately dying.

That’s why thinking about God is notoriously difficult. How do we talk about a God we can’t see, who lives in an eternity we can’t quantify?

J.B. Phillips published a famous book in 1953 entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. The primary purpose of the book was to show Christians that their ideas of God were too limited—that we tend to put “God-in-the-box.”

Phillips said that some persist in their Sunday school mindset, seeing God as a “Resident Policeman,” a “Grand Old Man,” as “Meek-and-Mild,” or as the “Managing Director.” All of these are images that we can readily understand, but they’re too limiting. God is much bigger than our ability to comprehend.

We need to speak about God using analogies and images, but the analogies and images need not only to be understandable but also to be big enough to capture the majesty and mystery of God.

Indeed, in Christianity, we claim that **Jesus** is the way we can get some purchase on who God is and what God looks like walking among us.

Philip, Jesus’s disciple, says a couple of verses prior to our text this morning—from our Gospel last week: “Show us the Father. It would help us, I mean, if we could get some visual confirmation.”

“Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? If you want to see God, just watch me and see what I do.”

This need for visual aids, I suspect, is part of why the disciples look at each other in panic when Jesus announces he’s getting ready to leave them. “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’”

Peter says—trying to contain the building hysteria—“Wait, what? Lord, where are you going?”

“Where I’m going, you can’t go yet, but you will follow later.”

“Why can’t we just go with you now? It’s the holiday travel season, after all, and if we don’t catch a flight out now, who

knows when we'll be able to get one. It'd be better if we could just go with **you** when **you** go. We don't much care for the idea of being left behind—especially with the political landscape the way it is. Don't you think we should maybe tag along **now**?"

Jesus says, "Relax. I'm going to ask for another Advocate for you, to be with you forever. Now, the world won't be able to see this Advocate, since the Advocate is the Spirit of truth. But you'll be able to recognize the Advocate, because the Advocate abides with you, and will be among you."

"But if we're talking about a spirit, how are we supposed to recognize the Advocate?"

Jesus leans into it. "Think of it this way: I'm the first Advocate; God will send you another Advocate, and that Advocate will look like me."

Humans, as I've said in the past, are fairly sophisticated pattern recognition machines. This characteristic has been evolutionarily advantageous to us as a species. We're really good at picking up on important cues from our environment. It was crucial for us to be able to identify the poisonous berries, to pick out the growl of a tiger from among the ambient noise. It's how we stayed alive.

Evolution has required, for example, that, because we humans mature at a much slower rate than other animals, we be extra good at identifying and protecting our kids. That's why parents can recognize their child's cry in the middle of a throng of other children. But not only can they recognize their child's cry, but they can also accurately interpret what the cry means. "Ah, she's hungry. He's bored. Oops, that sounds like a poopy diaper cry."

We've become remarkably adept at recognizing threats in the environment and identifying safe spaces to which we may retreat.

But to identify patterns in the environment, we need manageable parameters. If I tell you to go to Times Square on New Year's Eve and find Kevin, the brown-haired guy with a beard, I've given you an impossible task ... unless I give you more information about what to look for. You need as many cues as I can give you to recognize Kevin when he walks past you.

This need for additional information about what his followers should look for is one Jesus has already thought of as he's announcing his leave-taking and the one who is to come after him. He declares that the Spirit of truth will abide with them, but that's an abstraction, right? How exactly are the disciples supposed to pick this Spirit of truth out from among the background noise?

What will this Spirit look like? How will we know when the Spirit arrives? Will there be Twinkies involved?

Jesus says that the Spirit will be another Advocate, one who stands up on the side of truth.

Now, at this point, you might be tempted to object that that still sounds a bit theoretical. That doesn't give us much concrete information to hang onto. We're back to trying to find Kevin in Times Square. We need **more** than that, don't we? Give us some clues as to what this Advocate might look like.

It's difficult, I know. But think about what the first Advocate, Jesus, looked like, how he acted, who he loved, and who he stood up for. Remember what Jesus was doing just before this little question and answer session?

He was on his hands and knees washing his friends' dirty feet.

Jesus was an advocate for the poor, the hungry, the sick and despairing, the forgotten and the powerless, right? If you want to

see the Advocate Jesus sent, then look around you for those who look like **that**; look for the fruit **they** produce.

Standing up for people this culture doesn't think are worth it is hard, painful work. But that's what the Advocate looks like, that's how the Spirit of Truth sounds.

Every time you see someone standing up for the vulnerable, you've seen the Holy Spirit.

Every time you hear a voice raised in opposition to oppression and violence, you've heard the Spirit of Truth.

Every time you've felt the hand of someone on your shoulder, holding you up against the wave of dehumanization that threatens to overwhelm you, you've felt the Advocate.

We are the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world. We put flesh on the abstraction. We incarnate the breath of God right here.

The fruit we're called to produce is the Holy Spirit's advanced billing for most of the rest of the world.

Do you see how essential that responsibility is?

We live in a world where Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous people need someone to stand up and take some blows for them from a world that has too often focused its violence and hatred on their bodies. Think about it: we've just been told by the Supreme Court that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 is no longer necessary.

Why?

Because we've overcome racism and no longer need it. But, I mean, come on. I don't even think those six justices **believe** that.

We live in a world where undocumented immigrants need someone to stand between them and a system designed to

devour their families, where Muslims and Jews need people like us to stand arm-in-arm around their mosques and synagogues to keep out the forces that want to consume them.

It's a world where LGBTQ+ people need someone to stand by their side as they seek to make their way through a world that too often would rather they just go away, where people need all of us to stand up for their children and their parents denied adequate health care.

You want to know what the Holy Spirit looks like? You want concrete instead of abstraction? Look for the advocates.

And don't let anyone kid you, it's hard work, because those who stand up for others look like Jesus himself. And we **know** what they did to him.

As Father Daniel Berrigan said, "If you want to follow Jesus, you'd better look good on wood."

You see, the truth of the matter is, as a people who claim to follow a savior who was nailed to his **own** piece of wood and left to die alone, we can't stand idly by and watch the world do that to even one more person.

We're here to show the world the face of Jesus. So when Jesus tells his disciples, "You will see me," one another's faces should start popping into our minds.

When we talk about the Spirit of truth, I want to see your face, and I want you to see mine.

The Holy Spirit abides with us and will be among us, and we'll be able to recognize God's Spirit in the world not as an abstraction, but in the concrete actions of the advocates—those who live not for their own aggrandizement, but so that others might flourish.

We know the Spirit of truth is among us when we see people who look like Jesus standing up for the vulnerable, absorbing the blows meant for the powerless.

“When you see the Holy Spirit in the flesh and blood lives of people living for each other,” Jesus says, “then ... you will see me.”

“Then you will know what the Spirit of truth looks like.”

—Amen.