

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Where It’s All Going”
Pentecost Sunday
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Rene Girard describes the bible as a “text in travail.” It’s a text that struggles, that wrestles... often pushing against itself, taking two steps forward and one step backwards. In many ways, it’s mirroring our own spiritual journeys. That’s part of both its beauty and its complexity.

At times a lot of us would like for the bible to be some kind of answer book, or to lay out a simple plan of **“Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.”** But it doesn’t work that way.

It’s why a lot of people give up on the bible, I think. You start digging into all these strange stories and ancient histories and legal codes that seem so archaic, and you can’t help but ask, **“What in the world does that have to do with me?”**

The problem is, we tend to approach the scriptures like we would the search bar on our Internet browser. We want to look something up and just get the answer. But the bible isn’t really interested in giving us “Answers”... at least not in the way we’re used to thinking.

In part that’s because spiritually speaking, it doesn’t help to give people quick conclusions before they have had enough inner journey to hold those truths. The bible is really much more interested in our transformation, and journey, than in giving us answers.

And so, rather than giving us a set of conclusions,
it lays out for us a pattern.

It lays out for us a sacred trajectory...

one that we have to work out along the way...

one that we discover as we move from story to story...

from book to book... from one voice to another voice...

It’s a trajectory that develops as we move from the voice of the priests...to the poets... to the prophets...

and finally to the voice of pastor and preacher

in the pages of scripture.

For the last nine months, we’ve been following the story of the bible, trying to piece together that trajectory. Back in early September, we started with the Floods story and gradually made our way through the unfolding drama of

Creation... and then Crisis

the drama of Callings and Covenants

and then generation of Conversations,
and finally Christ and the Church.
(I'm getting pretty good at this alliteration thing aren't I?)

We've been doing this because it's one thing to know those stories, the story of David and Goliath, of Moses and the 10 plagues, of Jesus and the Magi. It's another thing all together to be able to trace the over all story that the bible is trying to tell.

We need to start with teaching and learning those stories, but as we grow up spiritually, we need to grow up in our reading of the bible...to put together in all the travail of the scriptures,

all the messiness and misunderstanding...

forward progression and steps backwards...

in order to see where this is all going.

Today as we celebrate Pentecost we are at one of those climax moments where we can look back and begin to see where this has been going all along

This is the day that we remember that the mystery of Emmanuel, of God with us, didn't end when Jesus ascended into heaven. Ten days later, while the disciples were in the upper room praying, Emmanuel didn't just happen **among** them.

It happened **within** them.

Jesus told them it would...

"You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit..." he said.

"The Father will send you an Advocate... the Spirit of Truth. He abides in you and will be in you," Jesus said.

Then it happened. The Spirit of God, the very life and breath and presence of God was poured out on the disciples. Now, God was both **with them** and **in them**.

In Pentecost, a kind of mystical union takes place between God and humanity... a union that we first see in Jesus. Jesus is the icon of this possibility. He reveals it to us. As Maximus the Confessor puts it,

"Christ, in his love unites created reality with uncreated reality... [that's the incarnation... the union of created reality with uncreated reality]. and he shows that through grace the two are becoming one. The whole world enters wholly into the whole of God..."

This is what we see in Jesus. It's what is revealed to us in Jesus. But we experience it in Pentecost... in the coming of the Holy Spirit in us.

You see, Pentecost is not an after thought to this story. It is in many ways where our story has been going all along. The bible has been pointing us and leading us to nothing less than **the mystery of divine union**.

That's where it's all going.

That's the trajectory of this sacred narrative,
And that's the trajectory of our lives.

Last week we talked at length about how Paul's favorite phrase is "in Christ." For Paul, **Christ is a sort of code word "for the all consuming reality of God in which we abide."** This week we see that not only do we abide in God, but God also abides in us.

The goal and direction of the bible, and of our lives, *is mutual indwelling*. Or use the word that Chuck Hussung coined, it is "in-each-other-ness."

When you realize this, you begin to see that this end was already there at the beginning. This is what the story of the Garden of Eden is all about. Adam and Eve walk with God in the beauty and goodness of the garden... completely open, exposed and vulnerable to one another, to creation, and to God. It all begins with an image of mutual indwelling.

But all of that changes when they begin to hide from God. They are embarrassed, and cover their nakedness. They cover up their vulnerability. In other words, they begin to think they need to protect themselves and separate themselves... and all this starts the plot of the bible.

It's a story that has in many ways been about returning us back to the Garden, back to a place where we are completely open and vulnerable and at one with God once again. So by the last two chapters of the bible, in Revelations 21-22 you have this beautiful vision... of this New Jerusalem where there is no Temple, but instead a Tree of Life and the River of life... It's Eden again...

And a loud voice proclaims:

*"The home of God is among mortals again.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;*

*he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said,
"See, I am making all things new."*

It's a fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision (37:27) and Jeremiah's vision (31:33-34). It's the restoration of Eden.. ***That fulfillment is getting started for us on Pentecost.***

Another way to think about this is that the bible is a story of God's love taking us back home... a home that we've forgotten... a home that we have a hard time remembering.

There's this story I've heard Richard Rohr tell about the homecoming of a newborn baby. His parents get him settled into his nursery and in comes his 4 year-old precocious big brother who says, **"I want to talk to my new little brother."**

Their parents beam with pride. **"Isn't that sweet?"** they whisper to each other. **"Of course, come on in."** So, he does, and looks at them again, **"No, I want to talk to my baby brother alone!"**

That was a little surprising... and seemed strange, but they decided to let him. They stepped out of the room, but they put their ear to the door. They wanted to hear what he was going to say... They wanted to make sure there wasn't some kind of sibling rivalry going on here. And this is what they heard, **"Quick, tell me where you came from. Tell me who made you. I'm beginning to forget."**

The Holy Spirit is poured into us... to help us remember. Just before our reading today, earlier in Romans 8, Paul says that the Holy Spirit is bearing witness with our spirit, that ***we are children of God.***

The Holy Spirit is given to us, prompting our spirit,
to know in a deeper way... where we've come from...
and where our home is.

to know that we've come from God and are returning to God.

Divine Union.

Today is our last day in Romans and it is also the end of the readings from the Narrative Lectionary for this year. The narrative lectionary lands in Romans in part because this is where the biblical narrative ends... with the early church getting started... and letters passed around from leaders to communities who are struggling with questions and conflicts of all kinds.

But we've also been taken into Romans in particular because in this letter, Paul has been doing exactly what we have been doing since September.

Paul is connecting the dots of this sacred narrative... a narrative that begins in Genesis and in a very messy way, moves generation after generation to his present time... when Christ has been revealed and the Spirit has been given.

He's connecting the dots of this narrative to help the church...

...to help us understand what ***has been*** and ***is being revealed*** through this story: the good news, the gospel and its profound power for our salvation, as he puts it in Romans 1.

And so, as we've been following Romans these last four weeks, we've looked at how Paul says this story has revealed the righteousness of God - a righteousness that is restorative, not retributive, holding us in relationship all along, despite our unfaithfulness.

And it's a story in which God demonstrates God's love countless times, but most fully and mysteriously in the cross. God chooses to enter death for us. It's a story in which God reaches into death, into all the "*rock-bottom, scorched-earth, dead-on-arrival corners of this world—including those in your own heart*"¹—and raises them to new life.

This is the story we've been following, and as we draw this narrative to a close, it's time we make some conclusions. That's what Paul is helping us with that today with the end of Chapter 8.

"What then are we to say about these things?..." the suffering, the messiness, the evil, the darkness at work? the travel in this story and in our lives? What are we to say about these things?

If God is for us, if this is what we've seen, if that's what's been revealed, what can stand against us? "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?"

Just look at how this story has unfolded and ask yourselves, can anything?

The Great Flood and the wickedness around it didn't. Floating out there in the sea of chaos, God "remembers" Noah... God remembers humanity and begins recreating a home for us once more.

Can anything separate us?

Sara's barrenness and Abraham's messy relationship with Hagar didn't.

Joseph's boyhood arrogance and his brother's jealousy didn't. "God was with Joseph" the story says again and again, remember?

Potiphar's wife's accusations didn't.

The slave masters in Egypt and all the power they represented couldn't separate us... And neither could our grumbling in the Wilderness and our unfaithfulness to the God who freed us.

Our complacency in the Promised Land? It ultimately couldn't separate us either:

David's self-illusionment, his blindness and affair,

Solomon's foolishness and pride,

Our injustices toward one another and the world around us that the prophets described? Even that couldn't ultimately separate us from the love of God.

Yes, it cost us greatly. The death we sowed came back to haunt us. And we encountered Assyria and Babylon, exile and great loss. But even there, in the midst of exile, we discovered that God was always with us,

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 21.

more present than the Temple,
more loving than vengeful,
more hope-filled than condemning.

Through Assyria and Babylon and Persia and Rome... all the powers that try to destroy us, God never abandoned us... but instead was preparing us for a great gift... preparing us to receive God's own self again,

offered and made known in Jesus,

born a baby, weak and vulnerable in this world,
grown to become a peasant-teacher with a fierce divine love,
offering us the upside down wisdom of God,
healing us in the most profound ways,
loving us enough to hang on a cross and say,

"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Even that great dark hour couldn't separate us.

God raised Christ to new life and has raised us with him, and is pouring into us that same resurrected life by putting God's own Spirit within us.

What can separate us from the love of God? Isn't it obvious by now? Can you see where this story has always been going ever since we turned our back, and closed our self off from God in the garden?

God has always been drawing us back...

back into the Garden... where all is at one,
back home in God. Union with God. Mutual Indewelling.

"Nothing can separate us," Paul writes. Not even death itself... in countless ways evil and death have worked their way into this story and have worked their way into our lives, and into our hearts and into our world.

Neither death nor life,

Not angels or rulers,

Not things present nor thing to come,

No power, no height, no depth,

nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God

"in Christ Jesus,"

...the love of God holding us in relationship,

the love being poured into us,

the love demonstrated to us,

the love in which we abide.

The Love of God will have the last word. It will never let us go, never stop drawing us home, until all things have been made whole again.

This is the story of the Bible.
This is the story you and I find ourselves in.
This is the story of our world, and of our lives.
This is the Gospel.

May you experience its power for your salvation.

Amen.

Silent Reflection

*O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be.*

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and from the ground there blossoms red life that shall endless be.*

~ George Matheson