

Listening for the Holy Spirit
John 14:23-29

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We have a fantastic scripture passage to reflect on today. It is from the Gospel of John, the 14th Chapter. Jesus is teaching his followers about what will happen after he has died. He is trying to prepare them so that when it happens, they will know it is of God. Jesus explains that when he is gone, God will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, in his name and the Holy Spirit will teach them everything, reminding them what Jesus has said to them. What a fantastic thing to know! The Holy Spirit will teach us everything and will remind us of what Jesus has said.

The Holy Spirit is not an easy topic. We can't see it. We have to learn to listen for it. Sometimes it comes to us and changes our lives. Sometimes it seems very silent. Learning to open our hearts to the mystery of the Holy Spirit is at the foundation of our lives as people of faith.

A few weeks ago I was teaching the 6th grade at Covenant Preparatory School in Hartford. It is an interfaith privately funded middle school for underserved boys. I am the teacher of the Christian faith. The topic for the day was the Holy Spirit. I started the class explaining that this was a difficult topic because we can't see the Holy Spirit and we have to learn to listen for it. I told the boys that they were to be detectives and find clues to discover the qualities of the Holy Spirit. Using art, scripture, music and short video clips, the boys created a long list of the qualities of the Holy Spirit ó light, caring, wisdom, energy, warmth, inspiration, love, hope, eternal, peaceful, everywhere, freeing, safe, teacher, and so forth. At the end of the class, I asked the boys to write a paragraph about what it would be like to encounter the Holy Spirit. One young man named Paris wrote: "It would be a pleasure to encounter the Holy Spirit. It would love me and care for me. It would teach me the main ways of God. Wisdom would be given to me."

Paris is right. The Holy Spirit gives us wisdom and that wisdom is meant to guide our lives. As people of faith, our job is to open our hearts to encountering Sacred Wisdom.

Our church has had a long, courageous tradition of opening our hearts to the teachings of the Holy Spirit. When we look back over the past 300 years, we discover a remarkable story. 300 years ago, a small group of people petitioned the Colonial government in Hartford to grant them the right to worship in West Hartford. They believed the Spirit was calling them to create a church here, and they persistently worked for their belief until it was granted. History tells us that this church spoke against slavery more than thirty years before the Civil War, and granted women the right to vote at congregational meetings at the end of the 19th century. This might seem a simple thing now, but it was radically liberal back then. Yet, our church mothers and fathers did not shy away from change or speaking for justice. They did not just settle into being content with the way things have always been. Instead, they kept listening for how the Spirit was calling them to be faithful in each era. This is the same kind of courageous listening that we need to carry into our future. How is God still speaking to us? How can we be faithful to our dynamic and changing environment as people grounded in a powerful, transformative faith?

Jesus teaches that this kind of faithful listening begins with each of us in our hearts. He invites us to listen within our souls to hear the voice of the Spirit, embrace it and allow it to guide our actions and our way of being. This takes practice ó it requires prayer and attentiveness, but when we engage in this kind of listening our lives are transformed. We come to know deep within our souls that God is here. God is present. God desires our attention and God guides us.

Just for fun ó as an experiment in listening to the Holy Spirit ó pick a quality of the Holy Spirit that you admire and desire. St. Paul gives us the list: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Pick one. Let's say it is kindness. Make a pact with yourself to check in everyday with a quiet time of prayer to reflect on kindness and how the Spirit is inviting you to make it a central feature of your life. Ask God to guide you in this experiment. Notice when you are kind. Notice when you are not kind. Perhaps you were tired, hungry, frustrated, or angry. Then bring yourself back to the commitment to try to become a person of kindness all over again. Do this experiment for a month ó you might even keep a journal to note what you are praying about, how you feel, what you see happening in your heart. Then, after a month, take some quiet time to reflect on all the Holy Spirit has shared with you. You'll be amazed at the transformation.

When we look for it, The Holy Spirit will teach us everything.

In my own spiritual journey, I have come to understand that an enormous part of knowing the Holy Spirit is to trust it. I was reminded of this on Good Friday.

This past Holy Week, I was in charge of the Good Friday service. In the past, this service has not been well attended, so I decided to step outside of the box and try something new. Knowing that only a small group would be gathered and that our vision work from our church wide retreat indicated a strong desire for alternative worship experiences, I thought it would be interesting to put together a Good Friday service around the idea of Lectio Divina. The scripture for Good Friday is fantastic. It is the story of Jesus in the Garden. I thought the small group gathered could listen together to the scripture and share their thoughts ó thereby having the community form the sermon, so to speak ó and experience a new way of worship. I also thought that I might suggest to the deacons that they consider not having a Good Friday service next year because of the historically low attendance.

Thinking optimistically, I prepared for twenty people ó printing the bulletin myself because I was using a picture I had taken as an icon for the evening and I wanted it to be in color. I got to the Chapel early to make a small circle of chairs, placing a candle in the middle of the circle and bulletins on each chair. As we approached 7 p.m., thirty-five people had arrived ó the circle of chairs had to be made bigger and Geordie went off to make copies of the bulletin in black and white. I began to panic. My inner negative voice started to criticize me saying something like: "You see, you should never try something new! You should have just written a sermon. You can't do lectio with thirty-five people! No one will say anything. No one can hear each other. This is going to be a disaster, what were you thinking?" Then, when we were in silence for a few minutes just before the first reading of the scripture, I heard a voice within say with vigor and conviction: "You have to trust me!" It made me laugh because I know this. I have learned that when I trust God, wonderful things happen. I have learned and relearned that after all the

work is done, I need to let go and let God. So, I let go and let God run the service. And, guess what? People spoke. Words of wisdom were shared. We could feel the presence of God and the Holy Spirit guided us.

This is our future. We must do the work to prepare. We must risk being courageous and thinking outside the box like our ancestors in the faith. We must gather in community to listen to each other and listen for God's wisdom and then, when all the work is done, we must trust the Holy to move among us.

This is the promise of our scripture this morning. Jesus told us the Holy Spirit will teach us what we need to know.

May God be with us on the journey. Amen.

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