

## ***God's Eye-Opener, John 14:15-21***

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Helen Keller was not born deaf and blind. She was a healthy, sturdy, bright child, with a mind of her own. Her first 18 months of life were uneventful. But at 19 months she suffered an illness that left her without eyesight or hearing, causing a major communication deficit at a very vulnerable time in her life.

As a young child she naturally strove to communicate, and gradually came to understand that others could do so by moving their lips. But she was unable to communicate in this way, and her frustration led to rage – terrible outbursts that were occurring daily by the time she was 6 years old. That's when her teacher, Anne Sullivan, came into her life. And if you know the story (or have read the book or seen the movie, "Miracle Worker,") you know that Miss Sullivan was Helen's eye-opener. The climax of that story is when Helen was able to connect the letters her teacher had relentlessly spelled out into her hand, with the reality of the water she could feel. Helen later wrote about this eye-opening experience:

Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! ...Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. (*The Story of My Life*, by Helen Keller)

In those first few minutes of discovery, Helen frantically learned all the words she could, including words for "mama" and "papa." Finally she turned to Miss Sullivan, who introduced herself as "Teacher." Teacher. That's who the Holy Spirit is to you and me. He is the "Eye-Opener" that reveals Christ to us; who grants and nourishes faith; and who challenges each of us to find and fulfill our purpose in this life.

Our Gospel reading takes us back, before Easter, to the night before Jesus' death. Here, Jesus is in the middle of his last conversation with his disciples. In chapter 14, Jesus is comforting his disciples, who are confused and saddened – frightened even – by Jesus' words, which indicate that he was leaving them. We heard those words last week, along with the comfort he offered his frightened friends. In today's lesson, he expands on those comforting – yet challenging – thoughts. Although he would not be with them in the same way anymore, neither would he leave them orphaned. He would send "another Advocate, to be with you forever." And this Advocate (aka Teacher) is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is to us what Anne Sullivan was to Helen Keller. Like Helen, we are in some ways, blind and deaf. We don't see God. We have trouble hearing his voice. Being deficient in these ways, we need someone who can open our eyes and ears. We need someone who can show us the Father; who can explain the ways of Jesus. We need a Teacher. Even those of us who live on this side of the Resurrection, need a Teacher to help us see what we don't see.

The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to Jesus as a real person. The disciples experienced life with Jesus; they knew he was real. But you and I lack that advantage. Yes, we know of him. We know the stories; we read the Gospels. In our heads, we know about Jesus. But it's only by the Holy Spirit that you can have an encounter with Jesus as a real person. What I mean by that is that you become willing to believe in the person the Gospels describe – in a person who is more than he seems, who does the unexpected, who becomes a compelling force in your life. A real person who is more than whatever box you have formed, which in your mind, defines (and limits) him. Jesus is a real, live person who often acts in surprising ways. An encounter with Jesus changes things.

Think of the "aha" experiences of people in the Bible who encountered the risen Christ and believed. I think of Thomas, who moved out of doubt into certainty that Jesus was his Risen Lord – and never looked back. Of Peter and the others who left the safety and seclusion of the Upper Room to go into the streets to proclaim the Resurrection, without fear. Of Paul, who made an 180 degree turnabout, no longer persecuting the followers of Jesus, but becoming one of them; indeed, one of their leaders. These people had all encountered a person who was real, whose words were true, whose actions could not be predicted. Jesus is a real person, alive today, who speaks to you through his Word. That encounter becomes real to you through the work of the Holy Spirit. He opens your eyes to Jesus.

The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to reveal Jesus to you. He also uses the Sacraments. I think of the two men on the Emmaus road (we heard their story a few weeks ago). First their hearts burned within them as Jesus spoke, opening their eyes to all that Scripture had said *about* him. Then their eyes were opened *to* Jesus himself, at the breaking of the bread. Luke says, "...he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them." That's almost word for word the description of what we now call Communion. In Communion, we too, break bread and drink wine, understanding that in it, we are experiencing the Real Presence of Christ. It is more than a symbolic act. We aren't just remembering what Jesus did and who he was. We are encountering the living Christ.

During this time of isolation, we need that encounter. We need more than words that describe a person who lived long ago. We, as human beings, need that tangible experience that yes, Jesus is here; and he is here for you and me. That's why we celebrate Communion – because in

this gift the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the real presence of Jesus, as well as the gift of forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life. Communion is an encounter with the Risen Christ.

The Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the person of Jesus. He also opens our hearts and minds to believe in him. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "another Advocate," but not in order to advocate our case before God (Jesus has already done that on the cross). Instead the Holy Spirit advocates God's case before us – so that we may believe.

The Holy Spirit creates faith. It's not something you can somehow conjure up inside yourself. Paul says, in his first letter to the Corinthians, that "... no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:3) We have already seen that even those who walked with Jesus, listening to him for three years, did not quite believe what their eyes and ears told them. It takes the work of the Spirit to open our hearts to faith.

Luther said a strange thing when explaining the work of the Holy Spirit. In the Small Catechism he says, "I believe... that I cannot believe." Did you know that? Here's the full quote: "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him." Reason alone is not going to cut it. (Just ask all the great theologians.) Reason has its place; God has created us, after all, as rational beings. Reason is not the enemy of faith. But neither is it sufficient to understand God's truth. God says,

My ways are not your ways; neither are my thoughts your thoughts. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Our minds, limited as they are, are just not up to the task. But – here's the good news: we are not to despair! Luther goes on, "But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." The Holy Spirit knows the mind of God. Paul says,

"What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived ... these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit..." (1 Corinthians 2:9-10a)

The Holy Spirit is the eye-opener to faith.

The Holy Spirit opens your eyes to the real person of Christ. He opens your hearts and minds to believe. And finally, the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to your life's purpose. You see, the Resurrection is not the endgame. The Resurrection is just the beginning of a whole new world. It opens the doors to our purpose for life here and now.

Here and now, you and I are in the midst of a world-changing epidemic. Perhaps you, like me, are wondering what our new normal will be like. Questions abound, and answers seem to be in

short supply. Will a vaccine be found, and when? Will jobs come back, and what kind? Will schools re-open and how? In an undependable world, on what can we depend?

In the midst of all these questions, one thing remains solid: Jesus is Lord. In the midst of the shifting sands of our world, one thing remains firm: God is God. He has not abandoned his world. He sees the future we cannot see. Whatever happens, he will bring good out of it. And, you have a part to play.

The Holy Spirit opens your eyes to what you can do today. You are salt and yeast in this world. Where others may turn to despair or anger, you are called to hope and love. Jesus gave us this command: to love as we have been loved. The Church has always been at its best when it puts self aside to show love to others, as Pastor Jonna mentioned last week. How can you do that? How can you be part of the greater purposes of God, salting this world with love, and spreading the yeast of faith? You are not the same as you once were. God is changing you to be more than you are – by the power of the Spirit.

You and I know that change does not come easily. The Holy Spirit begins in small ways, but he doesn't stop there, and sometimes he pushes the envelope further than we expect. C. S. Lewis put it best:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. You see, He intends to come and live in it Himself. (*Mere Christianity*)

When the Holy Spirit dwells in you – resides in you – you can't help but change. Think again about Helen Keller. That aha! moment when language was revealed to her, ushering in all kinds of newness. In her words,

That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! ...Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life.

So it is with you and me. Through the eyes of faith, everything becomes new. What was impossible now becomes possible. You can meet the real Jesus, in person, today. Your faith

can be awakened and increased, knowing that God sees the bigger picture. And you become a partner with God, empowered to work his plan and purposes in a world that needs hope. Today, may your eyes be opened by the power of the Spirit.

Notes and citations:

Luther's quotes: The Explanation to the Third Article of the Creed, *Small Catechism*.

C.S Lewis: *Mere Christianity*.

Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*.

From "The Miracle Worker" (1962), see this clip of Helen's discovery of language:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUV65sV8nu0>