

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

Narrative Lectionary 2.36 – Easter 6
Acts 17:22-28, John 14.15-21

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Salem, Bridgeport

“The Spirit Shelters with Us!”

This past Wednesday I couldn't get out of bed.
I had opened the ELCA interpretation of what the CDC guidelines mean for the reopening of indoor worship – 7 pages! – and by the time I had finished reading them I was totally depressed.
Basically what they said was that when churches do reopen for indoor worship, people will need to maintain social distancing, so no sharing of the peace, no shaking hands, no hugging. People will also have to wear masks, and since you would have to remove your mask to eat, there can be no communion and no coffee hour.
And because masks are limited in their effectiveness, there can be no singing in worship, and not even any choral reading – like saying the Lord's Prayer.
By the time you remove all of those elements from worship, let's face it: there's not much left.

And then came the kicker.
We were told that one of the medical experts who had worked on the guidelines said that because the virus isn't going away until we either have herd immunity or a vaccine, we are probably looking at no indoor worship for at least the rest of 2020.
No indoor worship together for the rest of the calendar year???!
How are churches going to survive?!
I was so depressed I didn't see the point of even getting out of bed.

But then I read our texts for today and all of the sudden my mood shifted, my spirits lifted – as I realized we don't have to come to church to meet God because God has already come to meet us!

In our gospel reading, Jesus says to the disciples who were no longer going to be able to gather with him, *“You'll see me; because...I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you.”* [John 14.19-20]
And Jesus explains exactly how that happens.
He says, *“I will ask God to send you...the Spirit...who remains WITH you & will be WITHIN you.”* [John 14.16-17]
We don't need to come to church to meet God because God has sent the Spirit to meet us!

Now I know I'm talking to a lot of Lutherans out there, and I know that probably any Lutheran older than I had to memorize Luther's Small Catechism.
I know many of you memorized the whole thing – some of you in English, some in Swedish, and some in German.
Well by the time I was in confirmation class I didn't have to memorize the whole thing – just one part. I don't recall whether we all had to memorize the same part, or whether we were each assigned different parts. All I remember is that I had to memorize Luther's explanation to the 3rd article of the Apostles Creed, the article that begins, *“I believe in the Holy Spirit...”*.
And Luther's explanation of that begins like this, *“I believe that I cannot by my own understanding believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but...the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps the whole Christian church on earth.”*
Calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps: those are the words that restored my hope and faith this week.
Let me share with you how.

Calls.

If you're a Christian it is because the Holy Spirit has called you,

As Paul said in our first lesson,

²⁵... God is the One who gives everyone life, breath — everything.

²⁷ God did this so that human beings would seek, reach out for, and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any of us ²⁸the One in whom we live & move & have our being." [Acts 17]

The Spirit is the only way that we can know God.

The Spirit is what draws us to faith.

The Spirit is why you're listening to this sermon right now.

The calling can happen in many and multiple ways.

It can happen physically – through an interaction with someone,

through what you see in them or hear from them or experience through them.

It can happen intellectually – through something you read, or a light bulb suddenly going on in your head.

It can happen emotionally – through an intense appreciation of beauty or overwhelming feeling of love.

It can happen spiritually – a nameless yearning that is suddenly fulfilled.

But there is no way that anyone can come to God, no way that anyone can encounter the risen Christ, except through the Spirit.

Gathers.

Calling can happen through our bodies, minds, hearts or spirits, but gathering is a physical thing.

And after calling, gathering is the very next thing that the Spirit does.

When the Spirit calls a person, it is into a church, a congregation, a faith community, because no one can be a Christian alone.

To be a Christian means to be part of the body of Christ

and that means that an eye can't exist alone and an ear can't exist alone and a mouth can't exist alone.

Each separate part needs to be in relation to the other parts.

Now usually gathered means physically brought together in the same place,

but that's not the only way we can be together.

We can worship online with Facebook or YouTube.

We can attend Bible study on Zoom.

We can have conversations about faith in person with those with whom we live,

or electronically with those from whom we are physically apart

by FaceTime or Skype or Zoom or by phone or text or email or snail mail.

When my faith is weak, I need Christians whose faith is strong;

when mine is strong I can help someone whose faith is weak.

We don't need to come to the sanctuary to gather; the spirit has given us other ways.

But gather we must – whether it's in person or in some electronic way.

We need to use our bodies, our physical senses to relate to one another as the church.

Enlightens.

Gathering involves our bodies.

Enlightening involves our minds.

While we can certainly be enlightened at times by what other people say or do,

enlightening doesn't need to happen through other people.

It can happen directly from the Spirit.

Enlightening happens when I read a scripture text and all of a sudden see it in a new and relevant way.

Enlightening happens when I'm praying and suddenly an answer pops into my mind.

Enlightening happens sometimes at 4:00 in the morning when God wakes me up with a new idea.

Sanctifies.

Gathering is the way the Spirit works in our bodies

Enlightening is the way the Spirit works in our minds.

Sanctifying is the way the Spirit works in our souls.

Sanctifying means making holy.

It's the way the Spirit works in us to transform our lives from the inside out.

If we're just operating according to a code of conduct, keeping the law, abiding by the rules,

doing what's right and avoiding what's wrong because we're supposed to,

that's a surface kind of behavior; it's simply reformation.

Sanctification is about more than reformation; it's about transformation –

something that goes deeper, something that changes not only our outward behavior, but our inner desire.

Let me give you an example.

I have always believed in evangelism.

It's the only logical way to grow the church. It's a rational, reasonable thing to do.

But it was only when the Spirit came to be not just WITH me, but IN me,

that my heart was changed, and evangelism was not something I should do, but something I had to do,
because my heart had been changed.

Keeps.

Gathering is the way the Spirit works in our bodies

Enlightening is the way the Spirit works in our minds.

Sanctifying is the way the Spirit works in our souls.

Keeping is the way the Spirit works in our hearts.

Think about keeping as a divine hug, a holding, an enfolding embrace.

Jesus said that he would not leave us comfortless, but would send the Spirit to be our comforter.

Jesus said to his disciples, *"Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I send you."*

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, *"Receive the Holy Spirit". [John 20.21-22]*

Jesus said to his disciples then and says to us now,

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." [John 14.27]

That's what it means for the Holy Spirit to keep us.

The bad news is that it's going to be a long time before we can worship together indoors.

But the good news is that we don't have to.

Jesus sent the Spirit to be with his disciples – to call, gather, enlighten, sanctify, and keep us.

The Spirit is definitely with us. And maybe we even have the Spirit within us.

I know that the Spirit is with you.

If you are watching this, that means the Spirit has called you and gathered you.

I hope and pray that the Spirit will continue to work in your life, enlightening and sanctifying you.

But more than that I pray that in this time of trial and tribulation,

the Holy Spirit will keep you, will hold you, will enfold you in the divine embrace,

calming your body, quieting your mind, comforting your heart, and filling your soul with peace. **Amen**