

Living in the Spirit's Call

Cycle

B

Sermons Based on the Gospel
Lessons for the Season of
Pentecost, First Half



Sarah B. Miller

Living In The Spirit's Call

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Cycle B Sermons for the
First Half of Pentecost

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LIVING IN THE SPIRIT'S CALL

FIRST EDITION

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To my beloved Andrew, and our boys. Thank you for being living testaments of how far the Lord has helped us. Our family steps forward in and because of God's grace.

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Introduction

Discipleship is the pathway to life and new life because of following Christ. Its practices are not new, and they are exactly what make us new. *Living in the Spirit's Call* is a collection of Cycle B Sermons for the Sundays after Pentecost based on the Gospel Lessons. Written for the season of Kingdomtide, these sermons invite readers to live in the Spirit's call as they embody discipleship after the example of Christ.

This collection celebrates how discipleship has changed my life for the better because of my relationship with Christ and neighbors. May these sermons be an additional invitation and helpmate to you in seeking deepened revelation of God's plan for your discipleship as you live in the Spirit's call.

Day of Pentecost
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Did You See That One Coming?

My husband and I were married on Christmas Eve-Eve in 2006. After our delightful cake and punch reception we headed for the North Georgia Mountains for a honeymoon between semesters. Everything was planned. We had a cabin reserved at the base of Amicalola Falls. We would eat Christmas Eve dinner and Christmas Day meals in the state park's lodge. That is, until we couldn't.

We arrived early evening on Christmas Eve and found a sign on the front door of the lodge that read "Dining Room Closed for Renovations." Suffice it to say, we did not see that one coming, especially after Andrew called to ensure our reservations for December 24 and 25 were on the books. We ran back to the car and zoomed out of the state park. Did I mention it was Christmas Eve? We were 35 minutes away from the closest super store that was closing in 25 minutes...you do the math.

When we arrived, they had already pulled the metal gates across the entrance; customers were leaving, not entering. We explained our situation to the security guard out front: out of towners, newlyweds, staying in a cabin, dining room closed for renovations, we ate all our trip snacks already, *please!* I remember the look on his face; it read "there is no way they are making this up." He lifted the gate waist high and motioned for us to duck under. "You have less than ten minutes."

We divided and conquered, flapping about like wild birds, pecking at what was in our wingspan, and dive-bombing for the check-out line. Thanks to this circus of events, we had our

first Christmas Eve tradition! Every year since, the night we celebrate Jesus' birth, we eat the foods we ate our first married Christmas Eve: frozen pizza, chicken bites, and orange juice. Thanks be to God.

Whenever I read John 15 into John 16, I also experience the "didn't see that one coming" feeling. John 15 began with the incredibly hope-filled imagery of disciples being the branches connected to Jesus the vine. We hear encouragement to abide in him because in him and with him we will bear much fruit. Jesus commands us to love because by loving we reveal that we are Jesus' friends.

Jesus shared these words so that they would become our rule of life, so that they become the boundaries of our life wherein we transparently live, move, and have our being as his committed disciples. Reading the first half of John 15 makes me think of the closing scene from *Grease* where the cast sings in one voice about always being together!¹ *Changitty chang shu bop!*

Then, the discourse took a downward turn as Jesus discussed the judgment and hate the disciples would experience because of him. *Groan.*

The final blow? Jesus said it was time to go. *Didn't see that one coming.*

Candidly, the world didn't see anything coming from Jesus until it was before us, and we are all the better for it. The prophets long foretold of the coming Messiah, but was this Jesus *him*? There were political leaders and charismatic teachers rallying followers and supporters day by day, but how do we *know* Jesus is the real one? The true one?

These are the sorts of questions I like to explore with my youngest worshipers in our weekly Children's Moment, which is by far my absolute favorite part of the worship service. There is something so tender and real about sitting with God's precious ones on the chancel steps and having a heart-to-heart

1 *Grease* (New York: Paramount Pictures, 1979).

conversation full of giggles and gigantic questions and grace. So much grace.

Sometimes we pretend the adults cannot hear us, when in reality, I am so glad they can. Children's Moments break down barriers for adults because "Pastor is *just* talking to the kids." Guards lower. Hearts open. Ears perk. And adults are given permission to wonder again. To wonder anew during this special chat for *all* of God's children.

A treasured question I annually ask the kiddos during Children's Moment is how we know whether or not something is true? Together we have brainstormed criteria and agreed that if something or someone is helpful, good, honest, trustworthy, and kind, then it is true. Older students have added that we test what is true through application, experience, and measurement.

In studying the fourth gospel witness, we read and experience evidence that Jesus is the true Messiah, the real Son of God. John's Prologue began announcing that the Word that was with God and the Word that was God in the beginning "became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only Son, full of grace and truth."² A few verses later the book testifies that "the law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ," the Word of God.³

In Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, we learn that those who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth. In John 5, Jesus commended John the Baptist for testifying to the truth that Jesus was the one, the Messiah, that the baptizer foretold like the prophets before him.⁴ Jesus taught in John 8 that his disciples knew his word and would continue in his truth; Jesus' truth made — and makes — disciples free.⁵

² John 1:14.

³ John 1:17.

⁴ John 5:33.

⁵ John 8:31-32.

Jesus declared in John 14, "I am the way and the truth and the life."⁶

From his incarnation through his public ministry to the threshold of his passion, Jesus said he was the truth and that he came in truth. Through miracles by multiplication and miracles by healing, through conversations with kindred hearts and caustic ones, through highs and lows, through graces and griefs, we experience Jesus' applied and measurable truth. Indeed, Jesus is helpful, good, honest, trustworthy, and kind.

Today's passage is a portion of Jesus' farewell discourse in the fourth gospel. His hope was that in hearing these words, his present and future disciples would both fare well and faith well. Equipping that hope with strategy, Jesus shared another truth, "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."⁷

Jesus had concern and care for his disciples; he did not want to take something away, in this case, himself, without giving something in return, the Spirit. Disciples would experience human loss in the transition and time between Jesus' departure and the Spirit's arrival. His followers' uncertainty about the unknown is neither overlooked nor undervalued by Jesus. Their feelings are true and real.

Jesus used the Greek word *parakletos* in characterizing the Spirit. In the New Revised Standard Version, *parakletos* translates as *the Advocate*. In other biblical translations and paraphrases you may read the words Comforter, Helper, Counselor, Friend, Intercessor, Strengtheners, Standby, and Companion. My favorite characterization of the Holy Spirit comes from the Celtic Christians, who have long imagined the Holy Spirit as a wild goose.

My home church sits across from a lake that ducks, swans, and geese call home. When commuting around Lake Morton, the fowl always have the right of way, and they are not to be

6 John 14:6.

7 John 16:7.

hurried or intimidated to hasten the speed of their waddling. The geese have been known to stalk cars and people they feel have crossed them while honking all the live long day. They are loud, present, commanding attention, while also capable of being calm and quiet; serene and poised above the water while fiercely paddling for change and justice underneath? Yeah. Sounds like the Spirit to me.

John, alone, used *parakletos* to speak of the Spirit. It means “summoned, called to one’s side, especially called to one’s aid [when] pleading another’s cause before a judge [as] a pleader, counsel for defense, and legal assistant.”⁸ Why do we require such aid? Need such defense? Because Jesus anticipated conflict borne from animosity between his followers and ‘the world,’ which is a collective noun for those who would not receive the Spirit because they refused to receive the truth, which is Christ, himself.⁹ His anticipation of animosity then holds true through and beyond today.

On the whole, we are a conflict-averse society. We avoid situations that could result in conflict. We resolve conflicts by agreeing, even if we don’t, by changing the subject, and/or by severing the relationship entirely. While avoiding conflict appears to protect us in the present by preserving our self-esteem and sense of who we are, in reality, it limits who we are now in addition to who we are capable of becoming in the future.

We are not always people that agree; therefore, we need to know what to do when we don’t. We need to know our default or baseline reaction to conflict, and even more important, we need to know the default reaction that Jesus desires from us while experiencing conflict.

It is not the best practice to “keep things light” or “avoid certain topics” for the sake of civility because civility is an incredibly low bar for Christ followers. We are called to extend the reach of Jesus’ love and care in the world. We are called to

8 “G3875 - Paraklētōs - Strong’s Greek Lexicon (KJV),” *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed February 6, 2025, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3875/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

9 John 14:17.

look into the places of deep pain and injustice and be part of the healing, transformative, life-giving solution in Jesus' name.

Jesus does not want us to be people that "see red" all the time — neither walking around in rose-colored glasses, nor boiling with rage. Rather, Jesus wants us to be people that see relationship all the time. Relationship is the marrow of our bones; we were created for relationship with God, with one another, and with all of creation. We are called to deep friendship and deep stewardship. God calls us in order to know God, one another, and all of creation, and to be known by God, one another and all of creation. Knowing and being known happens in and through relationship.

Relationships, whether for a reason, a season, or a lifetime, will include conflict and therefore, loss. The Bible tells us so.

Consider this lectionary passage. It is not all sunshine and rainbows; it is realistic. Jesus was leaving and the disciples will experience loss. Animosity would persist between Christ followers and the world, and the disciples would experience loss. The work of the Holy Spirit would prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment, and that experience, be it of confrontation and/or conviction, will create loss of what was through accepting the Holy Spirit's truth or the loss of what could be by refusing the Spirit's leading.

This is a gospel text for Pentecost, the day we celebrate the birth of the church through the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost was a day of great celebration; in the church of my childhood, this day was incomplete without flame headbands as the Sunday School craft and cake after worship whose icing would stain your teeth red for the next 72 hours!

In first-century Jerusalem, the first Pentecost was not an isolated event held in a bubble unaffected by the world. This good, this power, this theophany, meaning physical and visible revealing of God to humanity, occurred in real time in the real world with both curious and critical bystanders just beyond the threshold where the Pentecost congregation worshiped.

It is good for us to remember that though we read Scripture in individual segments at times, it is part of a larger whole. Awareness of the larger whole, alongside awareness of Scripture's tensions and complexities, reinforces for me the primacy and relevancy of Scripture in my life and in our world with all of its tensions and complexities. Scripture is not just life-giving when it is all sunshine and rainbows. Scripture is life-giving in all times and all places; it contains all things necessary and sufficient for salvation. Scripture was not written to depict our story of faith as lived in a serene, climate-controlled and conflict-controlled environment. It is a series of historical snapshots of struggles and savings, of dalliances and deliverances. It is a series of historical snapshots where God shows up and continually shepherds us beyond conflicts to times and spaces where all manner of things shall be well.

There will be intersections where the beliefs and practices of the world and of our own choosing rub raw against the beliefs and practices of Christ. The heart and hard work before Christ followers is discerning through the Spirit how to address conflicts as ambassadors for Christ.

In foreshadowing the Spirit, Jesus said, "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you."¹⁰ The Spirit will build upon and extend the foundational teaching of Christ to our present circumstance. This is an excitement and a comfort. An excitement because that means revelations from God continue; God is still speaking! And a comfort because the Spirit anchors us to the truth of Christ, grounding our faith in hope and relevance as we venture into circumstances and conflicts that would not have crossed Jesus' mind when leading and teaching, not even in his wildest dreams.

One of the dear saints of the church in my life is my friend, Bob. I called him Spitzer, because what a great last name. Spitzer was a dedicated servant of Jesus' good news. He committed his gifts; he offered his leadership; he invested precious

time to the faithful work of wrapping language around his beliefs. He loved Jesus. He loved to tell me *no*, and he loved giving me a hard time about scripture's syntax, semantics, and word selection. Today's passage is a text that would have tap-danced on Spitzer's soul in the best possible way!

Hear again from Jesus in John 16, "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, *he* will prove the world wrong."¹¹ Spitzer would have said, "A two letter word! These two verses hinge on a two-letter word!" That's right, my friend. They hinge on the word *he*. The *he* refers to the person of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment; *he* not *we*. Ours is not the lane or role for proving wrong. Ours is the lane and role to be filled with the Holy Spirit and self-adjust, correct, and recalculate in manners that are becoming of life lived in the Spirit's call. This work happens within individuals and concurrent alongside our neighbors. It is not for us to do this work in affront of our neighbors.

The synoptic gospels record Jesus teaching that a house divided against itself will not stand.¹² Jesus was not unfamiliar with conflict. He knew and anticipated it being a part of his disciples' lives. And Jesus did not desire that we willfully contribute to conflict in our lives or in the lives of our neighbors, known or new. Jesus was kingdom building. We all have a role to play. Led by the Spirit, we all have inner and outer work to redeem and renew that will shepherd in God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

When Jesus' disciples receive his Spirit, we will be guided into all truth. Jesus taught earlier in the fourth gospel, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you

¹¹ John 16:7-8, emphasis added.

¹² Matthew 12:25; Mark 3:25; and Luke 11:17.

will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”¹³ Before Jesus, God’s people lived burdened under the legalism interpreted from God’s word in the law. Righteousness was self-made and the result of high functioning under and within the interpreted legalism. Any other behaviors or decisions that missed the mark in responsible living in relation to God and neighbor were judged as sin. A person judged with sin was a person judged.

Jesus, the Word of God, responded to this confining and condemning legalism with the good news of the gospel. We *are* able to fulfil the mark of responsible living in relation to God and neighbor. We *are* able to become more like God in character and behavior. How? It is because of the Spirit’s presence in us, and because of the Spirit’s movement in our lives stirring us in response to both grace and accountability.

Through the Spirit we become aware of our need of God in our lives. Through the Spirit we develop assurance that never once have we been without God. Through the Spirit we grow in comfort that we need both law and grace for faithful living, because law without grace is all penalty and grace without law is cheap. Through the Spirit we sustain in real-time connection to God’s ongoing revelation.

Future moments, inclusive of future trials as well as triumphs, inclusive of future conflicts as well as celebrations, will demand fresh words and winds from the Spirit. Our theological task as Christ followers today is to discern and apply the Spirit’s leadings in ways that are faithful to the work Jesus began long ago and boldly chooses to continue in and through us today.

That’s right! Us! Filled with his Spirit and attuned to its leadings, we are Jesus’ plan to inspire hope and ignite change as the ongoing caretakers of and contributors to his mission on earth.

Did you see that one coming?

¹³ John 8:31-32.

Our God is a God of justice. The cosmos God created is on the side of justice, and justice will eventually win. The Holy Spirit will guide us, fearlessly and intentionally, as we mature in faith and in cooperation in the kingdom alongside our fellow disciples.

Our world is full of conflicts aching for the freedom and healing the Spirit's truth brings. It is a brave and holy business to be open to these possibilities, and to respond to the Spirit's leadings with intentionality and purpose. May the discernment and application of the Spirit's leadings in our lives be a continuation of the faithful work Christ began long ago to build the kingdom even in the midst of conflict, the Holy Spirit being our perfect Advocate...and when appropriate, our wild goose.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.