

May 31, 2020 Pentecost John 14: 16-17; Romans 8: 14-17

Prayer: Dear Lord, We pray for our country, which this very morning is being ripped apart by riots and protests, by racism and injustice. We so need to feel your Holy Spirit, to be infused by it, to let it guide our steps through these frightening days. Amen.

The Accompanier

If you are like me, you have been glued to the television, watching images of protesters and police in Minneapolis and New York, Washington and Denver, and most startling, at CNN headquarters in Atlanta.

Riots and looting will always provide ammunition for those who refuse to look at their cause. Because what did that poor Target store do to anyone?

Aren't CNN reporters the good guys?

Why are Atlanta police getting hit with bottles intended for a quartet of officers in Minneapolis?

But riots and protests are the outraged cries of disenfranchised and marginalized people who watched a Minneapolis police officer press his knee on George Floyd's neck until the black man died.

Who watched video of 25-year-old Ahmoud Arbery jogging, accosted and killed by two shotgun-toting Georgians. Who saw authorities there do nothing for 10 weeks until a video surfaced.

Who have watched a train of similar incidents going back year after year after year.

Martin Luther King called our reaction "the appalling silence of good people." Because that's what we do. We are good people. And we are appallingly silent in the face of a racism that has never been resolved in this country and has been revived and unleashed and stoked in the past four years.

I don't have the distance yet to talk about this in a way that makes sense. So I'm going to turn to a story of another violent place on our globe, and see if there is anything we can learn.

We have in our congregation a retired couple who spent their lives in service to God through the Presbyterian Church USA.

The Reverend Steve Doughty is currently working on our pastor search committee. His wife Jean Fontaine volunteers with intake during our Wednesday morning food pantry. She is especially valuable because she speaks Spanish.

No matter where their pastorates and denominational work took them, Steve and Jean remained committed to the gospel from a global perspective. They were concerned about immigration. They were concerned about peace. They were concerned about poverty and inequality, about racism and unfair power structures.

Those concerns led them to the South American nation of Colombia in 2009, and for Jean, again in 2016.

Probably what most of us think of, if we think of Colombia at all, is drug cartels. And that thinking is not entirely misplaced.

The country has been involved in internal war and violence for half a century. Drug sales and gun running have largely supported that war.

And as is always the case, the losers are the poor who have been squeezed among government forces, guerrilla soldiers and drug lords. Many of them have been forced off their land, threatened with death, disappeared.

Between 5 and 7 million people are internally displaced – the highest number of any nation. That means they remain in Colombia – but they are out of their homes and off their land.

For years, the Presbyterian Church in Colombia has been a voice for those people – standing up for human rights, supporting families, speaking out against injustices. It has attempted to break the appalling silence.

In 2004, the church there realized it needed the help and the witness and the voice of the universal Christian community. It needed the world to see what was going on.

So the Presbyterian Church in Colombia asked if that denomination could send volunteers to accompany church members as they faced dangers from militias, guerrillas and government.

In a word, they felt they'd be safer with outside Christians looking on.

The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship agreed to do this. They train and send two volunteers at a time into an area for a month.

That's not a large number. This is thoughtful, potentially dangerous work. Standing beside. Walking alongside. Living with. Witnessing and reporting.

That's what Steve and Jean did in 2009. Jean went back again in 2016. They lived with families in rural areas. They heard their stories. They attended dinners, worship services, human rights meetings.

They were accompaniers. That's actually the name used by the Peace Fellowship. They were *accompaniers*.

That word *accompanier* comes from the old French word for *companion*. It's easy to see the derivation, even in English.

And *companion* is how the Common English Bible translates the Greek word *paraclete* in our Scripture this morning. So I'm going to read from that translation. Listen to **John 14: 16-17**.

This is Jesus talking to his disciples.

16 "I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. This Companion is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. You know him, because he lives with you, and will be with you."

How about that? Jesus promises us a companion or accompanier in the form of the Holy Spirit. Just like Steve and Jean were companions or accompaniers in Colombia.

Different translations have many words for what we know as the Holy Spirit. Advocate. Helper. Comforter.

But I find it fascinating that the Spirit is *also* known as Companion, one who accompanies.

Because that is the rock on which we have built our work at Triune. Coming alongside. Being with. Belonging to each other. Accompanying each other through life's journey.

Today is Pentecost, the one Sunday of the year when we hold that mysterious Holy Spirit front and center. We talk about God a lot. We talk about Jesus even more.

But the Holy Spirit is sort of the little-known middle sister who moved out of town. The family mentions her every now and then, but

we really don't know what to do with her. We aren't sure what's she up to.

The Festival of Pentecost was a Jewish celebration of the spring harvest. But in the year that Jesus was crucified, something new happened. On that Pentecost, which came 50 days after the first Easter, a violent wind was blowing. Something new was about to be harvested.

In the gospel of Luke, John the Baptist told his followers, **“I baptize you with water...”** But one is coming who **“will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”**

Sure enough, in the book of Acts, which is the sequel to the gospel of Luke, that is exactly what happened.

After the crucifixion and resurrection, Peter and the disciples returned to Jerusalem. And on this day, they heard a sound like a great wind and saw tongues of fire alighting on each disciple. And each of them was able to proclaim the gospel in the language of every person in Jerusalem that day.

That's Pentecost. The dramatic entrance of the Holy Spirit. The coming of our Comforter. Our Advocate. Our Companion.

It is what Jesus promised before he left. It is the way in which we retain our access to Jesus.

And just as we try so hard to follow in Jesus' footsteps, to scour and adhere to his teachings, to do what he would do, so we are to follow the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is to be companion to us. We are to be companion to each other.

The Spirit is to accompany us. We are to accompany each other, whether to the wilds of Colombia or to the streets of Greenville.

Let's think about that for a minute. What would it look like if we were really companion to one another?

Would we allow some of our brothers and sisters to be cavalierly murdered under the pretext of law and order?

If you saw some of the protests in Minneapolis, you saw a lot of white people kneeling in the streets with their hands up. They were companions. They were accompaniers.

I don't know if you are close to your siblings, but our siblings are our first companions. They share our history in a way no one else ever can.

They are the only ones who know what it was like to grow up in a particular household with a particular set of parents. They remember your questionable hair choices. Your unfortunate prom dress. Your cowhide bellbottoms.

They remember what your mother called quirks but were likely psychiatric disorders.

I set my first novel on a farm that was very much like the one my grandparents owned in northeast Georgia. When my brother read the book, he threatened to sue me for stealing his childhood.

So I dedicated the book to him and my sister and my cousin who all experienced life on that farm together in the '60s and '70s. We were companions in a time and a place that no one else shared in quite the same way.

Each of us had those childhood companions, whether siblings or cousins or friends. And when the apostle Paul thought about Pentecost and the Holy Spirit as Companion, he connected it to that sort of family. Here's what he wrote to the Christians in Rome. **Romans 8:**

14-17:

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.

"When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of

God,¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ”

That was the idea I was aiming for when I wrote the tag line on the front of our worship brochure: *You are a child of God, and you are welcome in this place.*

The message is that since we are all made in the image of God, we are his children, his heirs. We are brothers and sisters to Jesus himself.

When the Holy Spirit is our companion, we are children of God.

We’ve been adopted into the family.

And what do families do -- besides threaten each other with lawsuits? They look out for each other. They rise up in protest when one of them is treated unfairly.

Six years after his time in Colombia, Steve Doughty published a wonderful book of essays, “The Man with Six Typewriters ... and Others Who Knew God.” One of those essays told about a day in

Colombia when he was sick and had to stay all day in a woman's home.

His hostess was a short woman, with glowing brown eyes and thick black hair that hung down her back. Guerrillas had blanketed her village with death threats days before.

From his seat on the couch in her living room, Steve watched the parade of visitors to this woman's house. From 7 in the morning until dusk they came – neighbor women telling the hostess their problems, a young woman who needed to write a school paper, an elderly woman, three young mothers, four elementary school girls.

Then the husband and son came home, bringing men and foreign visitors.

After dinner, the hostess changed clothes and went to a prayer meeting to show the guerillas who'd sent the death threats that she wasn't afraid. She was back up before light to start again, preparing food for Steve before he left at 4 a.m.

Steve went to South America to accompany this woman through some dangerous days. But in return she offered companionship, accompaniment, to him and to all the people of her village.

That's the power of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Companion.

And that same Companion, that mysterious middle sister, is available to us. We can call on this third person of the Trinity to be with us, to live with us, to be our companion.

You will remember that someone once asked Jesus, *What is the greatest commandment* ? It is two-fold, he answered.

Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor as yourself.

This is exactly what we see with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is companion to us, so that can be companion to each other. Very same thing.

As we attempt to live in Christian discipleship, we can go to South America, and I am in awe of Steve and Jean for doing that.

But we can also stay in the States or even in Greenville, refusing to be appallingly silent, speaking up for our brothers and sisters of color, hanging out with our Companion in order to be companion to those on our margins.

Amen.