



*Rev. Chris Taylor - 6-16-19*  
*"God Moving in Our World"*  
*Psalm 8 and John 16:12-15*

Harry Emerson Fosdick was one of the great preachers of the last century. The magnificent Riverside Church in New York City was built specifically for him. Three decades before that church opened, however, Fosdick suffered a devastating nervous breakdown during his first year at Union Seminary that left him helpless and suicidal. He would later call it the most hideous experience of his life.

Fosdick's first instinct was to go to the home of his fiancé; hoping that a brief time with her might restore him. But instead of getting better, he went from bad to worse. He returned to his parents' home where he remained for several months before his doctor finally sent him to a sanitarium in Elmira, New York. There he began to gradually recover, and four months later he was finally released.

The whole experience, he said, one of the most important factors in his preparation for ministry. For the first time in his life he was faced with a situation he couldn't handle. The harder he struggled, the worse he got. He had descended into the depths; beaten and unable to cope, but it was there in those depths that he encountered the living God. As he puts it:

I learned some things about religion that theological seminaries do not teach. I learned to pray, not because I had adequately argued out prayer's rationality, but because I desperately needed help from a Power greater than my own. I learned that God, more than a theological proposition, is an immediately available Resource; that just as around our bodies is a physical universe from which we draw all our physical energy, so around our spirits is a spiritual Presence in living communion with whom we can find sustaining strength. (p. 75)

It is this spiritual Presence that Jesus is talking about here in our text this morning – this immediately available Resource that Fosdick discovered, and that is available to every one of us as we open our lives to God through Jesus Christ.

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Today is Trinity Sunday; a day we recognize and celebrate the triune nature of the God revealed to us in the pages of Scripture – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Scripture doesn't actually offer a doctrine of the Trinity. You won't find the words "triune" or "trinity" anywhere in its pages. What we do find are references to each of the three persons that suggest both unity and distinction. Our text, this morning, is an example; "All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he [the Spirit] will take what is mine and declare it to you." Jesus the Son, speaking of both the Father and the Spirit in a way that suggests a mutual indwelling of the three.

The first generation of Jesus' followers simply accepted the three. It was only later, with more time on their hands, that succeeding generations began to wrestle with how we could have Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but still have just one God. It was in these later generations that a doctrine began to emerge.

So Jesus focus here isn't the Trinity itself. His focus is on preparing the disciples for his departure, and on what they can expect once he's gone. The text is part of his Farewell Discourse – the message he shared on his final night with them.

"I still have many things to say to you," he says, "but you cannot bear them now." There are some things that they are only going to understand after his death and resurrection. But at that point the Spirit will come and "guide them into all the truth."

He isn't talking about a new truth, or even all the truth there is to know. As long as we are part of this world our understanding is still going to be limited and incomplete. What he is saying, rather, is that the Spirit is always going to be moving, helping us (helping each new generation) understand what the truth of Jesus' revelation means for our time. So in the first century the Spirit brought understanding of that truth as the Church wrestled with persecution and the misunderstandings of Gnosticism. And in the same way, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Spirit brought understanding as England and the United States struggled with slavery.

This is the beauty of how God moves in our world – not a visible presence, but the invisible Spirit always moving; at work in us and through us to affect God's purposes. If you have ever had the experience of turning to Scripture, and suddenly finding a familiar passage coming alive with relevance and meaning;

that's the Spirit moving. Or if you have had someone suddenly come to mind and felt led to reach out to them only to hear them say, "You have no idea how much I needed to hear your voice today;" again, that's the Spirit moving.

That's what God does. It is one way, a primary way, in which God moves. Think about some of the key figures that God has raised up down through the ages at just the right time with just the right word: Martin Luther, or William Wilberforce or Martin Luther King Jr. That's God moving through the Spirit: God making a difference, through the likes of you and me.

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In 1840, a child named Joseph De Veuster was born on a farm in rural Belgium. He was the youngest of seven children and everyone simply assumed he would grow up to take over the farm. Instead, he went to college and then on to a novitiate. At twenty five he was posted to Hawaii, and eight years later – having seen many in his congregation sent to the leper colony at Molokai – he was granted permission to serve in the settlement.

For sixteen years, Father Damien worked with the lepers in Molokai. All around him he found victims of the disease; their bodies in ruins, their faces ravaged, their breath fetid and their breathing labored. Doctors appeared from time to time but lived in terror of being infected. One of them would examine the leper's wounds by lifting their bandages with his cane. Another would leave medicine on a table so the lepers could collect it without any contact with him.

Father Damien brought a different approach. He washed their bodies. He bandaged their wounds. He tidied their rooms and their beds. He did everything he could to make their lives more comfortable. For him, it was the lepers themselves who came first (who does that remind you of?). His impact on the community was transformational: the miserable huts that greeted him when he first arrived became small white houses surrounded by flower gardens and cultivated fields; the despair and lawlessness of the early years were replaced by a sense of dignity and joy.

One day, eleven years into his ministry there, Father Damien accidentally dipped his feet in scalding hot water. His feet blistered, but he felt no sensation of heat or pain. It was then that he realized that the disease that he had battled for years had now claimed him, as well. Five years later in April of 1889, Father Damien finally died. He was just forty nine years old.

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Harry Emerson Fosdick experienced God's presence in the midst of a paralyzing breakdown. The Spirit came and did in him what he couldn't do for himself; offering a comfort, hope and strength that made all the difference in his recovery. The experience changed his life, changed his understanding of God, and ultimately left him a far better pastor and preacher for having gone through it.

Joseph de Veuster gave his life in service to God. It was the Spirit at work within that called him; and it was that same Spirit who did through him what Christ himself had done before: making known in a visible, tangible way the depths of God's love; the truth of God's presence and care.

God is moving in our world. The evidence is all around us. The Spirit is God's love in action; making a difference, touching lives, moving in us and through us to affect God's own purposes. You don't have to be some Saint to experience God's presence. All it really takes is the recognition of how desperately we need the Lord, and a willingness to step forward in faith. God doesn't promise the way will be easy. What God does promise is that we won't be in this alone. Through the presence and power of God's own Spirit (God's very self at work within us!) we can become partners with God in bringing healing, justice, righteousness and care to a world in desperate need.

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<sup>i</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1956), p. 75