

July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022

## John 14:15-26 “Joined Together in Discipleship”

The phrase from our Disciples Affirmation of Faith this week is,

“In the communion of the Holy Spirit we are joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ.”

We’ve been talking about how our movement, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) rejected creeds because our founders thought creeds only highlighted the *differences* between Christian sects. In some church traditions those who do not agree with a particular creed are labeled outcasts or even heretics. Some people think that our Affirmation of Faith, written 132 years after we were founded, sounds too much like a creed. That’s a fair critique. As I’ve said over the last few weeks, creeds were written to make it abundantly clear what one is to *believe* about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the church *in that order*. We on the other hand prioritize *confession*. Our affirmation starts out with how we *confess* that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. We don’t get to God until the third stanza, and even then we’re not talking about what we *believe* about God, but that our *response* to God is to *rejoice* in the covenant of love that binds us to God and one another. Thus far in our series, we’ve studied how we *confess* Christ and how we *rejoice* in God. That leaves the Holy Spirit. And here we are five weeks, five stanzas into the Affirmation of Faith and *finally* the Holy Spirit is mentioned!

We Disciples aren’t really known for our close ties to the Holy Spirit. At least not like folks from more charismatic traditions. Go to a Church of God of Prophecy or an Assembly of God or Open Bible or Pentecostal Freewill Baptist Church and you will see some amazing displays of Holy Spirit power. You’ll see people speaking in tongues, dancing in the Spirit, laughing in the Spirit, shouting in the Spirit and even crying in the Spirit. Some people are slain in the Spirit. They’ll just drop to the ground out of the blue or maybe a pastor or an evangelist will touch the

person first and they'll collapse. The Cane Ridge Kentucky Revival of 1801 where our movement started was quite the Pentecostal experience. Not only was there a lot of dancing, speaking in tongues, and being slain in the spirit, some journalists and other bystanders reported people who were barking at trees like dogs. Which makes me wonder if that's where they get the old saying, "barking up the wrong tree?" Who knows? So we are definitely no strangers to the more dramatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

But somewhere along the line, though, we lost that. Our movement was founded in what historians call "The Age of Enlightenment," and because our founders were scholars for the most part, they shied away from some of the more extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit. Oh sure, wisdom, discernment, perseverance, hospitality, teaching ... those gifts were okay. But when it came to speaking in tongues or interpreting tongues or prophesizing, that was a different story. According to some of our founders, those gifts seemed ... pedestrian at best. Something to keep the less educated lower class entertained. That seems snobby to be honest with you. But before I make any condemnations, I have to keep my own snobbery in check.

I remember going to a baptismal service at a Pentecostal Church back in Virginia once. When the fast-paced praise music started the service off, there was a lot of dancing and singing in the spirit which you would expect in a charismatic church, right? But when the more soulful worshipful, "Jesus is lord of my heart" music started, that's when the tears and the tongues started flowing. One man began weeping, bowed his head, raised one hand in the air and began chanting what sounded to me like "Bobby Labonte." This is where we need to take a break and talk about NASCAR racing. The only sport that even comes close to rivaling NASCAR for sheer popularity in the South is football. NASCAR started on the North Carolina beaches in the 1940s when moonshine runners and former bootleggers raced their souped-up stock cars. Over the decades it developed into the multi-billion-dollar industry that it is today. Bobby Labonte is a stock car racer who was the

NASCAR Cup Series champion in 2000. He and his brother Terry Labonte are legends in NASCAR racing. So at this baptismal service, when I heard that man weeping and crying out, “Bobby Labonte” I thought, “No, I’m hearing this wrong. My imagination is running wild here. He couldn’t be saying that. Too many people here know who Bobby Labonte is. They’re going to think he’s faking it ... that he’s not really speaking in the tongues of angels.” But if you’ve ever heard tongues spoken before, you’ll discover that there’s a lot of ... repeated sounds. You hear a lot of bal-lalas shalalalas lalalas and shashashas. And like any unfamiliar language, you start looking for what sounds familiar. You start thinking, “Did that person just say ‘She come in a Honda?’ Did that person over there say, “Shalla-balla Honda?” In that town, folks sort of looked down on Japanese made cars.” So I listened more closely and tuned in a little more to this guy who was speaking in tongues. Sure enough, clear as day, he was saying “Oh, Bobby Labonte” over and over again. Like I said, before I criticize our founders, I have to keep my own snobbery in check. Who knows? Maybe in the tongues of angels, “Bobby Labonte” means, “We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” I don’t know. But what I do know is that we Disciples balk at the more spectacular manifestations of the Holy Spirit in worship. When we start thinking like that, we are not practicing what we preach when we say that “all means all.”

In seminary, we had a professor of New Testament theology who made it a point to explain why we should denounce the gift of tongues in church. He said that tongues were fine for the people in the early church in formation, but once the church was established and began using written scripture we didn’t need tongues anymore because the Bible was now the only thing we need to see how the Holy Spirit works. In fact, he said that now, in modern times, the Holy Spirit can *only* work through scripture and that tongues and prophesizing should be condemned ... nay *silenced* in the church lest it leads to disorder. Some smart-aleck wanna-be cartoonist drew a Bible with a barred window on it like a little jail, and inside the jail was a dove which typically represents the Holy

Spirit who was saying, “Help! Lemme out!” I tacked it on the bulletin board in the break room ... I mean ... the smart-aleck cartoonist tacked it up on the bulletin board in the break room. Yeah. What a goofball.

Truth is, there are a lot of Disciples churches that speak in tongues and dance in the spirit and who prophesize during worship. A lot of South American congregations and churches in Africa like our sister church in the Democratic Republic of Congo do this. Here in the states there are churches in the rural Appalachians and even international congregations in urban areas whose members speak in tongues. I was in an African American Disciples congregation in South Central Virginia when a woman stood up in church and started dancing and then bam ... she fell down and hit the floor. Graham was next to me and he said, “Dad, is she okay?” I said, “I think so.” Suddenly a group of women surrounded her in a circle and started waving their fans over her. Then she stood up and started dancing again while the women were saying, “Yes! Praise God! Hallelujah! Thank you Jesus!” Graham said, “What was that all about?” I said, “She was slain in the Spirit.” He said, “Oh. Well I’m glad she’s okay.” She’s okay. But are we? And when I say “we” I mean those of us who are in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Are we okay with the Holy Spirit?

“In the communion of the Holy Spirit we are joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ.”

I hope that you’re noticing that in our Affirmation of Faith, we use the words “we” and “us” a lot. As rugged individualists, we’re more accustomed to dwelling in the “I” and “me” than we are in the “we.” And yet, we follow Jesus whose core message focuses on the importance of “we.” In verse 16 of the scripture that Georgeanne read from John’s gospel, we heard Jesus’ describing the Holy Spirit as an Advocate who will “be with you forever.” In English there’s no distinction between second person singular and second person plural. In Greek there is a clear distinction. In English the best way to explain this is in the

difference between “you” and “y’all.” “You” pertains to the individual. “Y’all” pertains to the collective.

“In the communion of the Holy Spirit we are *all* joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ.”

In Bible study, we’ve been learning about what discipleship means. Our working definition is that discipleship is the byproduct or evidence of our faith. It’s how faith is manifested. We are the *Disciples* of Christ, which, according to our definition means we manifest Christ. We bring Christ into the world. How? And that doesn’t sound right ... “We bring Christ into the world.” Are we all that? Fair point. The better way to frame it is that the Holy Spirit brings Christ into the world by joining us together so we, in obedience to Christ, can do the necessary work to make it happen. Yeah, but that still sounds like too much credit is given to us for bringing Christ into the world.

But John writes that the Holy Spirit is, “the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” That’s how we confess the Holy Spirit. We are in the communion of the Holy Spirit. All of us. Joined together in obedience to Christ to manifest Christ to a world that desperately needs healing and hope and reconciliation. Symbolically speaking, this happens when we come to the table. The table is how we will end the service today, and it is where will begin next week as we discover what really happens here at the table.