

Homily - God, Show Us the Way

Rob Keim

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This is our last Sunday in the Season of Easter and next week we celebrate Pentecost with the gift of the Holy Spirit that was also the birth of the church. However, this week we already have the Holy Spirit as it is guiding the earlier followers of Jesus. Our reading from the Book of Acts shows that God is guiding God's people and showing them the way. Now, I am one of those people who believes the Holy Spirit is active in our world and here is a true story from my own life. I have shared this story with some of you.

Back in 1996 my wife and I decided to move to California. She had grown up in Los Gatos, and even though her family had moved back to Germany when she was in college, my wife was unhappy enough that we decided to get a fresh start. My wife got a Bay Area job pretty quickly, but it took me longer, so my three-year old daughter and I stayed in Ohio for an extra six months until I found a temporary job. We saw my wife every other weekend, and we bought a house in Los Altos without me even seeing it. When I landed the temporary job, my daughter, and I joined my wife in our new home in California.

The day after my daughter and I finally moved to California, my wife announced that she was filing for divorce. I knew that she had been pretty unhappy in our marriage, but I expected a fresh start in California. Her announcement caught me by surprise, but I could tell that she was also very serious about her intentions.

The following day, two days after moving to California, it was a Sunday morning. I was sitting by myself in Starbucks and I decided that I needed to go to church. Shock was setting in, and somehow I found myself on Hwy 280 going North, knowing that I wanted to go to church, but not knowing where to go.

So, I decided to follow a car that might lead me to a church. I don't know why I chose to do this, but it was 9:30 on a Sunday morning, and I selected a car with a couple in it that looked a little dressed up. I followed them for the next ten minutes. They got off the highway, and I followed them for another five minute as they wound through the streets and eventually they pulled into the parking lot of a church.

I parked and went into the church. The service was just starting, and it was crowded, so I actually had to sit towards the front. I remember that at some part I

started crying. I had just left my friends and job behind in Ohio and thirty-six hours later, I was crying in a church.

After the service ended, I happened upon the choir director and made an appointment with him for later in the week. When we met, I broke down and told him my story. He hugged me, prayed with me, and welcomed me to join the choir. And, that was the second life changing Holy Spirit decision I made that week.

I joined that choir and they surrounded me with love. They fed me, helped me move twice, and provided love to my daughter. Some of them became my closest friends. Collectively they held me as my life unraveled. How was I to know that a church choir can be a loving community such that I had people walking with me on a journey of healing? Without them my life would have been completely different. My journey with God would be completely different, without the guidance I received that week from the Holy Spirit.

This story is a little longer than ones I usually share, but I wanted to share it for a couple of reasons.

First, it is just a good story, and it gives you some insight into my own journey, especially now that I am twenty-seven years on the other side of that story and pretty happen with the way things turned out.

Second, it is an example of how a community can take a shocked person and bring them back to life. I believe we are that same type of community here at St. Barnabas.

Third, I think that it is through stories that we get our best glimpses of this thing that we call the Holy Spirit. Time and time again the Holy Spirit reveals God to us. Often that revelation is through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but it is also in our own personal Holy Spirit stories.

As Americans and as Christians, we have a lot of different ways that we explain a story like the one that I just shared. We have a lot of different ways that we understand God's Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal denominations place a lot of emphasis on gifts of the Holy Spirit like speaking in tongues and spiritual healing. Evangelical traditions would talk about how God has a plan for each person's life. We need to trust that God's Holy Spirit will guide us into that plan. The Holy Spirit has also been described as the very spark of life that we have as human beings. The Holy Spirit is that thing that gives us consciousness and allows us to think. In my own spiritual journey, and using anthropomorphic terms, I think of Holy Spirit as

the very arms of God that are always embracing us with the sacred presence of God. This connection is similar to but also different than the Christ that is in all and around all.

Now, we are always frustrated when bad things happen to us. We wonder why our omnipotent God doesn't make the bad things go away. But, we know this is not the way the world works. However, we can always be assured that God is with us in the good times and in the bad times. I think of the Holy Spirit as one of the ways that God is with us.

And, I think of the Holy Spirit as the spark that allows us to see the serendipitous things that are surrounding us. It is the Holy Spirit that allows us to choose between the various open and closed doors and windows that are our path through life. Discernment is not easy, and I think of the Holy Spirit as the guide to our prayers, as we try to discern the crooked path of life.

Now, the Holy Spirit may be the guide, but it doesn't mean that choices are obvious. Here is another story to illustrate part of my struggle with the Holy Spirit. A few years ago, I was a finalist for a Rector position, and I was convinced that God was calling me to that parish. And, when the vestry of that Parish called someone else to be the Rector, I was still convinced that the Holy Spirit had been calling me to that Parish. So rather than change my conviction, I decided that the Vestry had gotten it wrong. I decided that the Vestry had not called the person that was being called by the Holy Spirit and that the Vestry screwed things up. I was so convinced of the call that I decided God's people had gotten it wrong.

There is a theological idea with the Latin term *imago dei*, which is that as human beings we are made in the image of God. We are not divine, but we have a glimmer of the sacred in each one of us. Maybe this is another way to think of the Holy Spirit. However, my story about the vestry getting it wrong means that I am guilty of the reverse of *imago dei*. Instead, I often make God in my own image, and think that God is like a coin-operated vending machine that will deliver my desired results. If I want something enough then God will make it happen. I'm guessing that you can see the problems with this reversal. It puts me in control instead of God, and this is also not the way the universe works, though I wish it was.

This Holy Spirit stuff is complicated. It is complicated as for us as individuals and it is complicated for us as a church. Here are some of the things we are always trying to figure out here at St. Barnabas. Where is God leading St. Barnabas? In what ways can St. Barnabas continue to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the

south county? What does St. Barnabas need to do differently to be relevant to and embrace the community around us?

And, here is a very specific question we are trying to discern. Are we supposed to do something with the land out at the entrance to our church. Are we called to sell it and make money for ministry? Are we called to partner with an agency and provide affordable housing? Or are we called to lease the land for a dollar a year to an agency like Five Cities Homeless Coalition. Or, are we being called to do nothing with the land? And, do we have a group of people with the energy and excitement to make any of this happen? Don't worry we aren't moving forward with anything, yet. But, we are wondering where we are to go.

Discern what is of God is important as individuals and as a group. I wonder where the Holy Spirit is leading the beautiful ministries we have here at St. Barnabas. It is important that the community of St. Barnabas make room for the Holy Spirit to help discern answers to each of these questions that is before us. Holy Spirit, be with us.

Giver of Joy

Giver of Comfort

Giver of Peace

Giver of Wisdom

Giver of Right Judgment

Giver of Good Counsel

Giver of Strength

Giver of Awe and Wonder

Giver of Love

Giver of all these things, be with us as we make room for you in our hearts and in our minds. And, whether it is by following a car or some other way, be with those that you may be leading here to us as well. Amen.