

Sermon of June 3, 2007 at St. John's Church  
William Flanders

For the past weeks we have been listening to, and perhaps been overwhelmed by, passages from the gospel of John. I will try to conflate several into a few short sentences:

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...You know him because he abides with you and he will be in you. He will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Although he never uses the word, John's thought is traditionally understood as trinitarian: God understood as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In more contemporary terms, and in an attempt to relate this to your life and mine, I would say that what John is grappling with is the mystery of inspiration.

Whom do we think of when we use the term inspired? Beethoven? Mozart? Michelangelo? Shakespeare? Musicians? Artists? Poets?

What about doctors, scientists, engineers, economists, inventors mathematicians, philosophers? What about religious figures - Moses? Jesus? Mohammed? Gandhi? Martin Luther? Martin Luther King?

Maybe those persons we consider inspired are those persons who have deeply inspired us.

I would like to tell you about two persons whose words I have held within me all my life. The first was a woman of small stature, my eighth grade music teacher. She was named Adelina Patti Fulton - after a famous Spanish-born American singer. Ms Fulton never tired of trying to introduce us students to the world of great music. But one day, when she was going on about the wonders of symphonic music I seemed to have made a typical thirteen-year-old's smirk. She stopped and eyed me.

"Billy Flanders, she said, "Why do you think people every week will wait for two hours outside Carnegie Hall - even in the rain - in hopes of getting in and hearing the symphony?"

She could have told me that I was too immature to appreciate great music. Instead, she asked me a question. And I have delighted in discovering the answer to that question over a life-time. Her question didn't teach me anything. But it did inspire me. It enflamed my curiosity.

The second person I encountered two years later in boarding school. His name was Howard Thurman. He was the first black intellectual I'd ever been exposed to, as well as the first poet and mystic.

The time was several years before the Brown Vs. Board of Education decision that changed the American school system forever.

Howard Thurman ended his address to our all-white student body with what he called a story, but was certainly a parable. I will try to tell it in the tone with which he spoke.

A man in a far country came to a town where all the people seemed well dressed except for one thing: no one wore shoes. He stopped a gentleman and said, "Tell me sir, why is no one here wearing shoes?" The man considered the question for some time. Finally he said, "Yes! Why aren't we wearing shoes? Why aren't we wearing shoes? Why aren't we wearing shoes?"

At the time, I and my closest classmates had no idea what this story meant. But I never forgot it. Insight did come with time, and with the Civil Rights movement. But inspiration, that unforgettable seed of truth, came through a parable and its questions.

Inspiration is crucial to human life. And inspiration is crucial to and within our Christian religion. I know we say, "Lift high the cross!" But it wasn't the cross that inspired the disciples. It was the life and the words and the actions of him who died on a cross. His inspiration finally could be denied by those who knew Jesus only if they denied themselves.

To put it positively: when the disciples realized that they could no longer hold back from affirming Jesus as their inspirer, and from acknowledging the inspiration burning within themselves, they underwent that hilariously freeing experience we call Pentecost.

Why do we come to church, you and I? Is it because this is a life time's habit? Do we come for the liturgy? To hear the Bible read? In hopes of a

thoughtful sermon? For the beautiful music? Is it the pull of the community itself? For all the activities going on here? These seem to be worthy of mention. But put them all together and they still might not bring inspiration.

For being inspired depends as much on us as it depends on what might inspire us. You and I have got to be ready for inspiration. To put it poetically: our hearts, as well as our minds, must be open.

Our friend John the gospeler knew this. This is what he is trying to express in his own trinitarian way, when he has Jesus say:

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...You know him because he abides with you and he will be in you. He will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

What I believe John is saying is that inspiration - what he calls the Spirit of truth - is a two-way thing. We are inspired by what comes from without and by what comes from within. From within each of us. You and I live for inspiration. It is our deepest religious hope. And it is our most human achievement. I use that term deliberately. Inspiration is not just something that happens to us. It is also something we open ourselves to.

The Church has so long exalted God beyond us. Inspiration depends also on God within us. And it's never too late to discover this. Even better, it's never too late to experience this. I'd like to close with one more episode. This happened to me in my early thirties.

I was talking to a therapist noted for his unorthodox, gruff manner. Trying to reveal to him something real and, I thought, especially personal about myself, I said, “You know, I always seem to have a tune in my head.” I didn't believe that I'd ever revealed that to anyone before, and I imagine I felt rather proud of myself. The man barely looked at me. I remember he mumbled something like, “Always have a tune in your head...humpf!”

I was stunned. His remark seemed so unfeeling, almost cruel. For the rest of the day I felt sorry for myself, wondering how he could be so dismissive.

What had I done to him - except to offer something that I thought was significant and might interest him?

When I got over the hurt my thinking took a new turn. Why would he say that? Could it be he was trying to tell me something? "Always have a tune in your head...humpf!" Was he suggesting: "So what? What good does it do you if the tune just stays in your head?"

I thought that over, and I kept thinking it over. What good was it to me if these tunes in my head didn't get out of my head?

And on the basis of that strange inspiration from without and from within, I wrote the first of over two hundred songs and hymns that founded a new lifetime career. The song was called, by the way, "I'm Burning Up!"

Sometime, when you have the quiet chance, consider what has inspired you. Not just what has impressed or even excited you, but what has truly inspired you. And think about the circumstances originally surrounding that experience. And finally, consider how instances of inspiration have helped shape you into the person you are today.

Again, John's words, with the pronoun altered to be more inclusive: "This is the Spirit of truth...You know her because she abides with you and she will be in you."

Call her Muse, call her Spirit, call her the love of God. Amen.