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***SERMON***

*The Pentecost Experience of Presence*

John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15

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The Gospel of John always gives me comfort. When I am out of sorts, lost, and consumed with the dangers and problems of this world, this book of good news calms my soul. Even though there is no birth narrative and nothing about Jesus’ early life, John offers an expansive understanding of the nature and presence of God. Jesus is connected with God and God’s way from the beginning of Creation. Jesus is no afterthought but is the experience of God and God’s intended purpose for all things. “Everything that was made was made through him.” Jesus came into our lives and “moved into the neighborhood” for a reason: to manifest God, the purpose of our lives and life itself. The very presence of God is taking on the flesh and blood of humanity to guide us into life, love and goodness.

This manifestation is essential because our lives are both beautiful and terrifying. We need healing, and so does our world. Creation is groaning under the oppression of mistreatment from people who were created to be its caretakers. Racism is a raging wildfire. We live in and accept systems that continue to hold too many people in the cold clutches of poverty. And too many people to count live under conditions in which death, hatred, violence and abuse are the norm. And much of the church is in rapid decline; we are no longer seen as a community of love, care and spiritual growth. And each of us engaging these words is aware of our despair, doubt, anxiety and quiet suffering.

And so, we cry, “Come, Lord Jesus! We need your presence! Help!”

And this morning’s passage is all about help in our time of need. Jesus has shared his life with his closest friends. He has healed people, and he has fed people. He has welcomed a host of people. Jesus has touched all kinds of people. Through his presence, people have experienced their identity as God’s beloved. Jesus is living out God’s will for justice and for broken lives, relationships and systems to be repaired. He includes people in ways that bring love, joy, and wholeness to people who were once considered outcasts and not good enough. He is the one who connects us with the essential nutrients of life.

Suzanne Simard’s *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* was a timely read. I have always loved trees and feel so at home in the woods. There is nothing more relaxing for me than a walk in the woods. My love for trees came from my grandfather, who only had a third-grade education but was one of the smartest, kindest men I have known. We would drive in his truck along mountain roads in Georgia, and he would recite the names of every tree we passed. Still, to this day, I love identifying trees. And I love simply sitting in the woods and taking in the nature around me. The smell of the woods calms my soul. I have discovered a life-giving presence in the woods, deeply connected to the God of Creation.

I have always experienced a deep connection to God, myself, others and Creation in the woods. I have felt a deep connection in my soul in ways that assure me I am loved and somehow belong in this world. But it was not until reading *Finding the Mother Tree* that I fully understood why. I discovered that trees in a forest are connected through mycorrhizal fungi networks. The mother trees pass on to the baby trees nourishment and wisdom, supplying them with the ingredients for flourishing and enduring the harsh conditions of nature. Simard writes, “The shoots received messages about her past struggles, giving them a head start” (p. 303). And, this mycorrhizal network supports other trees, too.

And now this one who has opened the disciples to the vast connections of the essential nutrients of life and love and given them a sense of home and belonging is preparing them for what is coming. He prepares them for his arrest, trial, suffering, death and resurrection. This one in whom they experienced healing and hope prepares them for events that make little sense. But they understand that he is preparing them for a time when he will no longer be physically present. They are in despair because, from the ways in which Jesus taught them, healed, fed people, and included people, they had experienced the most beautiful way of life and had such hope for the future, but now what are they to do? And how does Jesus prepare them for no longer being physically present with them?

He prepares them by telling them that the Spirit of Truth is coming. The Spirit is coming to help them. The same Spirit that hovered over Creation in the beginning, the same Spirit that anointed Jesus in the Jordan, is coming to them. With the Spirit’s assistance, they will know God's will and continue the gospel ministry of justice, healing and inclusion they experienced with Jesus. Within the presence of this Spirit, Jesus is telling them they will receive the loving flow of God’s life-giving energy, like saplings receive the nutrients and information of life from the mother tree. In other words, don’t worry and fret: I am coming to you. There is no need to be afraid because I will remain with you.

Here is the good news! In the face of nationalistic fervor threatening to rip apart democracy, institutions more concerned with protecting themselves than serving the good of all, and humanity struggling to be free under the bonds of racism and poverty, the Spirit will lead us into the truth revealed in Jesus. Like the early disciples, we will be witnesses to all that Jesus taught and revealed about God’s inclusive, all-encompassing love. We will do the same work of repair and restoration.

Jesus is sending the same Spirit that anointed and equipped him for his transformative ministry. The Spirit is described as the Helper, which will connect us with the energy of Creation to continue loving and healing the world inside and around us. We don’t have to wait for some time in the future; the time is now. We are empowered to be part of the connective presence that brings healing, love and nourishment to people and Creation. This loving, healing presence is what Jesus came to give us. He did not come to establish a belief system, but to show us the way into life. And the Spirit corrects us when we lose sight of the movement of God.

I will never forget the moment in the last church I served when I realized we had lost our way. The church started serving itself and forgot that the mission was about healing, hope and justice in the neighborhood. Through a ministry with unhoused people, we discovered our way, and I once again realized the deep presence of the Spirit and the gifts that were growing out of that presence: growth, love and belonging. Human beings living in a makeshift tent community along the roadside became part of the church’s life. We all found love and grace in what was becoming a rich and diverse community. We discovered that we did not have to tolerate people living without adequate care and shelter but could do something. And that something was to be present. Being present with God and others changed everything. Many of the unhoused friends found homes and places of support. They discovered a church community of love and care that changed all our lives. And I will never forget the words of one of the men who was now part of a loving community. He stood up in a gathering and uttered, “Thank you! Thank you for your help. I see Jesus in you.” I remember looking at Al at that moment and seeing Jesus in him and basking in the light of the presence of God and one another and the realization that we were connecting with God’s love, inclusion, repair and hope.

As we experience the presence of the Helper in our lives together and beyond, we are empowered to help others. Just as trees in a forest are connected in ways that bring nourishment, assistance and direction, we are part of a loving connection that brings healing to our neighborhoods and world. By the power of the Spirit, we live the life of Jesus for the world. Just as God sent Jesus, the Spirit is being sent to empower us with resurrection life. We will live and serve in ways that bring healing and life to people around us. Just as Jesus moved into the neighborhood with a loving presence, we are being sent into our neighborhoods with the same presence to be part of a network of love, grace, peace, joy, kindness, and goodness that changes lives and transforms Creation. And even though the world is beautiful and terrifying and life around us and inside us is complicated, we have received everything we will ever need. The Holy Spirit inhabited the lives of the early followers on Pentecost and continues to be present with us. This habitation resulted in a community that loved God, one another and the people around them.

No matter the size of our community, we have God's presence in the Helper. We have all we need in our community: worship, prayer, community, God’s Word, and the ways in which we care for one another and others. These connections become the love, healing and life network for all. Jesus is no longer physically with us, yet he remains with us just as promised. By sending the Helper, we are empowered to continue God’s work of love and justice, improving the lives of people around us and making the world more beautiful.

The Pentecost Offering offers an opportunity to connect our lives to the lives of youth and young people in the church and the communities around us. Through ministries like Educate a Child, Transform the World; Presbyterian Youth Triennium; and the Young Adult Volunteer Program, the Church supports the formation of youth and young people in our churches and communities in ways that foster a deep sense of the presence of God and hope for the journey of life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, through this offering, we can be Christ for one another and youth and young people worldwide.

Even though there is a part of me that longs for the physical presence of Jesus, I have always experienced the presence of God. However, part of my struggle is that I often find myself consumed with activity and miss the Pentecost “waiting” Jesus invites us to do. I must hear again the ancient words of Jesus to wait on the Spirit because the Spirit is coming and is here right now. Be open and ready.

And through the birth of our first grandchild, Poppy, I am beginning to understand the importance of waiting and the enduring experience of presence to change us. We do not see Poppy often because she lives across the country. However, we FaceTime with her and her parents regularly. The daily interactions through shared videos and conversations bring us together in ways that deeply connect us to the networks of love and care that will support Poppy her entire life. Even though we are not physically present, we are still with her to love and support her and her parents. In pausing/waiting, I am more open to the expansive ways God connects us to the sources of goodness, love and life. I even experience Poppy’s presence when I am physically absent because of the presence of the love we share, which has the capacity to change everything. The good news of the Pentecost experience of presence is that God is indeed with us. And God’s presence in Jesus is expansive! Amen.