

**May 13, 2007**  
**Dr. Lewis F. Galloway**  
**Acts 16:9-15, John 14:23-29**

**“Good News for Troubled Hearts”**

I remember the day my parents dropped me off at college. We got up early in the morning and packed all my worldly possessions in the car. I was crammed in the back seat along with more clothes than I would ever wear that year, a tennis racquet, a bag of shoes, piles of books, graduation presents, bed linens and pillows. My dad drove. The trip seemed endless. What a long way to go just to go away to school. Maybe because we had gotten up so early, I fell asleep. Or, maybe it was to push away the growing sense of dread that I felt in the pit of my stomach. Going away to college in another state had seemed like such a good idea, until the day actually came.

After we arrived at school and unloaded the car, my parents drove away. For the first time in my life, I felt abandoned in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by unfamiliar people, facing an unknown reality called “college.” Fortunately, it was a rather mild case of abandonment. Over the years, I have known more serious times of loneliness, worry, abandonment and fear. Among us are those who have known what it is to be afraid before a new adventure, an unfamiliar city, a new school, a broken relationship, a failed marriage, the death of a spouse or the death of a child.

In our home, Bunny and I have a painting of a scene of birch trees in a snowy landscape. It was painted by a woman in a former church. She had survived cancer of the jaw that left her face somewhat disfigured and made some tasks difficult for her. I think she found great comfort and joy in painting. Her husband was a painter too. He was a skilled house painter who took great pride in his work. He was a perfectionist. When he was painting some rooms in our house, he would carry on about how much he had to do for his wife and her sister and about how busy they kept him. He acted as if he never had any time to do anything he wanted to do. Even though he acted very put-upon, he always made sure to provide whatever his wife needed. Some years ago, we learned that she had died after several years of illness. Not many months after she died, we learned that he had died too. He took his own life. In spite of all his complaining, he just could not handle the desolation of being alone.

Jesus knows that the day is coming when he will have to leave his friends. He wants to prepare them for this day. He knows that they will be worried and afraid; they will feel desolate and abandoned. He wants to prepare them for his departure, but he also wants to prepare them for his return. He will come to them in a new way and dwell with them forever. He wants them to be ready to receive him again.

We hear the promise of Jesus that he will not abandon us. He will not leave us desolate. He comes to us and dwells with us. He makes his home in us. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit as a life-giving, life-abiding and life-transforming presence. The Holy Spirit is not some new God; the Holy Spirit is not a different God. The Holy Spirit is the abiding presence of the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the love of God poured out upon the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Only in the gospel of John do we hear Jesus speak of the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete or the Comforter. Jesus wants to emphasize to troubled hearts not only how close he is, but what he does for us. The Paraclete is the one who is called to come up along side of another as a helper. As Dr. Frances Taylor Gench notes, “The word itself defies translation, for it bears multiple meanings, including that of advocate, intercessor, comforter, and proclaimer.” (*Encounters with Jesus*, p. 109) The Holy Spirit is with us as our counselor, teacher, guide and friend. The Spirit confirms in our hearts the truth of everything that Jesus said and did. The Spirit leads us to understand what Christ would have us do as we face new challenges and new situations. Through the Holy Spirit, we face every situation with the confidence that Jesus is with us. We are never alone.

The Holy Spirit is the great untapped power of the church. We speak of the Book of Acts as the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. We could just as easily and, perhaps more correctly, speak of Acts as the Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Throughout Acts, the Spirit leads, inspires, teaches and guides the apostles as they go into the world with the good news of Jesus Christ. The Book of Acts tells the mighty deeds of the Holy Spirit through the witness of the church. It was through a spiritual vision that Paul heard the voice of a man in Macedonia calling him to help the people of Macedonia. Paul listened to the Spirit, found strength in the Spirit and relied on the Spirit as he took the gospel to the continent of Europe. In the Macedonian city of Philippi, Paul met Lydia, a businesswoman and the head of a household. She became the first person to embrace Christianity on European soil.

Many people are concerned about controversy and division in the larger church between denominations and even within the Presbyterian family of churches. There are controversies and divisions over styles of worship, the interpretation of Scripture and moral and social teachings. Sometimes we are more concerned with being right or with having our own particular viewpoint prevail than we are with listening to the Holy Spirit. It is not the differences of opinion in the larger church that trouble me; it is the lack of love. To see church leaders speak with arrogance and so many “cat-fights” in the church is enough to make you wonder if the Holy Spirit has packed his bags and gone off to Tahiti for vacation. The Holy Spirit has not abandoned the church. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will lead us in all truth. The Holy Spirit will bring to remembrance all that Jesus said and the Holy Spirit will help us interpret the teachings of Jesus in new situations. It takes patience; it takes forbearance; it takes kindness; it takes time to listen and to learn. The Spirit speaks to all of us together and to each of us individually. I do not believe we can know the whole truth until we listen to what the Spirit says to us through one another. The Spirit leads us to love one another. The quality of our love for one another is the greatest evidence and witness we have to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I also want you to think about how the Holy Spirit comes to each one of us. Jesus promises the Spirit not just to a select few, but to all believers. We have within each one of us the greatest force for life, because we have within our own hearts the very presence of God. Sometimes we let our fear, our insecurities and our doubts keep us from perceiving and trusting the Spirit of God within us. In his book, *The Go-Between God*, John Taylor notes that we are reluctant to open ourselves to the powerful presence of God in the Holy Spirit. The psalmist says that God has made us a little lower than the angels, but our greatest concern is to be a little higher than the Joneses. We try to find our strength and our sense of well-being in too many other things. There is more to life than keeping up with the Joneses. We are called to live life in the fullness of God's presence.

In all the troubles we face, the Holy Spirit is present with us, longing to give us the gift of peace. Jesus says to these frightened disciples, “My peace I leave you; my peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid.”

When we are deeply troubled, anxious or grieving, the least helpful thing someone can say is, “Quit worrying; don't be afraid; or, stop grieving.” It sounds like cheap advice from someone who doesn't know the kind of troubles we face. It is unhelpful advice. When Jesus says to us, “Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid,” it is a different matter. What matters is the one who says it. Jesus is the very source of our spiritual peace and eternal well-being. He knows us better than we know ourselves. When we hear Jesus speak those comforting words of peace to our troubled hearts, the Holy Spirit within us answers back, “Yes, the words are true.” The Holy Spirit calms our fears, heals our broken hearts and grants us peace.

Today, we receive our 2007 Confirmation Class. I challenge each one of you to listen to the Spirit speak in your lives. Listen to the Spirit speak to you through the wisdom, the humor and the challenge of others. In committing your life to Christ, you are opening your life to the power of Christ's Spirit within you to encourage you, give you peace, make you strong and equip you to be a bold witness for Jesus every day of your life. When difficult times come upon you and you feel abandoned by everyone, remember you will never be alone. The Spirit of God is within you.