

“Distinguishing Spirits”  
May 29, 2011

Acts 17:22-31  
John 14:15-21

Last summer, I received an e-mail out of the blue from a young graduate student who was in Sonoma for an internship. She wrote that she was a committed Christian and had graduated from a Bible college. She explained that she'd recently begun to realize that she was attracted to other women. Her family, her church, and her education all told her that these feelings were not of God and that acting on them meant risking damnation. She was writing me, she explained, because, from our website – thank you, Kathy Aanestad! – and from her experience here on a Sunday morning, she thought I might have a different opinion, a different approach, to her questions about faith, God, Jesus, the Bible, and human sexuality. She closed her e-mail by asking if she could come speak with me.

I wrote back and said, yes, absolutely, I'd be more than willing to meet with her. We set a date, and, a few days after our e-mail exchanges, she arrived by bicycle at the appointed time.

In person, this young woman – I'll call her “Rebecca” – told me a little more about the reasons that had brought her to my office. As she spoke, I was struck by two things. One was her calmness, what I sensed as a deep trust in God and God's guidance in her life. Even though she was feeling things that she had been taught she should *not* feel and should *never* act on, she seemed certain that, with time and prayer and investigation, she would come to know the path she needed to take. In the face of crystal clear condemnations of homosexuality within her family and faith community and her dawning realization that she might be one of those condemned and condemnable lesbians, she was open, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit, and, at least in her conversations with me, not at all in anguish about it.

The second thing that struck me deeply about Rebecca was the combination of how very seriously she took the Bible as her guide for living, on the one hand, and how truly open she seemed to someone else's (very different) understanding of that same Bible, on the other. (If each and every one of us here and everywhere could live with such a passionate commitment to following the ways of God, while simultaneously having such an awareness of the limits of our ability to *know* the ways of God, this world would be a much different, much better place.)

So Rebecca and I talked about how we each approached the Bible and how we each interpreted the passages that have been used to abuse and reject lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual people. As it turned out, we didn't have to spend very long with Sodom and Gomorrah or the purity codes of Leviticus. For Rebecca, the New Testament, especially the writings of Paul, was far more important, with the Old Testament providing more of a background or backdrop than any specific guide to living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As we talked about the promise of love and forgiveness we both found at the heart of the Gospel, Rebecca acknowledged that none of the Gospels record Jesus saying anything about homosexuality. Leaving the Gospels, then, our conversation slowly but surely made its way to the New Testament passage that Rebecca considered authoritative for her questions, the passage that left her unsure how to understand her attraction to women and unsure about whether God would bless her path if she chose to act on that attraction. Our conversation had made its way to Paul's letter to the Romans and the passage in which he writes of God's wrath against women

who exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural and men who gave up natural intercourse with women and were consumed with passion for another. (Romans 1:18-27)

So Rebecca and I began grappling with the Biblical perspective that was going to make all the difference in whether she would understand her sexuality as a sin ... or as a gift of God's grace.

As we talked about this part of Paul's message, Rebecca and I *agreed* that the core of truth in what he was saying is that we are called, each and every one of us, to discover and become the people God created us to be. We agreed that we lose more than our genuine, deepest selves if we let fear or woundedness or peer pressure or arrogance keep us from becoming the people of creative and compassionate peacemaking God longs for us to be. Rebecca and I agreed that, if we lose our genuine, deepest selves, we lose our awareness of God and our openness to the Spirit's healing and guidance.

So ... using Paul's language, the heart of Rebecca's question, the heart of her struggle with her faith and her feelings, was whether her attraction to women was natural, part and parcel of how God created her and how the Holy Spirit was blessing her, or whether her attraction was, instead, unnatural – creations not of the Holy Spirit, but of the spirit of this age. Rebecca was in my office, trying to discern whether her emerging sexuality was part of her true self or something that had been created, shaped, and distorted by the spirit of this age and its warped attitudes toward sexuality. Rebecca was asking herself and me whether her feelings were truly *hers* or whether they were the product of an age in which sex is used as a weapon of war and ethnic cleansing, used as an advertising strategy to sell everything from cars to children's clothes, and used as a commodity itself to be bought and sold with no regard for the *human being* who is being bought and sold.

In other words, this young woman, working her way through questions of faith, Biblical interpretation, and sexuality, was asking what I think is the most important question in our lives as individuals and as a community. It's the question that is woven into the story of the apostle Paul in Athens, speaking at the Areopagus. It's the question that Jesus' promise of the coming of the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, leaves open. It's the question that we're called to ask, of ourselves and of one another, again and again and again. It is this question: how do we tell, how we discern the origin of our desires, our dreams, our wants, our longings?

Every single day presents us with a nearly non-stop series of choices about our desires and needs and wishes – how do we spend our time, how do we spend our money, how do we relate to co-workers, friends, and strangers? What do we choose to read about, care about, pray about, think about?

For those of us who want and seek to follow in Jesus' footsteps, to walk on the paths the Spirit of God lays before us – when we are presented with choice after choice after choice, how can we have any idea which choice leads us in the right direction, the holy, healing direction? How can we have any idea which of our ideas and desires is of the Spirit of Truth and which is, instead, simply an expression of what Richard Rohr calls our small self -- our self-contained, fear-based, ego-obsessed self?

Jesus' words as remembered in the Gospel of John certainly give us a clear clue. The path of the Spirit is marked by love, the kind of love Jesus lived, the kind of love Jesus offered to disciples and strangers. Bold, courageous, life-giving, life-changing love. Not the warm, mushy, Hallmark card kind of love that asks nothing from us, that doesn't challenge us to make room for other people and their needs and dreams.

If the choice we're making doesn't increase the possibility of greater life, greater blessing *for other people* and especially for the ones Jesus called the least of these – the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned – there's a darned good chance that it is not the choice the Holy Spirit longs for us to make. If the choice or decision takes us to the edge or *beyond* our comfort zone, *beyond* our previous willingness to forgive, *beyond* our previous capacity to care about someone else, *beyond* our self-satisfaction OR our self-doubt, then there's a darned good chance that the Holy Spirit is at work.

As we think about how we make choices in our lives, let's return for a moment to this morning's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. As the book of Acts portrays them, the people of Athens are not grappling with the question of which choices are faithful, which choices might lead them on the pathways of God. Instead, they seem to be trying to cover all the bases and to avoid making any choice whatsoever. As Paul looks around the city, he sees altars and temples galore, places where people are trying to please and appease a whole host of gods. And, just to be sure they haven't left anyone out, the people of Athens have dedicated an altar to an unknown god, hoping to win his or her approval and help and guidance, if in fact he or she exists. Instead of having a sense of God, the creator of all; a sense of the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Truth; a sense of the holy presence as all-encompassing ... the people of Athens – and perhaps many of the people here and around the world – seem to be playing spiritual Russian roulette, hoping that the pick the right god, the right spirit, the right path.

In sharp contrast, the young woman who met with me last summer didn't share the Athenians' fear that there was a whole hosts of gods she needed to please. No, Rebecca had a sense that the Eternal God, the holy presence, the creator of all things, had given her the gift of life and was and always would call her to embrace that life fully and faithfully. She was grappling with the question of whether it was that Spirit or some spirit of human brokenness and human limitation that was working in her sense of herself and her sexuality, but she was not casting about, hoping to appease some god she hadn't yet thought of.

We talked that day, honestly and openly, and Rebecca left still uncertain about the answers to her questions. And as she left, I had a strong sense that she would discover what the Spirit was offering her and where it was leading her. She was willing to grapple with the question of distinguishing the Spirit of Life from the spirit of manipulation and self-importance. She was willing to try to find the path on which the Spirit called her and through which the Spirit was seeking to bless all of creation.

There are no easy answers to know where we're meant to go and what we're meant to do, but if something invites us to follow a path that includes more and more people and more and more of God's beloved creation as we follow it, that "something" is probably the Spirit of God. But if something invites us to follow a path that seems to focus on our egos and our self-image, whether grandiose or negative, that "something" is probably a different spirit, a spirit of fear and manipulation.

May we find ourselves choosing the path of God together and discovering how wide and welcoming that path truly is.

Amen and amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC  
May 29, 2011